The Morning Chronicle (London, England),
Friday, December 21, 1849; Issue 25014

We have heard many tales of the pirates of the China seas, but never one which more strikingly illustrated the superb scale on which these gentry carry on their operations than the narrative transmitted from Hong Kong by the last Indian mail. In other parts of the world piracy has long ceased to exist, except as a subject for a sea novel. Corsairs of Algiers and rovers of Sallee have disappeared from the Mediterranean—no PAUL JONES or Captain CLEVELAND crosses the track of the homeward-bound trader, and the high seas are now as safe to travel over as the great northern road. The sea-robber is at least as fabulous an animal as the sea-serpent. Even in earlier times, when a specimen was still to be found in our Western Ocean, he was as different a variety of the species from that which infests the Ladrones and the Malay Archipelago, as the highwayman of Bagshot-heath from the Pindarrees of Northern India. The Chinese plunderers hunt in packs : they have their fleets, villages, and arsenals, and hive on the coasts of the most populous country, perhaps, in the world, within forty or fifty miles of our own naval station at Hong Kong. The destruction of one of these hornet's nests, detailed in our columns yesterday, is important enough to deserve more notice than such affairs usually receive. Nor should we omit to observe, that the news is particularly welcome at the present moment. At the date of the last accounts, several ships, trading between India and China, had for a long time been due at their respective ports of destination ; they are supposed to have fallen into the hands of pirates, and their disappearance has created much distress and alarm in commercial circles.

A piratical fleet, consisting of some fifty large junks, was, it seems, observed on the coast a short time ago by her MAJESTY'S steamer Medea, and five of the number destroyed. The rest separated into two divisions, one of which steered to the north-east ; the other, under the noted pirate chief CHUI-A-POO, to the south. This latter squadron, being discovered and chased by the brig-of-war Columbine, took refuge in a picturesque bay, thickly studded with small islands, about forty miles from Hong Kong. The brig stationed herself at the entrance to prevent the possibility of escape, whilst the war-steamer Fury, which had arrived to assist in the capture, threaded the intricacies of the bay, and after a search of two hours detected the squadron snugly moored in a small cove or inlet, and fully prepared for action. As soon as the steamer rounded the point, the pirates immediately opened their fire, which the Fury promptly returned. The cannonade lasted till evening, and by the time it ceased all the junks, together with three new ones on the stocks, several substantial buildings on the shore, and a large quantity of ammunition and naval stores had been completely destroyed. The Chinese stood to their guns manfully ; they did not desert their ships until four of them had been blown up by the steamer's shells ; and they returned again and again, under a fire of grape and canister, to struggle fruitlessly but perseveringly for the rescue of the remainder. All night the vessels were burning to the water's-edge, yet at sunrise on the next day, says the narrative, " groups of men might be seen " congregated on the hills, armed with matchlocks " and spears, who, on the least relaxation of vigi- " lance on the part of those already fatigued with the " exertions of the previous day, descended, and re- " commenced their efforts for the recovery of their " guns ; and ere the boats had well reached the Fury, " at the seamen's dinner hour, small sampans were " floated out of the creeks, and hundreds might be " seen busily engaged in attempting to recover the " yet undestroyed portion of their armament." The 23 vessels thus destroyed averaged each 500 tons, mounted from 12 to 18 guns a-piece, and are supposed to have contained upwards of 1,800 men. Many of the guns captured were of English manufacture, and the powder-barrels bore the English mark.

We may gather from this incident some idea of the condition of the country whence we procure the grateful and wholesome beverage that is steaming on the reader's breakfast table as he peruses these lines. Under the nominal sway of a Government as effete and decrepid as ever flourished and decayed in the old world, China is in a state of actual anarchy, and only saved from becoming a prey to the most frightful disorders by the busy industrial and commercial spirit which is the prevailing characteristic of her vast population. By the rude and ferocious populace of the province of Canton, the authority of the EMPEROR, two thousand miles away, is unfelt, and the potentate himelf is to them about as much a reality as PRESTER JOHN. The official class, too weak to develop into a governing bureaucracy, has not in China, as in some parts of Europe, succeeded to the power which has gradually escaped from the debilitated grasp of expiring absolutism. The civilization of the people is, after all, but a sort of savagery, lacquered over with a varnish which cannot conceal, and, to European taste, can scarcely be said to embellish, the native poverty and coarseness of the stuff of which the national character is made. We had an exemplification of this in the recent atrocious outrage at Macao, which the Government at Pekin would have been impotent to prevent, and is now unable to redress. In short, the seeds of dissolution are germinating thick and fast in the oldest and last of the great Empires of Asia. Whether it has reached the last stage of decay, or will drag on its feeble existence until another half century shall have elapsed, and the marine of America has taken the place which appears to be destined for it in the Asiatic waters, our limited acquaintance with the internal condition of the country forbids us to conjecture. But the practical result of this state of things is, that, with a view as well to the present as to the future, the importance of our naval station at Hong Kong is not to be measured by the money value of the traffic carried on with the Celestial Empire under the protection of our flag. To procure an article which has become one of the first necessaries of life to the whole mass of our population, we are obliged to go into the native market with arms in our hands. A necessary of life, we say, it is—for the pleasant fiction that Englishmen live on beef and beer is now completely exploded, and we know too certainly that the labourer's ordinary diet in country and town is dry bread and weak tea. The cottons sent out as the medium of exchange by those gentlemen who keep so sharp an eye on the outgoings of the national marine, must be sold under the very guns of our own men-of-war. If we want to show a better balance on this leaf of the national ledger, it is clear that little, if anything, can be subtracted from the debit side : it must be done, not by curtailing our expenses, but by increasing our returns. If, as appears to be the case, our trade with China has really diminished rather than increased in value within the last ten years, there is only one direction in which it is possible to make a step in advance. We mean, of course, the reduction of the exorbitant duty on the only article the Chinaman has to sell, and the Englishman wants to buy.