

THE BORNEO PIRACY QUESTION.

Our readers will find, on reference to our parliamentary report, that Mr. Hume has been at last enabled to bring before the House of Commons his motion for an inquiry into the conduct of Sir James Brooke and the naval force which, on the night of the 31st of July, 1849, attacked and destroyed a reputed piratical fleet of prahus on the coast of Borneo. We do not scruple to say, that we never remember reading a more unsatisfactory debate, and never felt less confidence in a result indicated by so overwhelming a majority of votes. So far, indeed, from the division list affording us any satisfactory proof that the subject had been fairly treated by the House, it offers the most convincing evidence that we could desire of the contrary—not only of the fact that the House of Commons had prejudged the case, as well as predetermined on the course which should be taken with regard to it, but that it had done so irrespective, and in wilful ignorance, of the evidence which had been laid before it.

In entering upon the discussion of this painful subject, we have some satisfaction in feeling that, as we avoided all reference to it until in complete possession of the facts alleged on both sides, we are at least free from the charge of having hazarded an opinion upon a slight foundation, as well as free from the suspicion of having any cause, except that of humanity, to serve, in thus protesting against the treatment and fate to which Mr. Hume's motion has been doomed. It has become too much the fashion of late years, when the public interest has demanded an investigation into the conduct or capacity of individuals holding offices under Government, for their friends to come forward and try to convert the ground of dissatisfaction into matter of a private and personal nature; and thus change what might turn out to be a public into a private grievance, until at last, by vigorously imputing interested motives, they succeed in holding up their cherished protégées as the most injured, abused, and persecuted of mortals—the victims of slander, lies, and a host of most foul and unnatural conspiracies. Such was the course adopted by the friends of Lord Torrington, and such have been the successful tactics of the admirers of Sir James Brooke.

Now, we know absolutely nothing of the Rajah of Sarawak, except that he is also the Governor of Labuan, Consul-General to the Sultan of Borneo, and a merchant trader,—thus joining in his own proper person the somewhat inconsistent characters of an independent prince, the representative of another sovereign, the servant of another state, and an object of protection to himself, as consul, in his dealings as a merchant. We believe him also to be a man of considerable intelligence, enterprise, and ambition—possessed of great firmness and courage, but rather apt, in his reliance on the power of his own will, and the superiority of his wisdom and judgment, to undervalue the firmness or discretion of others, and, moreover, to be somewhat unscrupulous in his pursuit of certain ends.

As we have taken the trouble to wade through the whole of the Parliamentary and other papers on this subject, we will, for the benefit of our readers, furnish them with a slight review of the whole question. It is well known to all that the Malay or East India Archipelago, is, and ever has been, infested by pirates, who have stations and hiding places among the 1000 islands with which those seas are studded; and that from their numerical strength, as well as perfect acquaintance with the use of fire-arms, they have greatly obstructed commerce and the consequent advancement of civilisation. Numerous treaties have been entered into with foreign nations for their suppression; but even these combined efforts have hitherto proved unequal to the task of completely extinguishing the trade of piracy, which, to this day, is the curse of those parts. Borneo, where the massacre occurred to which Mr. Hume's motion had particular reference, is the largest as well as the richest island in those seas. Its interior is entirely occupied by the native races, variously called Dyak, Idan, and Tiroon, according to the parts of the island they inhabit. They cultivate the ground in a rude manner, display considerable industry in fishing in the large rivers and estuaries with which Borneo abounds, and occasionally employ themselves in collecting gold. Their institutions and manners indicate the very rudest state of human society, they being constantly engaged in intertribal wars, and apparently devoted to the storing and smoking the heads of their enemies.

Along the coast, however, a different, and to a certain extent a civilised, race, hold sway. Their distinguishing characteristic and besetting sin is undoubtedly piracy. They are called Malays, and they are more or less diffused throughout the

whole of the Indian islands. While the natives of the interior entertain the most superstitious dread of fire-arms, the Malays are perfectly accustomed to them, and in their use display considerable skill. Sir James Brooke thus describes the tribes which he has since decimated for alleged acts of piracy:—"The Sarebas are by no means so warlike as the others, and, from their great dread of fire-arms, may be kept in subjection by a comparatively small body of Malays. The sound of musketry or cannon was enough to put the whole body to flight; and, when they did run, fully the half disappeared, returning to their homes." The naval commander of the expedition tells us that the Dyaks, from being almost entirely devoid of fire-arms, are utterly unable to stand up even against an indifferently armed force.

We have endeavoured to find out, by reference to numerous works on the islands of the Eastern Archipelago, if there is any mention of the Dyak races being addicted to piracy; and in no single instance have we found such a charge made against them. All, however, agree that the numerous tribes into which they are divided are constantly engaged in war with each other, and that the rivers abound in large prahus, containing warriors armed with the usual sword and spear, and bent on some "head-hunting expedition." This, then, would sufficiently account for H.M. ship *Nemesis* meeting between the rivers Sarawak and Tanjong Sirick with the flotilla which she then and there destroyed; but there is not a tittle of evidence to show either that it had been engaged, or was about to engage in, acts of piracy. That it was upon some hostile expedition, is not only possible but probable; yet this would certainly not furnish good ground for the indiscriminate havoc made by the guns of the *Nemesis*.

The only evidence brought forward by the friends of Sir James Brooke of the Dyaks being pirates is in the nature of evidence of repute. One witness says he "has heard that the coast of Borneo is infested with pirates, and has been so for years, and that he has heard they consist of Lamins and Dyaks. Another states that he has been at Sakarran, the alleged nest of the pirates, and that he was told all the people dwelling there were pirates. This is nothing, after all, but hearsay, and when put in opposition to the fact that there is not on record a single instance of a Dyak prahu, manned by a Dyak crew, having ever been taken in *flagrante delicto*, we think our readers will agree with us, that it is somewhat slight evidence upon which to justify an onslaught which resulted in the death of 500 human beings. In the address from Singapore, signed by fifty-three merchants and other inhabitants of that place, it is stated—"There is not one among us who ever heard the captain of a merchant vessel, or the Nacodah of a trading prahu, mention their having seen a Dyak pirate; and the circumstance of either the one or the other of them having fallen in with, or been attacked by, prahus which were propelled by paddles, and had neither masts nor sails, would have been a novelty which could not have failed to attract attention, to say nothing of their want of fire-arms." Nobody disputes the fact of there being pirates on the coast of Borneo. We have all read of their doings, and many of our naval friends can testify from personal knowledge to their existence; but the point at issue between Mr. Hume and Sir James Brooke is simply this—what proof is there, beyond assertion, that the 500 Dyaks slaughtered by the canister, grape shot, and musketry of the *Nemesis*, on the night of the 31st of July, 1849, were pirates? So far as our investigations have extended, we confidently assert that no such proof exists. The only pretence for the assumption arises out of an argument, that, as the Malays are pirates, and the Dyaks inhabit the same island and fish in the same rivers, they must, therefore, be pirates also; but of what avail such flimsy materials as wooden swords and spears, prahus propelled by paddles, and fighting men who fly at the sound of a musket, can be against armed merchantmen, or the armed prahus of native traders, we are at a loss to imagine. However, Mr. Hume's case rests on stronger grounds than the mere want of power to do harm. It is established on facts which, although necessarily of a negative character, prove the absence of all trustworthy evidence of the Dyaks being a piratical race. That they are savages, and delight in savage warfare and marauding excursions, there is no doubt; and this brings us to another part of our subject.

It appears that the tribe of Dyaks, of whom the Sarebas and Sakarran are a sub-division, are the hereditary foes of Sir James Brooke's own subjects, and that "head-hunts" are the constant amusement of both parties. Moreover, it is said that the Dyaks have of late years been unusually successful in their marauding incursions, and that the smoked head of many a Sarawak chief was to be seen ornamenting the interior of Dyak huts. Here, no doubt, there was good cause of anger and vengeance on the part of the Sarawaks and their Rajah; but most assuredly none for exterminating their enemies by the assistance of the *Nemesis*, or for retaliating and laying waste their lands and villages by enlisting the aid of a civilised nation, under the false pretence of a crusade against those universal enemies of mankind—pirates. The *Times*, keenly alive to this, the weak point in the case of Rajah Brooke, sums up the massacre of those unfortunate Dyaks, somewhat after this fashion:—"Well, after all, it is clear that the flotilla was bent on mischief; and if its crew had not attained to the dignity of pirates, they were at least robbers, destroyers of villages and paddy fields, and smokers of human heads; and as such they were deserving of the punishment which their contemplated incursion brought upon them." We do not put this forward as the precise language of our contemporary; but it is the spirit in which it defends the transaction in question.

Assuming, however, the evil intention of the Dyaks, what does it amount to, save a contemplated retaliation of the last mischief done to them by their savage neighbours, the Rajah's own subjects? If they were deserving of the treatment they received, Sir James Brooke might with equal justice turn the guns of the next frigate that moors within gun-shot of Sarawak against his own subjects; for between them and the Dyaks there is not a pin's difference. Both are equally savage and vindictive; both possess an equally refined taste for smoked heads.