

THE ANTI-SLAVERY CONTEST IN
HOLLAND.

Parties in Holland are divided on the subject of Java. Java, as the reader is aware, is the brightest gem in the Netherlands' diadem, the pride of the Indian Archipelago, unmatched for beauty and fertility by any equal extent of the earth's surface. Java, an old Portuguese, and subsequently a Dutch colony, came into the hands of the English in 1811, and only fell back to the Netherlands by an act of spontaneous cession five years later. The Javanese, a Malay race, were already civilised at the time of the first Portuguese settlement in 1511, and by the advanced state of their agricultural industry, aided by the most perfect system of irrigation, they had made of their land the granary of the Archipelago. The Dutch, who previous to 1811 had only some settlements in the island, had introduced forced labour in their plantations; but their "peculiar institutions" were abolished during the English occupation, and not restored for several years after the reinstalment of Netherlands rule. One of the Governor-Generals of the Dutch East Indies, however, by name Van den Bosch, effected a revolution on a large scale in the island, appropriated all such soil as could best be turned to the production of sugar, coffee, indigo, &c., and, by the means of compulsory labour, changed the whole aspect and economy of the land. The results of these measures, it is stated, were a rise in the revenue to a sum of £4,000,000 yearly, and an increase of the population from 5,000,000 in 1816 to 13,649,680 in 1863. We must not, however, suffer those somewhat startling numbers to mislead us. The population of Java, with all its wondrous increase, is only about half the density of that of Lower Bengal, and as to trade, while the joint imports and exports, not only of Java, but of all the Dutch islands in those Eastern seas, are valued at about £13,000,000, they are exceeded by £2,000,000 by those of the three little British districts in the Straits of Malacca, the two principal of which were still uninhabited eighty years ago. That, with all the wealth which they accumulate for their taskmasters, the Javanese labourers do not greatly improve their own position one might feel tempted to infer from the fact that the price of corn has during the last sixty years risen 200 per cent. The island, which was once, as we have said, the sole granary of the Malay Archipelago, has ceased to export corn, and the supply for those islands comes at the present day from the British possessions of Pegu, Aracan, and Siam.

But, however splendid may be for Holland the results of the forced labour system in an economical point of view, the time has come in which such questions are put to the test of humanitarian, no less than utilitarian inquiry, and an outcry has been raised among a party of the Dutch Opposition by whom the system of cultivation in their East Indies, however disguised it may be under the specious name of "apprenticeship," is stigmatised as unmitigated servitude. It is little to the purpose to assert that the Javanese are not demoralised by their present condition, or that they are aware of no oppression, that the system is indigenous, and has always been in the island. Our age is at little trouble to distinguish between *corvée* and *battue*, and downright slavery. It will put up with no forced labour, even for the negro; so much less, then, for gentle and patient Malay, who seeks no escape from his lot except in emigration, and goes forth as a sailor, sometimes even as a pirate, or looks abroad for employment in any other capacity but upon condition of freedom.

Of such a nature is the question which seems to have roused the Dutch politicians from their wonted sluggishness. After the abolition of negro slavery in the Dutch West Indies in 1862-3 the Liberals wished to proceed to a similar measure in behalf of their Eastern possessions. A bill for the abolition of the system of forced labour in these colonies was brought in last year in the Dutch Parliament, but was rejected, as fraught with utter ruin to the colonies themselves, no less than to the mother country. More lately the Government filled the measure of popular discontent by the appointment to the office of Governor-General of the East Indian possessions, the highest office in the Crown's gift, of a man formerly well known for his leaning to the principles of free trade and free labour, but who had abandoned his principles and ratted from his party. A vote of censure was passed in both Houses against the Ministers who had advised the nomination of the obnoxious Governor. The King retorted by the dissolution of the Chamber, and Holland is now in all the throes of a general election. A Royal proclamation, intended to soothe the angry spirits, seems to have been void of effect. The Liberals are likely to muster stronger than ever in the new Parliament, and, in the event of a new vote of want of confidence, the Ministers are said to contemplate a resort to exceptional measures, equivalent to a violation of the Charter of 1818. It is easier to wish than to hope that milder counsels may prevail. The question of slavery, even under the most mitigated form, is one with which the present age will bear no tampering. The mischief which a violent abolition wrought in our West Indies and in the Southern States of the American Union might be even more grievously felt in the Netherlands' colonies. For the sake of the serfs, no less than of the masters, it would be desirable that the reform, however total, might be gradual; but hitherto no consideration of prudence has ever had power to stem the tide of passion in this delicate and dangerous matter; and we are not quite sure that even the proverbial Dutch phlegm will be able to keep its newly-awakened enthusiasm within rational limits.