

THE DUTCH WAR IN SUMATRA.

THE perilous position into which the aggression of the Dutch colonial administration in Sumatra has drawn the arms of Holland in the East should not be lost sight of even in the presence of our own conflict with the Ashantees. The ultimate issue of a struggle between a European Power of respectable rank and a handful of obscure semi-barbarous fanatics in the corner of an island little known to civilization is taken for granted very readily by most observers; and many make up their minds that the Dutch will crush the resistance of Atchin as confidently as our light-hearted preachers of the ninety marines' crusade against Coomassie did. Yet few persons in this country are capable of judging fairly of the forces which the outbreak of war in Sumatra has set free. Most certainly they are not to be scouted as feeble. The Dutch Government may be fortunate enough to dam them up again, but, on the other hand, it is quite possible that they may fail to check the progress of the movement which they have provoked, and the significance of which they clearly have never fairly estimated.

A triumphant telegram from the Hague yesterday informed us that after a desperate struggle the Kraton of Atchin has been captured by the European besieging force. This was no more than might have been anticipated. When, something less than a year ago, the Dutch were severely handled by the enemy and were scourged unmercifully by the pestilential climate, they retreated vowing vengeance. The pride of a nation that has always regarded itself as the second of European Powers in the East was deeply wounded. The Parliament of Holland though as little satisfied with the conduct of the Government as we have been with the policy of the Colonial Office on the West Coast of Africa, consented in the critical position of affairs to waive debates and recriminations, to give Ministers the largest powers, and to grant as much money as would be required for carrying on the war. Accordingly a strong expeditionary force was sent out from Holland and organized for the attack upon Atchin at Batavia. Operations commenced as soon as the cool season opened, and it was evidently anticipated at the Hague that the Atchinese, cowed by the formidable preparations with which they were threatened, would at once yield, and make their peace as best they might. This expectation is apparent in the manifesto addressed to the Sultan of Atchin by General van Swieten, the commander-in-chief of the Dutch forces by land and sea, which, though in form a State paper explaining a *casus belli* and demanding reparation, is in substance a threat addressed to the Atchinese, a boastful enumeration of the overwhelming forces of the invaders, and a premonitory justification of impending conquest. But though it appears that the Sultan, who is a mere boy, and some of his immediate family inclined towards peace, and that the trading and industrial classes of the community held similar views, the question had passed out of the hands of the Court and the merchants. The high Mahomedan party, which in the past generation has lifted its head in every country where the religion of the Prophet survives, had filled the populace and the peasantry with their own warlike zeal and spiritual fervour. No men fight more gallantly than the inhabitants of the Eastern Archipelago, and when led with spirit and capacity they make formidable foes. Though the repulse of the Dutch troops last year was due more to the outbreak of epidemic disease at the opening of the rainy season than to the losses inflicted upon them by the Atchinese, the successes of the latter were sufficiently remarkable to give encouragement to the war party and to weaken the arguments of the peace party. In the course of the year the defences of the Kraton, the citadel of Atchin, had been strengthened with no little skill, and with a large expenditure of money. The Mussulman leaders of the resistance, too, though relying faithfully upon the help of heaven, were not altogether neglectful of earthly assistance. They manned their batteries with modern artillery; they hired European renegades to discipline the Malay troops, and meet the Dutch strategy with some knowledge of its import. At any rate, they showed no intention of yielding to General van Swieten's proclamation. The Dutch general announced that he brought with him "guns enough to batter down ten Kratons," a fleet, cavalry, and every munition of war. Notwithstanding, the Atchinese showed a resolution to contest every inch of ground. It was painfully, and at the cost of a great loss of life, that the besiegers, in spite of their artillery and their fleet, won their way into the outworks of the Atchinese stronghold, and here only a week ago they paused to "await reinforcements." The news of yesterday shows that they have at last captured the Kraton, and it is stated "with little loss." But it is by no means certain that the war is now over; indeed, it is quite possible that it may be only just beginning.

The objects which the Dutch proposed to themselves in venturing upon the invasion of Atchin are set forth with sufficient candour in General van Swieten's proclamation. They are determined, cost what it may, that Atchin shall not remain an independent Power. They are willing, as they profess, to leave the Sultan some shadow of local authority, but he must have no more a foreign policy of his own than the Government of India allows to Scindia or Holkar. Perhaps the Sultan himself might not be unwilling to accept the gilded servitude of this position, but his people, apart from the religious enthusiasm with which they have been lately inflamed, are animated with a strong spirit of independence. Nor has the rule of the Dutch in the southern portion of Sumatra or the neighbouring dependency of Java been such as to attract communities, however uncivilized, which retain their liberties. We do not doubt that Holland has been able to establish a specious case against the Atchinese; for when a barbarous State is fixed upon the borders of a civilized one, it is hardly possible that causes of quarrel should not arise. But the motive really animating the invaders is plainly enough an ambition for extension of territory, and if the whole island of Sumatra should thus fall into the hands of the possessors of

Java the sum of human happiness, to say the least, will hardly be increased. Mr. Disraeli's remark that, by withdrawing our prohibition on the progress of Dutch conquest in the Eastern Archipelago, we have surrendered the freedom of the Straits of Malacca to our commercial rivals, is a legitimate point to make against a Ministry which blundered into a ridiculous bargain without calculating the consequences of any part of it. But the danger is, after all, rather a remote and not a very serious one. If we cannot hold our own against a third-rate Power like the Dutch so far as to make them leave the free water-way to China open for us, we must be fallen indeed; so fallen, in fact, that the piracy of Atchin would have done us at least as much harm as the jealousy of Holland. If we have sunk to this point, we may as well bid good-bye to commercial supremacy and empire together.