

THE OUTRAGE AT PERAK.

We are drifting into another little war. The telegram just received from Penang supplements a story that has a very alarming aspect. First of all, the Colonial Office was informed by the lieutenant-governor of Penang that "Mr. Birch was murdered at Passir Sala, between Bhotia and Durian, on the Perak river, on the 3rd instant." It was added that troops and an armed force of police had been sent "to bring to justice the perpetrators of this outrage." The expedition is likely to have some hot work cut out for it, as the telegram received from Penang yesterday states—"The Malays are besieging the British residency at Perak. The troops despatched hence on the 4th instant have reached the place. Mr. Swetenham is safe. Mr. Birch's body has not yet been recovered. All the native rajahs are suspected of complicity in the murder. Sultan Ismail is reported to be collecting large forces, to expel the British."

Now, who is Mr. Birch? Where is Perak? Who have murdered him, and why have they done it? These are questions which not unnaturally occur to us as we reflect on the scanty information vouchsafed with reference to a business so grave as to justify the invasion of a foreign state by British troops. Very clearly, Mr. Birch must be a person of some official importance, in which case he must be the Mr. J. W. Birch who was lately appointed British Resident at the Court of the Malay Sultan of Perak. He used to be "settlement officer" at Ceylon, and latterly he was employed as Colonial Secretary at Singapore. He was appointed by Sir Andrew Clarke, Governor of the Straits Settlements, to the residency at Perak, on account of his great physical energy and the wonderful art he had of acquiring influence over the Malay mind. It was with a view to introduce something like decency and order into the anarchical court to which he was accredited that Mr. Birch received his appointment. Great things were expected from his influence there. Not only in the East, but even at home, speculators were busy calculating the chances of profit on capital they were, on the faith of Mr. Birch's presence at Perak, thinking of pouring into this rich but sadly misgoverned territory. Should the news of his murder prove true, then, in virtue of responsibilities this country has recently undertaken in the Straits of Malacca, very strong measures, leading perhaps up to actual annexation, may have to be resorted to. For, we may remark, Great Britain has committed herself recently to a policy of "protection" and intervention with reference to those states in the Malay Peninsula that lie between Siam and Singapore. This long tract of territory, since the great empire of Malacca crumbled into fragments, has been split up into a large number of little states. Each of these is ruled by a sultan. The only notion he usually has of government is to build forts on the banks of rivers and levy promiscuous blackmail on passing traffic. Considering that his understrappers, with or without authority, do likewise, the

Chinese trader or miner is squeezed pretty flat before he gets out of the country, and, when they are strong enough, the Celestial hawkers (usually British subjects, natives of Penang) resent and resist. Hence fierce fighting is always going on more or less in all these states, which is further complicated by succession wars, piracy, and in one instance with faction fights amongst the Chinese miners themselves, who happen to have emigrated to the north of Perak in great hordes. In a word, the whole of the Malay Peninsula, from Siam to Singapore, though it is one of the richest territories in Asia—rich in arable fertility as well as in vast mineral treasures, including gold, copper, and tin—has been converted into a tradeless, poverty-stricken, depopulated wilderness, blighted by intestine discords, and devastated by an unending reign of terror. There are only two exceptions amongst these states. At the northern extremity there is the peaceful, prosperous, well-governed nation of Quedah. There the authority of the great kingdom of Siam, to which it is tributary, prevails. At the southern extremity of the peninsula there is the kingdom of Johore. It is so close to our own seat of government at Singapore, that one may almost say the Sultan is under a British protectorate. At any rate the influence of our government pervades this state to such an extent that it enables its Sultan to keep peace and order all through his territory. The inference from these facts is plain enough. Home rule in a Malay state is only possible when it is under the protection of a strong power—European or Eastern—able and willing to strengthen the arm and enforce the authority of the Sultan and the law in time of need.

It was the late Liberal Government that first conceived the possibility of practically annexing the whole Malay Peninsula under the guise of a protectorate, and thus establishing order in it. Previously the policy of this country with reference to Malacca was, says Governor Sir Harry Ord, "unconnected, inconsistent, and incongruous." When we interfered we usually sided with one party, generally the wrong one; and as we did not keep up intervention, we got credit both for vacillation and injustice. In 1873, Perak, the most northerly of these states, one which borders on our settlement at Wellesley Province, got into such a state of anarchy and turmoil that the disorder threatened to spread to our own territory. Our war ships were fired on. The rival factions were on the eve of fighting out their disputes in our colony of Penang. Lord Kimberley then ordered the governor, Sir Andrew Clarke, to "rescue, if possible, these fertile and productive countries from the ruin which must befall them," and asked him to see "whether it would be advisable to appoint a British officer to reside in any of these states." Sir Andrew found Perak in the following condition:—A Sultan *de jure* was making war on a reigning usurper, and, under pretence of aiding each, rippers were scouring the country, plundering everybody who possessed anything worth taking. A cunning knave, called the Mantri Nya Abraham, who was governor of the tin-mining district of Larut, finding the Raja Bandahara (the usurping Sultan) would extend his power, sided with him, hoping thereby to achieve practical independence. The two great factions of Chinese miners from our colony of Penang, at Larut, joined in the quarrel, each in the hope that the victor would reward his ally with exclusive possession of the tin mines. In Sir Andrew Clarke's despatch it is stated "the country was one huge cockpit, where nothing but fight-

ing and murder and violence were going on." Sir Andrew Clarke restored peace very quickly. The Chinese factions offered to submit their claims to the decision of a commission appointed by him. The chiefs and nobles of Perak agreed to accept Raja Muda, the rightful heir, as Sultan, on condition a British Resident was appointed to help him to govern properly. The usurper Raja Bandahara had a territory given to him to govern as a sort of viceroy, and the Mantri of Larut was confirmed in his office there, but put under the surveillance of a British Resident also. Practically Perak, and after it all the other Malay states, were put under a British protectorate—ruled by Sultans, who were themselves ruled by our Residents. The effect was almost magical. Capital at once flowed into Perak. In a few months 10,000 miners were at work at Larut, where a town was rapidly springing up. Confident that the British flag would afford immunity from robbery, piracy, and murder, traders, shopkeepers, and planters began to swarm into Larut, and we happen to know one London speculator who offered a young English planter an advance of £30,000 down if he would open and work a tobacco plantation in Perak.

And now the end of it all is that the man on whose firmness and influence all our hopes of bringing about a peaceful era of industry and development in this rich and fertile state were based has been treacherously murdered. How can we account for it, seeing that all parties at the settlement of the Perak succession demanded the appointment of our Resident, as a guarantee that justice would be always impartially done? We are forced to remember that the settlement Sir Andrew Clarke made last year was not agreeable to everybody in Perak. There were three parties who had reason to object to it, and some of them were not at pains to conceal their hostility. The Mantri of Larut lost all chance of independence in consequence of the accession of the Raja Muda (the rightful heir) to the throne of Perak as Sultan Abdullah. He lied and wriggled and prevaricated at the conference of nobles which Sir Andrew Clarke summoned. He only gave an enforced consent to the recognition of the Sultan *de jure*, who, being young and energetic, was not so likely to let him have it all his own way as the usurper, Raja Bandahara, who is old, and lives far away from Larut. Then, though this individual, who seems to be a worthy old man, may have been loyal enough in his submission, and though he was comfortably provided for, still he had been a Sultan *de facto*, and his retainers felt the change bitterly when he was reduced to his proper level. That they visited their chagrin on Mr. Birch, the Resident at Perak, is proved by the fact that last year, when he went to Blanja, where the ex-Sultan lives, to use the words of Sir Andrew Clarke's despatch of date June 16, 1874, he "was not received very cordially, this village having become the refuge of several freebooting chiefs, who, driven from other states, thought that in the probable grievances of the ex-Sultan they saw a chance of future difficulties, by which they would benefit." Lastly, there was another personage of considerable influence in Perak who had reason to object to the British protectorate, and who gave but a sullen recognition to Sir Andrew Clarke's arrangement of the Perak succession. That was Raja Yusuf, a prince of the blood royal, who was rejected by the people when they elected the heir-apparent, or Raja Muda, at the succession preceding the last. Most likely it is from one or other of these quarters—probably from one of

the two latter—that the blow has come which has ended the career of our Resident in this turbulent state. It may be, also, that in his attempt to institute an honest system of revenue collection, instead of the favourite Malay plan of promiscuous "squeezing," Mr. Birch has fallen a victim to the malice of some freebooting chiefs, who find their old occupation of robbery gone. In any event, we have made ourselves responsible for the peace and order of Malacca, and we dare not shrink from the duty, which is all the more binding that it is self-imposed, of maintaining and enforcing good government in these rich but distracted states. The spirit of outrage and turbulence must be nipped in the bud, or it will spread all along Malacca from Siam to Singapore. We must, therefore, be as pertinacious in our efforts to bring the assassin of Mr. Birch to justice, as we have been in insisting that Mr. Margary's murder in Yunnan should not go un-avenged.