

THE MALAY DISTURBANCES.

The news that the British Government in the Straits Settlements has been involved in a difficulty that may lead this country into a costly and gainless war cannot surprise anyone who understands the character of our rule in Oriental countries. Yet the feeling of tranquil self-satisfaction to which Mr. Disraeli gave expression at the Guildhall, and which had entered into the soul of the nation since it became apparent that peace would be maintained with China and Burmah, has been rudely shocked by the intelligence that Mr. Birch, British Resident at the Court of the Malay Rajah of Perak, has been murdered; that Sir William Drummond Jervois, the Governor of the Straits Settlements, has thought it necessary to proceed in person to Perak with such troops as he could muster, and that these troops, though successful in relieving the Residency, have been repulsed with loss in a subsequent attack upon a stockade fiercely defended by the Malays. We know further that the local disturbances were threatening to merge in a rising of the whole Malay population of the peninsula, and that it was feared at Penang and Singapore that the outbreak would assume the dangerous character of a religious war. Reinforcements have been telegraphed for to the east and west, and as fast as steamships can bring them they will gather at Penang and Malacca from Hong Kong, Calcutta, and Bombay. The mere demonstration of British power may suffice to awe the Malays into submission. When our gun-boats have burnt a few villages, and our soldiers carried a few stockades, we shall have attained "peace," as our Colonial Governors understand it. When we have done this, it will be worth our while to consider whether the policy we are pursuing in this quarter of the world is in any respect a profitable or prudent one.

Beside the two insular possessions which are the centre of our trade on the Straits of Malacca, we own two provinces on the mainland—Wellesley, on the coast opposite Penang, and Malacca, near the narrowest point of the channel between the peninsula and Sumatra. Wellesley Province is bordered on the south by the native State of Perak, which extends, according to its Sultan's pretensions, as far as the northern frontier of the province of Malacca, but in reality this large tract of territory is divided among a number of quasi-feudal nobles, who claim to be rulers within their own domains, who levy their own taxes, and, above all, practise incessantly the mediæval custom of private war. The ministers and vassals of the late Sultan Ali of Perak were thus perpetually quarrelling with each other, and intriguing for their personal aggrandisement. It is highly probable that this state of things was found inconvenient by the British mercantile community, who wish to carry their trade everywhere, and at the same time expect to be as amply protected at the North Pole, or in the depths of Central Asia, or among the pirates of the Eastern Archipelago, as they are in Cheapside. The merchants dinned repeated entreaties for protection into the ears of the Indian and Colonial Governments, but in vain. A policy of strict non-interference was strictly enjoined upon the Straits Government, and traders were warned that if they went among the native population they must do so at their own risk. While this policy was observed we had no trouble with the Malay rajahs of the peninsula. They may have been as turbulent and lawless as they are represented, but at any rate they did not trouble us. In 1873, however, Sir Andrew Clarke went out to the Straits Settlements as Governor, and found the native chiefs quarrelling as usual. According to a colonial eulogist, "he at once seized the situation and the remedy." The State of Perak was divided by a war of succession, and by an attempt on the part of the Mantri of Laroot, one of the principal vassals, to make himself independent. These squabbles were complicated by the intervention of the Chinese mine-owners and miners who were concerned in the tin mines of Laroot, and some of whom, having been wronged by the Mantri, took sides against him with the legitimate Sultan of Perak, Abdulla, while others were bribed and bought over by the Mantri and the Perak

Pretender Ismail. Such was the "situation," and though it was uncomfortable to have such an imbroglio at our doors, we should have thought that it was most manifestly the part of wisdom to keep clear of it. But Sir Andrew Clarke was confident in the value of his remedy. He proceeded in person to Perak, gathered the chiefs together, and peremptorily decided the question of succession in favour of Sultan Abdulla. The Mantri of Laroot was recognised as a permanent Governor, and "an agreement was signed by which all revenue was to be collected for the Sultan of Perak; a specific charge on it was to be made for the salaries of the chiefs, and British Residents were to be placed in Perak and Laroot to advise on the government of the country." The chiefs accepted this agreement without the slightest intention of carrying out any of its inconvenient promises. Sultan Ismail decamped into the jungle with the Crown jewels, attended by several discontented chiefs, and bided his time. The Residents were appointed, and Mr. Birch, who had been Colonial Secretary at Singapore, was sent to Perak. Such was Sir Andrew Clarke's wise "remedy" for the evils of the situation he found before him in 1873.

A brief experience showed that the adoption of this mild diplomatic treatment of ferocious semi-savage passions was doomed to fail, though no one had the foresight to see the dangerous form that failure might assume. Only a month ago Sir W. Jervois was compelled to announce that the position of the Resident at Perak had been "unsatisfactory from the very commencement." "While Her Majesty's Government," he said, "hold the chiefs responsible for keeping the engagements entered into by them with the British Government, there is scarcely any one of those engagements referred to which has not been violated by them. The Resident's advice is disregarded, and he must either passively look on while acts are committed which he disapproves but cannot control, or he must assume to himself a power which is inconsistent with his position as adviser, thus practically taking upon himself the government of the State so far as the opposition of rajahs and chiefs will permit him to do so." This unfortunate situation, the fruit of Sir Andrew Clarke's unnecessary and imprudent interference, explains the attack on Mr. Birch, the siege of the Residency, the rising of the Malays under Sultan Ismail, and the summons to arms against the British addressed to the neighbouring States of Salangore and Johore by the insurgent chiefs of Perak. It is doubtful whether this call will be responded to by the other Malay rajahs, but if a religious character be imparted to the struggle we may find the entire Mohammedan population, from the borders of Siam to Singapore, arrayed against us. It is easy to say that the Malays are few and weak, and can offer no such resistance as that with which the Atchinese have baffled the Dutch. No doubt we shall beat them soundly, and exact retribution for the death of Mr. Birch. But what then? According to "A Straits Resident," who writes to the *Times* yesterday, the lesson of these troubles is this:—"If the Malays cannot govern their own country we must do it for them. The interests held in it by British subjects are too extensive to be ignored. A firm and settled Government is absolutely essential to the prosperity of our own colony, and would be hailed with delight by the Chinese and by the poor Malay peasants—by all classes, in fact, except by the wild, lawless, worthless chiefs. We have tried years of external influence with them in vain, and it is time that they should be relieved of a duty which they cannot fulfil." We have yet to learn what are the interests of British subjects that exist in Perak and the neighbouring kingdoms of sufficient importance to impose on the Imperial Government the costly task of conquering and governing a tropical country, overrun with pestilence and inhabited by the most unruly of Oriental peoples. To our mind the lesson is plainly the very opposite of that enunciated by "A Straits Resident." When we have punished the murderers of Mr. Birch and renewed the lustre of our arms,

let us revert to the policy of non-interference from which Sir Andrew Clarke so unluckily departed in 1873. We were not afraid to do this in Abyssinia after punishing King Theodore for his treatment of our Consul, and Lord Carnarvon has courage enough to be cautious when boldness is absolutely profitless.