

A L I T T L E W A R.

It is some time now since Mr Disraeli excited the mirth of his opponents by the importance which he attached to certain proceedings in the Straits of Malacca. Nobody appeared to have heard of anything in particular going on there. But we are not unlikely to find out that the matter was more than a grave joke. It so happened that a few months before—viz., in Nov., 1873—Great Britain had departed from her policy of non-intervention towards the semi-independent Malay States, and it needed little foresight to see in that simple fact the elements of grave complications.

The first cause of this change of policy seems to have been partly civil, partly religious, but, upon the whole, not a little absurd. The late Sultan died in 1872, and the successor whom he had chosen unfortunately absented himself from the funeral, which, according to Malay custom, it was his duty to attend. His rival claimant attended in his place, and the claims of the two brought about party feuds, which Sir Andrew Clarke, the British Governor at the Straits, thought to put an end to by pacific counsels, and by giving the original claimant his moral support. But these measures seem to have been treated with little respect. One diplomatic formula can scarcely be made applicable to all cases; and, as war is esteemed the proper work of Malay gentlemen, and piracy a very proper development of this warlike taste, when it cannot be otherwise gratified, a civil war could scarcely be expected to be put down by pacific counsels. To make our influence more direct on the turbulent chiefs, a British Resident was appointed, viz., Mr Birch, who was secretary to the Malacca settlements; and we were fairly in for all the consequences of settling down in a bad neighbourhood.

Still pacific counsels appear to have been a drug in the Malay market, and treachery on the part of the chiefs led to turbulence, culminating in the murder of Mr Birch, and a defiance of the British authority, which cannot remain unpunished. All that we know as yet is that the smouldering disaffection has broken out into revolt, and there is no saying where it may end. The country is rich beyond measure in minerals, and the attractions of these riches, not to speak of its vegetable produce, have drawn adventurers from all parts of the world, who have got the whole trade of the country into their hands. These naturally excite the jealousy of an idle, proud, and vindictive race, so that our interests and our quarrels are alike complicated; and, with good cause to avoid any collision, this intervention has apparently been forced upon us.

This is a very general outline of the position in which we stand to the state of Perak, and indeed to Jahore and Selangore as well, the opening up of which to British trade has been the desire of British merchants ever since our settlement in the Straits. It is to be deplored that our first intimate relations with them should have led to such lamentable results, more especially as in the riot during which Mr Birch was murdered, such an outrage does not appear to have been premeditated. The sad affair of the 7th inst., which was equally gallant and costly, has been speedily followed by the occupation of the Residency by 1000 troops, under European officers, supported by two gunboats, and although the friendly chiefs are friendly still, and active in support of Sultan Abdullah, who is under British protection, the supporters of his rival, Sultan Ismal, are fast arming for war, and there is no saying where the miserable business is likely to end.