

THE NORTHERN ECHO.

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OUR LATEST LITTLE WAR.

WE have a little war on hand in the Malay Peninsula, which, before it is over, may, perhaps, cost us as many lives as a first-class railway collision. As a matter of course, grumblers are asking what in the world are we doing in the Straits of Malacca, and suggesting the desirability of retiring with bag and baggage from the Peninsula. We wonder these wisacres do not propose, after every railway collision, that we should abandon railroads and return to stage coaches. Our railway companies smash up more men and women every twelve months than all the lives lost in the defence of an Empire which encircles the world. This Malay trouble is, of course, a convenient text for those who disbelieve in the civilizing mission of the English race, to descant upon the duties of curtailing our responsibilities in these distant regions, but in reality it is a cogent argument in favour, not of drawing back, but of going further. Just as a railway collision emphasizes the imperative necessity, not of abandoning all control over the arrival and departure of trains, but of perfecting the arrangements for conducting the traffic on our great lines, so this collision with the Malays teaches us, not that we should withdraw from all attempts to control a fierce and savage race, but that we should so increase our authority over them as to render similar collisions impossible in future. Our duty to these Malays is not to withdraw from them altogether and leave them to cut the throats of all peaceable traders, honest settlers, and industrious workmen at their own sweet will and pleasure, but to supersede, once for all, the utterly scandalous and inefficient rule of their piratical Rajahs by the civilizing sovereignty of Great Britain. In no other way can we decrease the risk of such unfortunate affairs as that which has recently occurred, excepting, indeed, by the radical measure of prohibiting any trade in these

regions, which would be as revolutionary and as absurd as to abolish railways to prevent collisions. Fortunately, the stereotyped lamentation over the extent of our responsibilities and the burden of our Empire has never much influence in preventing the extension of responsibilities or the increase of our Imperial burdens. Circumstances are too strong for us. We are driven onward by a resistless destiny, which becomes stronger instead of weaker with every successive year. Nor do we expect to see the pressure decreased until we have either fulfilled our civilizing mission or become unworthy of being entrusted with the education of the myriad races of the East. One hundred years ago the Ruler of Great Britain exercised authority over ten millions of human beings. To-day, HER MAJESTY is recognised as a Sovereign by 350,000,000 of subjects. The rapidity of this growth of empire is only less astounding than the fact that at no period during the present century have we purposely sought to extend the number of our subjects. We sought trade, and we found Empire. Like SAUL, the son of KISH, we were but searching for our father's asses when we received from the hand of Providence the kingly diadem. The reason for this is not so much our rapacity as our humanity; and the lamentation which arises whenever a new State, or island, or territory is added to our Empire arises often from the most sordid motives, because governing a people costs more than trading with them. But, whatever may be the motives for our regrets, they are utterly powerless to arrest the course of events. If we persist in trading, unless the national conscience becomes as hard as the nether millstone, we shall, sooner or later, be compelled to undertake the governing of the countries where we take our merchandise, where there is no other goods worth the name, and the only method short of annexation for avoiding any future troubles in the Malay Peninsula is to abandon our settlements, and prohibit the landing of an Englishman or an English cargo along the whole of the coast.

Many sincere and well-meaning people

seem to imagine that there is no difficulty in keeping clear of such complications as those which have lately embroiled us with the Malays without resorting to such a radical measure as the prohibition of all trade. In spite of the unvarying experience of the last hundred years, they believe that it is the governors and not the traders, that it is diplomacy and not commerce, which involves us in these broils, and that the latter only need be left to itself to avoid all little wars. They might as well say that it is the organization of railway traffic that leads to collisions, and that the true way to avoid smashes is to allow every one to run a train in any direction whenever he pleased. The only certain way to avoid collisions is to keep all trains off the rails; and the only way to avoid little wars in the East is to keep all Englishmen in the West. Let us suppose that we eliminate governors and diplomacy, garrisons and gunboats, from the Straits Settlements, and leave our merchants to their devices. As the trade of these settlements amounts to £22,000,000 per annum, our traders would not abandon these ports at once—that is, always supposing that they could keep their hold upon them. There are only 1,750 Europeans altogether who live in the midst of 150,000 Malays and 100,000 Chinese, and those who know the Settlements declare that if it were not for the gunboats the white men would be driven into the sea to-morrow. Suppose, however, that they were not driven into the sea, but that they are permitted to live and trade as before, minus gunboats. As soon as the gunboats disappeared, the piratical prahus which lurked of old in every creek would once more make their appearance. Commerce would be unsafe, sailors would take their lives in their hands, and the Straits of Malacca would be restored to the possession of the brigands of the seas. Our countrymen would be murdered, their property plundered, their ships burnt, until trade was rendered impossible. Englishmen, however, even though deserted by their Government, do not lose their hold upon a great and a profitable trade without a struggle. In all probability the merchant adventurers of Singapore and Penang would maintain troops and equip gunboats for the protection of their ships. If they

did, they might, of course, continue to trade, but things would be just as they are now, with this most important difference, that the armed force of the settlements, instead of being as at present in the hands of the Supreme Government, liable to be called to account at any moment in England, and unaffected by the prejudices of our traders, would be in the hands of an irresponsible community of speculators, guided by no other principle but a desire to make money, and controlled by nothing but their own passions, prejudices, and fears. There would be ten collisions then for one that takes place now, and Englishmen would kill and be killed more frequently than ever.

The result would be the same, if, instead of aiming to repress piracy the Singapore merchants were to pay black mail to the pirates. There would either be an endless succession of pirates demanding tribute, or the pirate chief would break his trust, or he would be attacked by his envious neighbours, and our merchants would in the end find themselves compelled to fight. It is otherwise where there is a settled strong Government. But in the Malay Peninsula there is nothing but anarchy. There are endless disputes about succession, and there are as deadly feuds about property. The Chinese secret societies and the Malay pretenders between them keep the Peninsula in constant bloodshed and turmoil. There is neither peace, order, industry, or honesty. We must either abandon all attempts to trade with the Malays, or we must protect our merchants with the strong arm of our authority—a course which is certain to result, sooner or later, in the assumption of the Government. If we leave our merchants to themselves, they will do as the East India Company did, and build up an Empire without the moderating control of the Imperial Government. The question thus comes to this:—Is it worth while to govern the Malays for the sake of our trade with the Straits Settlements? Of that there can be no doubt. The imports and exports into the Straits Settlements exceed the imports and exports into any other British possession excepting Canada, Victoria, and British India. The territory inhabited by the Malays is very fertile, it abounds in precious metals, and it would be converted into a garden by the industrious Chinese if the anarchic no-rule of its independent Rajahs were superseded by the strong impartial authority of a Colonial Governor. It would pay, and more than pay, its expenses. It is high time an end were put to the playing fast and loose with this question. It will not do playing at annexation under the guise of appointing Residents, and then leaving them to be murdered. The whole country, from Quedah to Johore, although not including either State, should be formally annexed to our Settlements. That is the real lesson of the trouble in Penak.