

[SATURDAY REVIEW.]

The deputation which recently waited on Lord Derby to call his attention to the labor traffic in the Pacific fully deserved that he should say kind things of it. It confined itself strictly to calling his attention to a state of things of some interest, but did not suggest that anything particular should be done. It is sufficiently well known that the Colonial Secretary is always ready to direct an intelligent and scrutinising eye to any object of interest which may present itself on the face of the globe. He has never been known to decline to direct his attention wherever it was likely to be rewarded by a discovery, and is always disposed to emit curious observations of a critical nature. The deputation asked for very little more. They suggested vaguely that steps should be taken, and that the French Government should be spoken to with the object of protecting the natives of the New Hebrides from kidnappers; but they purposely stopped short of making for the one measure likely to prove effectual. Lord Derby thanked them for their moderation, and much commended their virtue. Then he proceeded to deal with the whole question in his own judicial style. He propped the arguments pro up against the arguments con, and left them standing.

What the deputation had to set before Lord Derby in support of their request that something not too strong should be done was a very old story. European colonies in the Southern Hemisphere are always more or less in dire want of laborers capable of working in a tropical climate. Negroes can no longer be got and are proverbially useless except as slaves. Chinese coolies are good workmen, but they are far too pushing to rest content as laborers. The planters do not seem to find that they stay long enough on the same plantations. Besides, the demand is in excess of the supply. Hands, however, must be got somewhere, and they are recruited with more enterprise than scruple. The islands of the Pacific were long the happy hunting ground of the "contractor." The quality of the labor got there was inferior, but then it was to be obtained with much greater freedom than elsewhere. In India a strong and vigilant Government protected the coolie, and its protection followed him when he had left the country. But there was nobody to protect the natives of the Pacific Islands, and a species of slave-trade grew up among them, and became an abuse of great magnitude. Much has been done to check it. Wherever the controlling power of the English Government extended, it was put a stop to; but that control is at best only indirect among many of the groups of islands of which the Pacific is full, and there the speculator in native labor had the liberty which he was certain to abuse. There is no reason to suppose that the members of the deputation of last Wednesday overstated their case in any considerable degree. The slightest consideration of the probable conditions under which the trade is carried on will show that Dr. G. Smith had probability in his favor when he said that the labor traffic often meant kidnapping on one side and bloody reprisals on the other. Those distant regions of the Pacific have notoriously been long full of broken men and outlaws of various European nations. Under the name of sandalwood traders, or some other convenient title, they contrive to come as near piracy as the fear of the gallows allows them. It is these adventurers who naturally carry on the trade in laborers, and they do it after the fashion that might be expected. The New Hebrides are under no recognised authority; and when an armed European will be only too ready to carry things with a high hand. The difficulty of protecting the natives from such ruffians is complicated by the fact that France has views on the New Hebrides. Her colony of New Caledonia lies only some 150 miles to the south-west. Plans for bringing the two under the same system of administration have been proposed in Paris, and entertained with the favor never at any time denied to anything which would extend French influence. The New Hebrides have been selected as a convenient place in which to establish a colony for incorrigible criminals, according to the scheme presented to the Chambers some time ago. To save the natives from the actual miseries from which they suffer, and from the greater evil with which they are threatened, was the object of the deputation. They had no very definite plan to propose, but they did ask that something should be done. It was perhaps inevitable, considering how many of the speakers were missionaries or philanthropists, that they should at least to some extent spoil their case by exaggeration. One gentleman thought it wrong that the islanders should be allowed to emigrate at all. It would appear that in his opinion the Pacific Islands should be preserved as a species of missionary park under British protection, well stocked with their appropriate game. The kind of answer which Lord Derby might be expected to make to addresses of this kind scarcely needed reporting. He was glad to see that none of the gentlemen whom he had the honor of receiving had come to propose annexation, at least not by that shocking name. Annexations are not in fashion, not even in South Africa, in his opinion. As for the protection of the natives, of course it was right that they should be protected. But there were difficulties in the way. We might hang and imprison our own ruffians when we caught them murdering and kidnapping; but what were we to do with the French? In politics it is above all things necessary to please the French, and they might not be pleased at hearing that we were taking upon us to restrain active citizens engaged in the patriotic task of extending the legitimate influence of their country in the New Hebrides. Of course the Colonial Secretary would have nothing to say to any proposal for making the New Hebrides into a prison for the natives. Lord Derby's dislike to doing anything is consistent with itself, and extends to objecting to prevent men from attending to their own interests. He fully recognised that this was a very important business—very important indeed—and though he did not see his way to doing anything he would take it into his consideration. That may be taken for granted. No living statesman can be more implicitly trusted to consider a matter for any length of time, and to do it with impartiality, thoroughness and intelligence.

Meanwhile, it is not very easy to see what necessity there is for any lengthy consideration. Nothing can be simpler than the whole matter. Except to those people who are capable of believing that the world is flat, it must be perfectly obvious that the New Hebrides cannot indefinitely remain unannexed by some European nation. From the moment that adventurers in trade or religion, of good character or of bad, begin to come among barbarous tribes, the old organisation and independence cease to be any longer possible. The natives lose their best qualities, and learn all the vices of the white adventurers. In any case they are helpless in the presence of the armed and intelligent villany of the new comers. The choice for them is not between some kind of order and prosperity under native rule and government by the whites, but between that and miserable anarchy. We have our recent experience in Fiji and our present experience in South Africa to show us that there is no middle term. Of course it does not follow that, if the New Hebrides are to be taken by somebody, they are to be taken by us. We may not find our account in taking the government of the islands out of the hands of half-educated Scotch missionaries and more or less rascally traders. But that somebody will is tolerably certain; and, considering the use to which the islands would probably be put by the French, it is perhaps as much our interest as it well can be to establish a protectorate. If we are not going to cease altogether to try to regulate the labor traffic, we must have officers exercising authority on the spot, and they will always be the virtual Government. It is not at all to be hoped that the difficulty of supplying tropical colonies with laborers will diminish, but much the reverse. There seems every reason to suppose that the French claims lately advanced against Madagascar were originally suggested by the wish to find some country in which the planters of Réunion could obtain coolies without having to submit to all sorts of vexatious control as they do now when they have to get them in India. There are many others in the country besides Lord Derby who see with something like dismay that we are almost daily absorbing more and more of the barbarous country which lies along our borders in various parts of the world. But, in spite of protests and alleged unwillingness, the process goes on, and will in all probability continue. It really seems that the only result of a policy of disinterestedness is to inflict a few years of anarchy on the countries we have to annex, and make the annexation all the harder when it actually comes. Meanwhile there is one sentence in Lord Derby's speech which seems to contain something like an expression of intention. He spoke of an understanding between France and England to respect the independence of the islands. If there were anything more utterly foolish in our colonial policy than the cowardly habit of letting things drift, it would be making "understandings" with France. We have had some experience of

what that has meant in Egypt. We had an understanding about Madagascar, and we see what has come of it. Understandings between countries that they will not do what may one day be forced on one of them, are among the most fertile of possible sources of trouble. If we do not choose to take over the New Hebrides ourselves, we need not build up a bungling imitation of a real protectorate, and in particular we need not do it with the French as fellow workmen.