

89. A significant commentary on the proposed absorption of the Pacific Islands is afforded by an agitation lately commenced for the annexation of Fiji to New South Wales or New Zealand, on the avowed and acknowledged ground that, were it effected, the interests of the natives would be no longer regarded as they now are, the acquisition of their land would be made easier, and the institutions now existing for their benefit would be abolished. There is, of course, no fear that Her Majesty would be advised to consent to a measure involving, as in the case of Fiji it must involve, not only a flagrant breach of faith, but consequences, in the end, as disastrous to the settlers themselves as to Her Majesty's coloured subjects, who form 98 per cent. of the entire population; but the proposal and the grounds assigned for it are at the present moment singularly instructive.

90. The other objection we would urge is of a more temporary character, but it is of quite as great immediate importance.

91. A federation of the Australian Colonies cannot under any circumstances be hastily effected. Its accomplishment requires time—probably a considerable time—while immediate action with regard to the condition of the Pacific is indispensable. Inefficient as the High Commission at present is, it exists; and while it continues inefficient there is very great danger that its powers will be ignored, or defied, in a manner very derogatory to Imperial authority.

92. Had a Deputy Commissioner been resident in New Guinea, the Queensland Government would hardly have despatched a Magistrate to annex that island, for it would probably have felt that to affect to give to Mr. Chester authority over Her Majesty's subjects in New Guinea, which was already exercised by another officer on the spot, under the direct sanction of the Imperial Government, was something more than a mere extension of the rule of the colony over vacant territory. We have some reason to believe that an armed expedition from Australia, similar to that contemplated in 1878, now proposes to appropriate a part of New Guinea, and we know that an association for the acquisition of territory in North-eastern New Guinea is now in the course of formation in London. This is the part of New Guinea most remote from Australia, and it is inhabited by quiet and friendly natives, over whom Baron Miklouho Maclay (a Russian subject) has acquired an influence which it might be difficult, and certainly would be undesirable, to overthrow or undermine.* These parties, on arriving in the island, will come under the authority of the High Commissioner; nor can we suppose that the Acting High Commissioner will tolerate their pretensions to independence of his authority. Her Majesty's Government have repeatedly declared that such expeditions would not be permitted.† We trust that effectual steps will be taken to prevent these declarations from being disregarded. The attitude assumed by foreign Powers equally renders the longer maintenance of a purely negative policy impossible. Communications lately received from the German Government, and to which we shall presently again refer, show that a more active and efficient supervision over the proceedings of British subjects in the remoter parts of the Pacific than has hitherto been exercised is urgently called for on grounds of humanity and general policy; and also that, if its establishment be neglected, serious danger of misunderstandings with the German naval authorities will ensue; for, from the tenor of the complaints made with regard to the high-handed proceedings of British subjects to the detriment of the Germans, it is clear that it is not only against natives that the German man-of-war, to be permanently stationed in the islands, has been instructed to "give efficient protection" to German subjects.

93. However unwilling we may be to adopt such a conclusion, we cannot but perceive the present state of matters in the Pacific renders more or less interference in some of the groups almost inevitable at no distant date.

94. The communities of the Pacific may be divided into three widely different classes. In the majority of the islands, as in the Solomon, Santa Cruz, and great part of the New Hebrides groups, the inhabitants, who are of the Melanesian race, are heathen, and for the most part cannibal savages.

* Mr. Deputy-Commissioner Romilly wrote thus from this district in August, 1881: "We anchored in a very little bay, called Port Constantine. I was much impressed by the magnificence of the scenery. The mountains appear to rise abruptly out of the sea to the height of 14,000ft., and on the day of our arrival were absolutely free from clouds. My desire was to find out, if possible, if the 'Courier' had ever been there, if the party in her had bought any land, and, if so, what consideration they had given for it; also if the accounts of the abundance of sugar and tobacco and scented woods were true. I had been absolutely unable to procure any interpreter, but Baron Maclay had taught me a few words of the language, and had shown me some signs which they would understand. Accordingly, when the canoes came round the ship, I told them I was 'Maclay's brother,' and asked after their chiefs by name. This did not seem to astonish them at all. In the afternoon Lieutenant Maturin and I had a most beautiful walk in the bush. There was a richness of vegetation which I had never seen before, and which I had not imagined possible. As far as I could make out, only two ships had been there before, but what their names were I could not find out, or how long ago they had left. I think I made myself understood in asking if any land had been sold to white men, and I received a most emphatic denial. I saw absolutely no articles of European manufacture among them, which I probably should have done had any land been bought. Sa-ul, moreover, said that on the occasion of ships visiting Ashstable Bay he had run into the bush, so at all events he can have been no party to any such transactions. In fact, I cannot find that the 'Courier' ever went there at all; but, if she did, she can have had no dealing with Sa-ul, who is the most powerful chief in the bay. There is no doubt that the country must be very rich, and I should think not unhealthy at that particular spot. There are numerous small rivers, with wide-spreading plains on either side, which look very fertile, and the mountain-range is so short a distance from the sea, and its height is so enormous, that any change of temperature could be obtained. I have no doubt this part of New Guinea might be colonized by white men with benefit to themselves; but I have also no doubt that it would be an act of injustice to the natives to allow a single white man to force himself upon them. Baron Maclay has assured me that they would never consent to alienate their land, and that any forcible appropriation of it would be resented to the utmost. I trust that, in the event of any forcible attempt being made to put this colonization scheme into practice, your Excellency will send a Commissioner to look after the interests of the natives." It is with reference to this territory that the association now forming intends, as appears from its advertisement in the *Times* newspaper, proposes to issue to every shareholder, "a warrant for 1,000 acres of land."

† See especially Lord Carnarvon's letter of October 30, 1875, which declines "to sanction, even tacitly, the acquisition of land by British subjects in New Guinea;" and Sir M. H. Beach's despatch of the 3rd April, 1878, "entirely approving" Sir A. Gordon's intimation that he would not permit the establishment of any rival jurisdiction on the part of the contemplated expedition from Victoria, and that "it would be his duty to make use of the powers intrusted to him to oppose any attempt of such a nature, or any enterprise calculated to compromise the Imperial Government as likely to produce collisions with the native inhabitants of New Guinea."