

[FALL MALL BUDGET.]

The arrival of the mail from the antipodes shows that the appointment of the royal commission to inquire into the labor traffic of the Western Pacific has created a profound impression. Demands, by no means entirely without justification, are made in many quarters for the representation of the colonies on the body which is to sit in judgment upon the commerce of the Southern Seas. On the other hand considerable uneasiness exists at home concerning the rumored limitation of the scope of the inquiry entrusted to the commission. When the appointment of the commission was first announced it was assumed as a matter of course that it was to examine into and report upon the labor traffic as a whole, and the announcement occasioned a momentary relief. At last, men said, we shall know the whole truth as to the traffic, and also the best means for preventing the evils which have hitherto accompanied it. But after a time an uneasy feeling began to prevail. The commissioners, it was said, were not to report on the whole question, but only upon one corner of it. Instead of being instructed to lay before Parliament and the nation a full, exhaustive and authoritative statement of what the labor traffic actually is, and what means, if any, short of absolute prohibition, can be taken to remove its abuses, it has been whispered they are to be confined to the expression of an opinion upon only one branch of the vast and complicated subject. The rumor is too absurd to be credible. But it gains an appearance of plausibility from the reference which Lord Derby made last week to the objects of the commission. He told the deputation which waited upon him to ask him to undertake the protection of the New Hebrides that the commission had been appointed to report upon the method by which outrages on natives could best be punished, and the context of the Colonial Secretary's speech showed that he was disinclined to regard the suppression of the labor traffic as an open question. It is possible to interpret Lord Derby's words in a wider sense, and that we hope and believe will be found to be the sense in which he intended to use them. But no time should be lost in expressing the very serious sense of disappointment, not to say indignation, that would be occasioned by the discovery that the inquiry promised by the commission is a mere illusory investigation, forbidden by the Colonial Office to pronounce an opinion upon the one point which exercises the national conscience, whether or not the labor traffic in the Western Pacific should be suppressed root and branch, as merely the old slave trade in another name.

The admirable report of Admiral Wilson on the labor trade in the Western Pacific calls attention to one description of the traffic, in some respects the worst of all, of which the public knows little or nothing. We refer to the trading vessels which are at present licensed by the colonial authorities to engage laborers to collect copra, bêche de mer, and other commodities in the islands of the Archipelago. Some of these men may be honorable upright traders, but others, there is too much reason to believe, are quite the reverse. The story goes that they "engage" or kidnap laborers, whom they compel to work for them for weeks and months for their rations, and then, when their cargo is collected, they either ill-treat them so that they seize the first opportunity afforded them of running away; or they land them among hostile tribes by whom they are promptly eaten. The number who are so ill-treated that they desert without wages or who are landed among their enemies is said to be by no means inconsiderable. In most cases the massacre of the unhappy natives is not intended by their employers, but to the luckless laborer it makes little difference whether the murder which closes his engagement was the result of a blunder or a crime. There is no supervision exercised over these traders. They engage their men how and where they choose, treat them as they please, and discharge them when they find it most convenient. In most of the islands from which they draw their recruits the natives are split up into a number of hostile tribes. If a laborer is landed a couple of miles to the right or left of the place where he was engaged, he probably finds himself among his deadly enemies, by whom he is summarily despatched and sometimes eaten. Unless the most stringent precautions are taken that the laborer is returned to the exact spot from which he has been recruited his engagement is virtually a sentence of death prefaced by a term of hard labor. But there is absolutely no security that the most ordinary precautions are taken to save the lives of the laborers upon whose exertions the growing traffic of the Western Pacific is almost entirely dependent. Their lot on shipboard, says Admiral Wilson, is, in many instances, "far worse than that of slaves under Europeans and Americans," and at its close they have in most cases nothing to look forward to but a bloody death, consequent on their being landed in the wrong bay.

To remedy this state of things is an imperative duty, which the Government can no longer refuse to face. Whether the commission has or has not been rightly constituted, it is now too late to discuss. Considering the conflicting interests and the colonial jealousies involved, it might have been better if the commission had been more broadly representative in its character. That matter, however, was settled by Lord Kimberley, and Lord Derby can hardly set aside his predecessor's arrangements. But it is not too late to urge that the scope of the inquiries of the commission should extend to every department of the wide field covered by the labor traffic. The public has a right to be informed by the most competent authorities how far this trade is a curse or a blessing to the aborigines of the Pacific, and whether or not it is true that beneath the English flag ships licensed by colonial governors are reviving a traffic in human beings "not even second to the slave trade, which England expended so much money and labor to put an end to." These are the concluding words of Admiral Wilson's report; and if they are at all near the truth it will be unfortunate, to say the least, should any English official stand in the way of the most ample and exhaustive inquiry into this grave national disgrace.