

THE WEEK:

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TOPICS OF THE WEEK.

TILL there is war there is hope of peace, and there is not yet war between England and Russia. At the moment at which we write indeed the cloud seems to have a little lifted. There are questions which the sword alone can settle. When Germany was bent on unification and France was bent on forbidding it, there was nothing for it but to try the issue on the field of battle. In the present case no such mortal difference exists. The fields of the two Empires in Asia are perfectly distinct, nor is there the slightest reasons why either of them should aggress upon or interfere with the other. There is no difficulty therefore with which diplomacy, if it were allowed fair play, ought not to be able successfully to deal. Nor is the danger in the intentions of the Governments on either side. It is in the restless condition of the Russian commanders in Asia, the pugnacity of the wild Afghans, the British Jingoism, which is all the time pouring out torrents of blustering menace, and the factiousness of the Tories, who want to wreck Mr. Gladstone's Government by driving it on the rock of war. The point on which Russian interests and those of England, if England maintains her present attitude, are really incompatible is not the Afghan frontier but the Dardanelles. Nature beckons the growing Empire of Russia to an open sea. England, as represented by Palmerston and Beaconsfield, insists on barring the access. This deadlock must in time breed war; it may even now be in the background of Russian policy, and may form the real knot of the difficulty, so far as the Governments are concerned. Concession or the prospect of concession in the direction of the Mediterranean would probably smooth away all antagonism on the Afghan frontier; but it is a thing of which the bare mention is enough to throw Jingoism into paroxysms of fury.

UNCERTAINTY as to the extent to which the trouble in the North-West may spread must for some time continue. That all the Indian tribes will become involved there is at present no reason to fear. Even the "Bill of Rights" put forth by Riel does not contain any article in which a definite complaint is made in their behalf. Riel must have been in communication with many of them before he issued his manifesto; and though he asks what may be called better terms for them, he does not set forth any specific grievance. And no official complaints appear to have been made by or on behalf of the Indians through other channels. No rational grounds for a general participation of the Indian tribes in the Half-breed insurrection appear to exist. The dream of expelling or exterminating the whites, which may have influenced "King Philip" two centuries ago, cannot now be entertained by the Indians of the North-West. Indian wars are sometimes undertaken without a rational hope that the tribes taking part in them can be successful; but a league of all the tribes of the North-West for the purpose of entering on a hopeless contest is in the last degree improbable. Riel is the champion of the Half-breeds, not of the Indians, whom he only seeks to secure as allies in fighting in a cause which is not primarily theirs. This the shrewd chiefs will readily understand; and his influence will likely be confined to bands that were already ill-disposed towards the whites. Most of the tribes, finding it increasingly difficult to secure the means of subsistence owing to the diminishing numbers of the bison, were anxious to secure the annuities which they obtained a few years ago for the surrender of their lands; a few gave a sullen compliance, either because they thought the price too small or they wanted the Government to promise to feed them when, as they seemed to dread, they might no longer be able to feed themselves. The danger of starvation is one which has come nearer to them with the practical extinction of the bison. Temporary privation and enforced fasting make the normal condition of the life of these nomads; but now the alternative seems to be between changing their mode of life—leaping over the chasm of centuries at a bound—and starvation. It is not surprising if they lose heart and feel like giving up the struggle. Pursued by hunger or worried by despair, there is no saying what any tribe may do; and all who once become responsible for a massacre such as has taken place at Frog Lake will do what they can to involve others in their guilt. Riel's men may be expected to fight at the river crossings, and in a pitched battle they will stand a good chance of being routed. One decisive defeat, at the outset, would probably cause many of his men to disperse, while it would overawe others who might be disposed to join if he could obtain any decided success. But most of the fighting is sure to be of the guerilla kind, in which Indians and Half-breeds are at home and raw troops at a disadvantage. It is doubtful whether sufficient attention has been paid to the foot gear of the men who have to march in the wet day after day. But, as always happens in war, there are many things which costly experience will teach, and the want of previous knowledge of which will exact an intermediate penalty of privation and suffering.

GENERAL MIDDLETON when he meets the forces of the insurrection will not have much reason to fear anything in front of him, but he may have too much reason to fear something behind him. In front of him will be only the Half-breeds: behind him will be the politicians whose game has brought upon us all these disasters. That their military administration when called into action should present, as we have been assured it does, to the eyes of shrewd judges the aspect of confusion, that they should have hurried to the front troops unsuited for the service and without proper equipment, is neither surprising nor much to their discredit. It was not to be expected that men whose lives had been spent in party management and the capture of votes would be all at once inspired with the genius of military administration. Through these difficulties we should have stumbled and blundered, as other inexperienced people had stumbled and blundered before us, at the cost of a certain number of lives and a certain waste of money. What is to be feared is that politics will interfere with the free action of the General, paralyse his arm and bring his enterprise to a futile conclusion, leaving the work, perhaps, to be done over again at some future