

## THROUGH THE ROBBER REGIONS

We ascended a few hillocks and drove down again to the bottom of the valley. Here the road was good and about 8 m wide. At the little town of Ching-ning we changed escort. All the shops were shut for the New Year festival.

It took us ages to get the new escort. The mayor sent message after message; but each time he received the answer that the officer in command of the garrison was not to be found; and no soldiers could be had without his consent. But we had to have an escort, for the road we were going to travel was very unsafe.

Meanwhile the mayor gave us a good deal of information. There were 60,000 persons in his *hsien* and 14,000 in the town itself. There were 36 schools in the district. A regiment, 3,500 men strong, squeezed 150,000 dollars a year out of the population. The soldiers were recruited from robber-bands.

»It's a good thing for you to have fellows like that for your escort,« said the mayor, »for they are on good terms with the robber-bands, and the people under their protection are not attacked. All the way from Lung-teh the garrisons are taken from the troops of the Central Government, and they are reliable.« And he added: »If you meet six men or more together on the road, look out! For they're more likely to be a robber-band than not.«

When we complained of the wretchedness of the road the mayor replied: »You ought to see what it'll be like in two months from now, when it is all one sea of mud! Now it's frozen hard.«

A few hours' wait, and at last we were off, and driving out of the town through the east gate. We descended in a deep, narrow, canyon to the bottom of the valley, which was covered with snow and ice-floes. The road then wound along the slope above the bottom of the valley. It was quite good, and had a fence.

A New Year's procession came along, carrying several flags, and with a large yellow paper lion at its head. They looked contented and happy, these poor farmers, getting their bit of amusement out of the chief festival of the year. But they did not like the new road, that deprived them of a strip of land without any compensation.

We met 131 camels laden with goods — a pleasant and picturesque sight in the wintry landscape. The wide and well-kept road was now bordered by two rows of splendid alders. A large herd of black pigs was being driven eastwards. The *chaussée* was wonderful, though it shrank now and then into a narrow trench.

Traffic was slight, as it had been the day after the New Year festival. The larger shops are kept shut for a fortnight; the smaller ones for a week only. Wooden columns and door-posts had strips of red paper pasted all over them. Even the caravans were decorated for the feast. Red ribbons hung from the fore part of the pack-saddle of the first camel in each string.

It was beginning to get dark when we reached the gate of Lung-teh and made for the mayor's yamen. He received us in a study of the usual type, exceedingly