

CHAPTER LXXVI

AT SU-CHOU AND ITS 'SPRING OF WINE'

My rapid survey of Chia-yü-kuan completed, I was free on the morning of July 22nd to set forth for Su-chou. The first large town we were to see within true Cathay was exercising a magnetic attraction on my people, and baggage and men were ready far earlier than usual. Yet even this early start did not prevent the kindly 'guardian of the Gate' from seeing me off in person. With an escort of ten mounted men, who had arrived the evening before as a special compliment from the Brigadier-General commanding at Su-chou, my cavalcade looked imposing. Two banners of large size and gay colours were being carried along by the little troop, and the huge straw hats with fluttering bands which the men wore added to the general quaintness. A carbine or two among their equipment looked strangely out of place in this mediaeval stage-mounting. But for the snowy peaks of the Richthofen range looking down upon us from the south there was little to distract the eye on the nineteen miles' march to Su-chou. By far the greatest part of it lay over a stony waste, which sorely tried our ponies' feet, already unshod from the last days' marches. Numerous canals from the left bank of the Pei-ta Ho were crossed *en route*; but the fertile loess belt which they irrigate lies miles away to the north.

The heat and glare were great, and we all felt relieved when by 3 P.M. the high walls of Su-chou came in view from the edge of unbroken cultivation near the west bank of the river. The many branches we forded held little water at the time, but the deeply cut loess banks on either