

OUR FOREIGN LETTER.

LITTLE PAPERS FROM JAPAN.

Twenty-five miles on a pack-horse! I feel that this really is worthy to be called travelling; for being luxuriously conveyed from place to place and country to country in trains and steamboats never does seem to deserve the name. The Japanese horses are much smaller than ours, and are trained to walk at a foot-pace, while a man walks alongside holding the rein. If the rider desires to trot the man will run behind beating the horse, but this is only a concession to the mad whim of the mad foreigner, whose unaccountable tastes must be pandered to, of course. One day I was out for a stroll on horseback accompanied by a peasant-lad with an almost Italian face, and by way of making conversation I remarked: "It is years since I rode a horse—the last time I was on one I was very small, and the horse was very large." "And now," said the boy, his brown eyes twinkling, "it is just the other way, the horse is very small and you are very large!" In England we do not consider five feet two inches a great height, but in Japan it is thought quite too tall for a woman.

These horses are universally employed for carrying burdens, the pack-saddle being a cumbersome arrangement to which the burdens can be fastened one on each side of the horse's body. When used for riding on, the centre of the saddle is piled up with cushions, and one sits on the top, so high up that one's feet rest on each side of the horse's neck without the appearance of riding astride. One has no rein or stirrups, and the position is not too secure, but soon we are all mounted and start off with something of that "lovely fearful feeling" that lends fascination to so many a doubtful pleasure.

Our path leads us first through a wild valley, where the tall, dewy grasses shimmer like silver in the morning sunlight, and then into a delicious pinewood, where we see the leaves and berries of the Lily of the Valley beside the pathway. Climbing the steep side of a ravine we come out again on an open hillside, with no sign of fence or barrier, and as far as the eye can see there is nothing but flowers, flowers, flowers! One longs to dismount and gather great bunches of them, especially the little pale yellow lily, which always shines like one of Nature's precious things among the commoner flowers. The path rises gradually, and after a time we see on our left a great stretch of land fenced in, the stud-farm, it appears, of one of the royal princes. In the open ground on our right stand immense trees, with what look like sponges growing high up on the branches, and closer inspection convinces us that they are indeed clusters of mistletoe.

At noon we reached a little rest-house and joyfully dismounted from our uncomfortable perches, feeling very stiff and sore. The little place consisted of one room, with a dais at one end for guests, and kitchen arrangements at the

other. The beams of the roof were the colour of dark mahogany from the smoke of the wood-fires, for which no way of escape was provided, but that did not matter as the sliding screens were all removed according to the delightful custom of the country, leaving the room wide open to the air. The place is poor and primitive in the extreme, and we should not feel tempted by such refreshments as they can provide; but that does not matter, as we have with us a well-stocked luncheon-basket of generous dimensions—a most important item when travelling in country places!

By and by we climb the little wooden mounting-platforms and get on our horses again, except one or two members of the party who have found the saddles intolerable and prefer to walk most of the way. Certainly it is delightful to walk over the flower-decked hills, and still more enjoyable is it when the road winds again through a fine wooded gorge and fresh varieties of flowers peep out under the trees. In one place the road is most exciting, being cut in the side of a precipice, and again one revels in the "lovely fearful feeling" before-mentioned.

Presently the scene changes. Cultivated valleys and trim villages succeed one another, and by the sheltered streams flourish side by side the rich claret-coloured bean-flower and whimsical "spoilt-child" (the wild dianthus), so dear to the Japanese heart. The balsam is there, too, whose name means "hanging-boat-flower," with many another blossom of dainty grace and quaint expressive name.

Towards evening we grew exceedingly weary with the incessant jogging up and down, and eyes and brain refused to take in any more beauty. I gave it up eventually and tried to kill time by committing to memory Shelley's "Cloud," or part of it which I happened to find in a Japanese magazine called the "Student." The scenery was still lovely, but as we neared our destination a ghastly reminder of the character of the place met the eye here and there along the road, in the shape of discarded pieces of cotton-wool! For the object of our journey is one of the famous hot-springs of this volcanic country, and people suffering from all sorts of horrible diseases resort there. Lepers especially go in great numbers, and, as our work is among these poor sufferers, we are anxious to see how they fare in the quarter devoted to them in this sad little town among the hills.

As night creeps on a drizzling rain blots out the view, and the last part of our journey is irksome and dreary. At last it is quite dark, and as we creep cautiously down the last long hill, darkness around us, clouds of sulphurous steam rising eerily from below, and the lights of the little town gleaming red still lower down, one horrible thought possesses each mind: It is no wonder that the Japanese borrow the word "hell" in naming their hot-springs.

But at last we reach our hotel, and, after another vigorous attack on the contents of the luncheon-basket, we thankfully retire to our Japanese beds.

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