

"PAY THE BALANCE"

Brand New Method for Squeezing the People: Smugglers' Paths to Avoid New Dues

From Our Own Correspondent.

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From time immemorial, China has had smugglers. There are the smugglers over the frontiers, or across the seas, but there are also internal smugglers, people who carry dutiable goods from one province to another, or even from one country to another. Their number is accounted for by the endless multiplicity of Custom houses. Likin offices, general goods "squeeze" offices, "pay the balance" offices, monopoly offices, and so forth, that wring the money from the unwilling people throughout the length and breadth of this long suffering land. And the rapacity of the said offices explains the fact that to sneak past a Custom office, or more often to use little frequently roads that avoid it, is not regarded as a serious lapse from rectitude, provided the Customs officer does not catch the offender.

This "pay the balance" office is a brand new imposition here in Lanchow. It aims at getting money out of people who have received goods by parcel post. The Postal Commissioner here objected to it at first, and the merchants in the city did so strenuously for a time, but all now seem to acquiesce in its existence. The merchants will get the money out of the consumer, so it does not really matter to them if a hundred new offices are created. Some country people, and muleteers, however, feel differently when a new Customs barrier is erected, and the first thing of course is to see whether another route will not avoid it. Thus in addition to the main roads, we have a whole network of mountain paths, which are really the smuggler's roads. They are often very hilly, but not much roundabout, free from dust, quiet, and beautiful. They run along ridges of mountains, and command extensive views of the valleys where the main roads lie. They have their disadvantages of course. One is that the inns on the smuggler's roads are poor. Another is that there are not all the nice little Chinese "eats" to be had on them, such as frozen pears, or roast chicken, or sliced melon, or meat dumplings. But by taking his own food with him, the traveller can do without all these. And the beautiful views and freedom from dust are great compensations. It is easy, too, to lose the way, but then, if he is at his destination by nightfall, what does it matter anyway?

Mule bells, of course, on these roads may defeat the smuggler's aim. So they are often removed, and it is almost uncanny to meet a train of mules and donkeys winding round a hill crest, almost as silent as the grave, with only the tiny patter of their hoofs on

the well worn mountain trails. They carry salt, and cloth, and oil, and wine, and whatever else may be profitably hidden from the eyes of the pilfering publicans in the Custom houses that lie perhaps 3,000 feet in the valley below. And what huntsman's treasures these roads are! Where wild pigs—six, one forenoon I counted—and pheasants innumerable, and foxes, and at times a wolf, pass close to one, startled or half indignant that the rider should thus have invaded their preserves.