

DESCRIPTION of the SOLEMNITIES observed at PEKIN, when the EMPEROR'S MOTHER entered her SIXTIETH YEAR.

*[In a Letter from a Jesuit Missionary.]*

IT is in China an ancient custom to celebrate with great pomp the day when the Emperor's mother enters upon the sixtieth year of her age. Some months before that day arrived, all the tribunals of the capital, all the viceroys and great mandarines of the empire had orders to prepare themselves for the afore-mentioned ceremony, the most splendid that is observed in these parts. All the painters, engravers, architects and joiners of Pekin, and the neighbouring provinces, were without intermission employed for more than three months together in making, every one, the nicest works of his respective art. Many other kinds of artists had also employment. The business was to construct something that might charm the eyes of a delicate and voluptuous court, accustomed to see whatever is most beautiful in the works of art brought from the four quarters of the globe. The decorations were to begin at one of the Emperor's houses of pleasure, which is at Yuen-min-yuen, and to terminate at the palace which is at Pekin in the centre of the Tartarian city: These are distant from each other, about four leagues.

There are two roads which lead from one of these palaces to the other. The Emperor ordered that the procession should be made along that which runs by the river side. Immediately all the preparations were turned towards that quarter. The prince caused new barks to be built nearly of the same size and form as our brigantines. The gilding and variety of colours with which they were adorned gave a dazzling splendour. These barks were intended to carry the Emperor, the Empress-mother, and all the persons of their retinue: But by an accident, which the Emperor himself foresaw, and which any persons of good sense might have foreseen as well as he, they were of no use.

At Pekin the cold is extreme, and, as it was in the most rigorous season of the year that the ceremony was to take place, it was natural to think that the river would not be navigable. Some mandarines nevertheless assured the Emperor, that they could easily surmount this difficulty. And they took the following method to effect it. By their appointment thousands of Chinese were employed night and day, some in beating and agitating the water to prevent it from freezing, and others in breaking the ice, which

was formed, from time to time, in spite of all the precautions of their comrades; and in drawing it out of the bed of the river. This troublesome work lasted about three weeks; after which finding that the cold continually increased, and that it would at length get the better of them, they yielded up the victory, and desisted from an enterprise the most daring that ever was.—It cost the principal author only one year's income of his salary. A punishment light enough in such a country as this, where it is always a capital crime for persons to be found incapable, or even under an impossibility of performing what they have had the boldness to promise the Emperor; and where it costs him so little to cut off their heads. The barks were then declared useless, and it was concluded to substitute sledges in their stead.—But all this while they had been working with incredible diligence at the embellishments that were to decorate the way by which the Empress mother was to pass.—And these were nearly what I am going to describe.

On the two banks of the river were erected buildings of different forms. Here was a house either square, triangular, or polygon (i.e. of many angles) with all its apartments. There was a rotunda, or some other edifice of a similar kind. As one went along, others appeared, whose construction (varied in a hundred different manners) engaged, amused, and charmed the sight, wherever one fixed it. In such places as the river, by growing wider, had departed from a right line, were built houses of wood, supported by pillars fixed in the water, and which appeared above its surface, some two feet, and others three or four, or even higher, according to the plan of the Chinese architects. The greatest part of these buildings formed islands, the passages to which was over bridges built for that purpose. There were some entirely detached and separate, others were contiguous, and had a communication between them by covered galleries, built much in the same manner as the houses and bridges which I have described above. All these edifices were gilt and embellished in the most splendid taste of the country. They were every one devoted to a particular use. In some were bands of music; in others companies of comedians; in the greatest part were refreshments and magnificent thrones to receive the Emperor