



WITH THE EMPRESS DOWAGER

CHAPTER I

MY PRESENTATION AND FIRST DAY AT THE CHINESE COURT

THE day of my first Audience at the Chinese Court, August 5th, we were up betimes at the American Legation, for it takes full three hours to drive out to the Summer Palace from Peking, and punctuality is the etiquette of Oriental as well as of Occidental potentates. Our audience was for half-past ten o'clock, and the portrait of the Empress Dowager was to be begun at eleven; that hour, as well as the day and the month, having been chosen, after much deliberation and many consultations of the almanac, as the most auspicious for beginning work on the first likeness ever made of Her Majesty.

We left the Legation at seven A.M. in the trap of the United States Legation Guard, that being the only vehicle available large enough to carry the party, Mrs. Conger and her interpreter and myself and my painting materials, which included a large canvas and

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a folding easel. After leaving the City, the drive out to the Summer Palace is through fertile fields and a fair, smiling landscape. It had rained the night before and everything was beautifully fresh. The wet, stone-paved road stretched ahead like a shining stream; the wheat and corn fields along the road were of a brilliant green, with here and there the somber note of a clump of arbor-vitæ, out of which rose the walls of a temple! The distant hills, where lay the Summer Palace, were delicately limned against a soft blue-gray sky, and the whole made an entrancing picture.

Soon after leaving Peking the mounted official Legation servants that followed Mrs. Conger's carriage were joined by a Chinese Guard of Honor sent by the Wai-Wu-Pu (Foreign Office) to escort us to the Palace. After an hour and a half's drive we rattled through a busy village, past the yellow ruins of a great lama temple, and along the park walls of the summer homes of several Princes of the Imperial Family, and soon came within sight of the beautiful grounds of the Summer Palace with its hills, valleys, canals, and lakes; the hills crowned with tea-houses and temples, the waters of the canals lapping the marble terraces of the Palaces. The red walls and glazed tiles of the yellow and green roofs, the brilliant foliage, freshened by the rain, made a gay picture; and the temples, arches, pagodas, and the many buildings that constitute a Chinese palace gave it the appearance of a whole town rather than of a single palace.

As in all Oriental palaces, upon the very threshold of the outer courts sit the beggar, the lame, the halt,

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and the blind, gathering rich harvests from the generosity of the high nobles and officials and their myriad retainers as they pass in and out of the Foreign Office and the outer courts of the Palace. The Foreign Office, during the residence of the Court at the Summer Palace, sixteen miles from the Capital, has offices on the left of the great Imperial entrance, in order that state business may be more easily transacted while Their Majesties are in villeggiatura.

We alighted at the Foreign Office and were met by a number of officials with their interpreters, coming out to receive us. After readjusting ourselves in the waiting-room, we were met, when we came out, by the Chief Eunuch of the Palace, who conducted us to the red-covered Palace chairs, each carried by six men. They bore us past the Imperial gateway (used only for Their Majesties), through a door of entrance at the left, when we were within the sacred precincts of one of the residences of the Sons of Heaven and within the walls of the favorite Palace of the Empress Dowager! Before we could take in our surroundings, we had been rapidly carried through various courts and gardens, and had come at last to a larger, quadrangular court, filled with pots of rare blooming plants and many beautiful growing shrubs. Here the bearers put down our chairs; we descended and walked through the court, preceded and followed by a number of eunuchs. The great plate-glass doors of the Palace in front of us, blazing with the huge red character "Sho" (longevity), were swung noiselessly back, and we were at last within the Throne-room of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress Dowager of China!

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A group of Princesses and Ladies-in-waiting stood to receive us. The Ladies Yu-Keng, wife and daughter of a former Chinese Minister to France, stood near the Princesses; and their perfect knowledge of both Chinese and English rendered them delightful mediums of communication between the Princesses and ourselves. Having known these ladies in Paris, it was almost like seeing old friends. They seemed a link between the real, every-day world and this Arabian Nights Palace into which we had been wafted. As we arrived at a quarter-past ten, we were in the Throne-room a few moments before Their Majesties appeared! Their entrance was so simply made, so unobtrusive, that the first I know of it, noticing a sudden lull, I looked around and saw a charming little lady, with a brilliant smile, greeting Mrs. Conger very cordially. One of the Ladies Yu-Keng whispered, "Her Majesty"; but even after this it seemed almost impossible for me to realize that this kindly looking lady, so remarkably young-looking, with so winning a smile, could be the so-called cruel, implacable tyrant, the redoubtable "old" Empress Dowager, whose name had been on the lips of the world since 1900! A young man, almost boyish in appearance, entered the Throne-room with her: this was the Son of Heaven, the Emperor of China!

After greeting Mrs. Conger, the Empress Dowager looked toward me, and I advanced with a reverence. She met me half-way and extended her hand with another brilliant smile which quite won me, and I spontaneously raised her dainty fingers to my lips. This was not in the protocol program. It was an

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involuntary and surprised tribute on my part to her unexpected charm. She then turned and with graceful gesture extended her hand toward the Emperor and murmured "The Emperor," and watched me closely while I made His Majesty the formal reverence. He acknowledged the salutation by a slight bow and a stereotyped smile, but I felt that he, too, was closely scrutinizing me as his shrewd glance swept my person.

After a few moments' conversation, interpreted by the Ladies Yu-Keng, Her Majesty ordered my painting things brought in, while she retired to be dressed. In the gown she had decided upon as appropriate for the portrait.

After she had left the Throne-room, I tried to take in the conditions of the place for painting. The hall was large and spacious, but the light was false, the upper parts of the windows being covered with paper shades. The only place in the hall where there was any sort of light for painting was in front of the great plate-glass doors, and this was but a small space in which to begin so large a picture. To get a light upon the portrait, as well as upon the sitter, I should be forced to place my canvas very near the throne where she was to sit; and, with so large a portrait as I was to paint, this would be a great disadvantage. When I thought I must paint here, and begin at once upon the canvas which was to be the final picture, my heart fell! Her Majesty wished, above all, to have a large portrait, and I was told she would not understand my beginning on a small canvas or making any preliminary studies — that if I did not begin on the

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big canvas at once she would probably not give me any more sittings; in fact we had that morning been told at the Foreign Office that Her Majesty was to give me but two sittings, so there was no alternative! There could be no preliminary poses, no choice from several sketches, and only a few moments in which to choose the pose, which must be final—and I totally ignorant of the possibilities of my sitter or her characteristics.

Luckily, I had but a few moments to consider all these adverse circumstances, for Her Majesty soon returned! She had been clothed in a gown of Imperial yellow, brocaded in the wistaria vine in realistic colors and richly embroidered in pearls. It was made, in the graceful Manchu fashion, in one piece, reaching from the neck to the floor; fastened from the right shoulder to the hem with jade buttons. The stuff of the gown was of a stiff, transparent silk, and was worn over a softer under-gown of the same color and length. At the top button, from the right shoulder, hung a string of eighteen enormous pearls separated by flat pieces of brilliant, transparent green jade. From the same button was suspended a large, carved pale ruby, which had yellow silk tassels terminating in two immense pear-shaped pearls of rare beauty! At each side, just under the arms, hung a pale-blue, embroidered silk handkerchief and a scent-bag with long, black silk tassels. Around her throat was a pale-blue, two-inch-wide cravat, embroidered in gold with large pearls. This cravat had one end tucked into the opening on the shoulder of her gown, and the other hanging. Her jet-black hair

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was parted in the middle, carried smoothly over the temples, and brought to the top of the head in a large, flat coil.

Formerly all Manchu ladies who have marvelous hair carried the hair itself out from this coil over a golden, jade, or tortoise-shell sword-like pin, into a large-winged bow. The Empress Dowager and the Ladies of the Court have substituted satin instead of the hair for this wing-like construction, as being more practicable and less liable to get out of order. So satin-like and glossy is their hair that it is difficult to tell where it ends and the satin begins. A band of pearls, with an immense "flaming pearl" in the center, encircled the coil. On either side of the winged bow were bunches of natural flowers and a profusion of jewels. From the right side of the head-dress hung a tassel of eight strings of beautiful pearls reaching to the shoulder.

She wore bracelets and rings, and on each hand had two nail-protectors, for she wore her nails so long the protectors were necessary adjuncts. These nail-protectors were worn on the third and fourth fingers of either hand; those on the left being of brilliant green jade, while those on the right hand were of gold, set with rubies and pearls.

Her Majesty advanced with animation and asked me where the Double Dragon Throne was to be placed. After the eunuchs had put it where I said, she took her seat. Although not more than five feet tall, as she wears the Manchu shoes with six-inch-high, stilt-like soles, to avoid throwing the knees up higher than the top she must sit upon cushions, and when

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she is seated she looks a much larger woman than when standing. She took a conventional pose and told me I might make any suggestion I wished; but I had made up my mind that the pose and surroundings must be as typical and characteristic as possible, and as I had had no time to study my August Sitter I thought she would know best as to her position and accessories.

It was nearing eleven!

Beginning anything is momentous. Every artist knows how the wonderful possibilities of the bare canvas in its virgin purity standing before him inspires him with almost a feeling of awe; how he hesitates about beginning, so great is the responsibility. This bare canvas may become a masterpiece, the full expression of his thought, or it may come forth a maimed and distorted effort. To-day in these strange surroundings, with these unusual and unfavorable conditions, my hesitancy was greater than usual; for upon this beginning depended my being able to go on with the portrait.

My hands trembled! The inscrutable eyes of the wonderful woman I was to paint, fixed piercingly upon me, were also disconcerting; but just then the eighty-five clocks in this particular Throne-room began to chime, play airs, and strike the hour in eighty-five different ways. The auspicious moment had come! I raised my charcoal and put the first stroke upon the canvas of the first portrait that had ever been painted of the Empress Dowager of Great China, the powerful "Tze-Shi." The Princesses, Ladies-in-waiting, the high eunuchs and at-

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tendants, stood in breathless silence around, intently watching my every movement, for everything touching Her Majesty is a solemnity.

For a few moments I heard the faintest ticking of the eighty-five clocks as if they were great Cathedral bells clanging in my ears, and my charcoal on the canvas sounded like some mighty saw drawn back and forth. Then, happily, I became interested, and absolutely unconscious of anything but my sitter and my work. I worked steadily on for what seemed to be a very short time, when Her Majesty turned to the interpreter and said "enough work had been done for that day"; the conditions had been fulfilled and the picture begun at the auspicious moment. She added that she knew I must be tired from our long drive out from Peking, as well as from my work. She said I must rest and we must partake of some refreshments. She then descended from the throne and came over to look at the sketch.

I had blocked in the whole figure and had drawn the head with some accuracy. So strong and impressive is her personality, I had been able to get enough of her character into this rough whole to make it a sort of likeness. After looking critically at it for a few moments, she expressed herself as well pleased with what had been done, and paid me some compliments on my talent as an artist! I felt instinctively, however, this was due more to her natural courtesy—her desire to put me at ease—than to an actual expression of her opinion. After she had looked at the portrait, she called Mrs. Conger and the Princesses to see what had been done, and it was discussed for a few

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moments. Then she turned to me and said the portrait interested her greatly, that she should like to see it go on. She asked me, looking straight into my eyes the while, if I would care to remain at the Palace for a few days, that she might give me sittings at her leisure.

This invitation filled me with joy. The reports I had heard of Her Majesty's hatred of the foreigner had been dispelled by this first Audience and what I had seen there. I felt that the most consummate actress could not so belie her personality, and I accepted, without a moment's hesitation, the invitation so graciously tendered. I thought thus I should be able to get a good beginning for a satisfactory likeness of this most remarkable and interesting woman. My sanguine heart even leaped forward to the possibility of probably finishing the portrait entirely at the Palace. Her Majesty seemed pleased at my acceptance and said she would try to make me happy. She then withdrew and we were served to luncheon.

The Empress Dowager always eats alone. When she has guests the Princess Imperial, as the first of the Ladies of the Palace, acts as hostess. The guests of honor are placed at her right and left. The Princesses, Ladies Yu-Keng, Mrs. Conger, and myself formed the guests on this occasion.

The table, decorated with flowers and fruit, groaned under the many Chinese dishes placed thereon. Foreign dishes were served *à la Russe*. The Chinese dishes, attractive to the eye as well as to the senses of smell and taste, appealed to me at once; though I had been told one must cultivate a taste for them. There were

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foreign table waters and wines as well as Chinese drinks. We did full justice to the viands, tasting everything and trying to use the chop-sticks, though knives and forks were also placed for each of the guests.

After the repast Her Majesty and the young Empress, the first wife of the Emperor Kwang-Hsu, came in. Her Majesty presented the young Empress with the same grace with which she had indicated the Emperor at the morning Audience, repeating her title, "The Empress," as she did so. Immediately behind the young Empress was the only secondary wife of the Emperor, who was also presented by the Empress Dowager.

Then Her Majesty told Mrs. Conger she had her Players at the Theater that day, and she invited us to come and hear them. The Empress Dowager and Mrs. Conger led the way and I followed with the young Empress and Princesses. We passed through several courts, all gay with flowers, and finally reached the largest of all, the Court of the Theater. The Theater projects into this rectangular court and consists of a covered rostrum, open on three sides with doors at the back for the entrance and exit of the actors. In front of the stage and across the open, flower-filled court, with splendid bronze ornaments here and there, is a building which might be called the Imperial loge. This is from sixty to eighty feet long with a pillared stone veranda and occupies one entire side of the court. Huge panes of plate glass, the full height of the building, enable Her Majesty and the Emperor to see, from within, all that passes on the stage, and they can,

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of course, hear everything perfectly. The buildings which form the other sides of this court, those which run at right angles to the Imperial loge, are divided into small stalls, each about the size of an ordinary opera box. There are no chairs in these boxes, the occupants sit Turkish fashion upon the floor, for no courtier can occupy a chair when in the presence of Their Majesties. These side rooms are for the use of the high officials and Princes who are sometimes invited by Their Majesties to be present at the Imperial Theatrical Representations.

On my first day at Court there were no other invited guests; the Players had been summoned in our honor. Her Majesty sat in a yellow-covered chair on the red-pillared verandah of the Imperial loge. The Emperor was seated on a yellow stool at her left, the place of honor in China. Mrs. Conger and I were on Her Majesty's right, the young Empresses, Princesses, and Ladies-in-waiting standing around. After seeing two or three acts of a play of which we understood little more than the pantomime, but which was interesting from its very novelty, Mrs. Conger arose to take leave of Their Majesties and the Princesses. After this was accomplished, I accompanied her to one of the outer courts and there told her good-by.

When she left, I was alone in the Palace, the first foreigner to be domiciled in any residence of a Son of Heaven since the time of Marco Polo, and the only foreigner who had ever been within the Ladies' Precincts. I had a curious feeling of having been transported into a strange world. A sense of loneliness crept over me,

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and I feared the strangeness of my position might affect my work. and that, after all, I should not accomplish what I had remained in the Palace to do. I stood for a few minutes pondering my position, but was soon joined by the Ladies Yu-Keng with a message from the Empress Dowager that I need not return to the Theater, as she had gone to rest. She sent word that she thought it would be well for me to go to my apartments and try to sleep a little. She hoped I would be happy in the Palace and find the pavilion she had set aside for me comfortable. She added that I must not hesitate to order anything I wished and must make myself perfectly at home.

The Summer Palace, like all Chinese palaces and temples, and even the dwelling-houses of the rich, consists of a series of verandahed buildings, built on stone foundations which rise about eight feet from the ground, generally of one story, around the four sides of rectangular or square courts, connected by open verandah-like corridors. The apartments set aside for my private use, while in the Precinets, were to the left of the Empress Dowager's Throne-room and quite near it—in order that I might go and come to my painting with ease. These apartments occupied an entire pavilion. It was charming. Its shining marble floors and beautifully carved partitions, its painted walls and charming outlook over flowery courts, made it a delightful spot. These pavilions at the Palace have movable partitions and the rooms may be made as small as closets or as large as the whole building.

My pavilion consisted of two sitting-rooms, a dining-room, and a charming bedroom, separated from each

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other by screen-like walls of beautifully carved open woodwork, with blue silk showing through the interstices. In the larger spaces were artistic panels of flowers painted on white silk, alternating with poems and quotations from the classics, in the picturesque, ideographic writing of the Chinese. On one of the solid walls was a large water-color painting on white silk, representing a realistically painted peafowl in a flowery field; an immense mirror formed the other solid wall. The plate-glass lower windows had blue silken curtains, the upper windows of white paper were rolled down, and the rich perfume of the flowers in the court came in. In my honor, several foreign "objets de vertu" adorned the tables and window-shelves. The bed, a couch built into an alcove, was covered with blue satin cushions; and the windows were shaded from the outside by blue silken awnings, which gave a soft subdued light to the room, that made it very cool and restful-looking. I found the couch so inviting I was soon really resting, and the events of the day passed before my mental vision in kaleidoscopic array. Although the cushions of the bed were harder than I had been accustomed to, and the dozen or more eunuchs, who had been set aside for my service, were whispering just outside my window to be ready for any call, I soon fell asleep from sheer exhaustion and reaction from the unusual events of the day.

At five o'clock one of the Ladies Yu-Keng knocked at my door to tell me the Empress Dowager was awake, and had asked that I come up to the Throne-room as soon as I was ready. When we went up she

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called me to her side and said she hoped I had rested well, that I found my apartments comfortable; she repeated again the wish that I would be happy with her. She said we would not paint any more for that day, but on the morrow we would have another and longer sitting for the portrait. She begged me to let her know if there was anything I cared for particularly, that she might order it for me.

The Empress Dowager then dined alone, after which the young Empress and the Princesses led me into the Throne-room, and we dined at Her Majesty's table, her seat being left vacant. The young Empress occupied the place at the left of this vacant seat, and had me on her left. When we had finished dinner, at which the young Empress and the Ladies were most considerate of me, seeming to try to make me feel at ease, we went up to take our leave of the Empress Dowager. After this was accomplished we left the Throne-room, and made our adieus to the young Empress and Princesses, and left the Imperial inclosure for the Palace of the Emperor's Father, which Her Majesty had set aside for the use of the Ladies Yu-Keng and myself while I was at work on the portrait.