

CHAPTER XI

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF HER MAJESTY—SECOND VISIT TO THE SEA PALACE

I SPENT the next day at the Legation, and thoroughly enjoyed it, but I was glad to think that I was to spend the following day at the Palace again. The study of Her Majesty had now become to me like a thrilling novel. I could not bear to lay it down; and when I was forced to do so, I was longing to be able to resume it. She was such a delightful surprise to me. I had heard and read so much of her, before I went to the Palace, and nothing that I had heard or read had at all prepared me for the reality, so charming, so unusual was her personality. Not charming and interesting by fits and starts, but always so! She was so considerate and tactful, and seemed so really kind in her relations with those who surrounded her. I had been now nearly a month in daily contact with her. I saw her, not only when she sat for the portrait; I was with her the greater part of the day, and I began to let myself go in my admiration of her. The days seemed flat and stale when I could not see her—so full of interest and charm I found her. She was a woman of such infinite variety! There was always something new and fresh to study

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in her. She was the very embodiment of the Eternal Feminine. She was at once a child and a woman with strong, virile qualities. She would go into the Audience Hall, transact weighty affairs of State for three hours, and then go for her walk or excursions, and take a childish interest in the simplest pleasures. She would be seated in one of her Throne-rooms in trivial conversation with her Ladies, when an Official Despatch, in its yellow silk case, would be brought in, and presented by the eunuch on bended knees. Her face would immediately become full of serious interest; she would bend her brows and become the statesman; a few moments later, when she had duly considered, and given orders relative to the despatch, she became again the woman, full of interest in her flowers, dresses, and jewels.

A distinguished Frenchman once said of Her Majesty the Empress Dowager, "C'est le seul homme de la Chine," and she deserves the appellation of "man," if it goes to mean superior intelligence and executive ability; but it was not the "statesman" that I had the best opportunity of studying. It was the woman in her private life; and I had unusual advantages for this study, and the more I saw of her, the more remarkable I found her! Her favors to the Ladies of the Court were very impartially distributed. She had her favorites, but she did not allow them to gain any supremacy over her, nor to warp her judgment. Although her "entourage" never expressed an opinion contrary to hers, in her presence, and though she always accepted their *expressed* views in the most courteous manner, one could see she was not imposed

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upon, and that she knew, perfectly well, their real opinions, so great was her natural penetration.

I was astonished to find in what veneration the Empress Dowager was really held by the Ladies of the Court and her "entourage." Her favorite title, and that by which she has been longest known to the courtiers, is, "Lao-Fo-yeh," the "Old Buddha," which shows that they invest her with sacred qualities. After her return from Hsi-An Fu, where the Court went when the allied troops occupied Peking, and where the sacred Persons of Her Majesty and the Emperor suffered so many hardships and endured them so bravely, the courtiers gave her another, a closer and more affectionate appellation, "Lao-Tzu-Tzung" (The Old Ancestress). This was the title by which she was called in the Palace, by the Emperor, Empress, and Princesses, and by which she allowed me to address her.

On our arrival at the Sea Palace, the day of my second visit there, after making our bows to Her Majesty, we started, in our chairs, to the Hall of the Mongolian Princes. This is a magnificent hall in the northeastern part of the park, some distance away from Her Majesty's and the Emperor's Palaces. It is of one story, as usual, but this nearly forty feet high. The interior is spacious, with only a few dragon tables and chairs and no ornaments or other furniture. There is a raised dais at the back, with several steps leading up to it. Upon the dais stood a splendid Throne of archaic design, and over the Throne there are two huge tablets of black marble, with inscriptions in Chinese and Manchu characters. This

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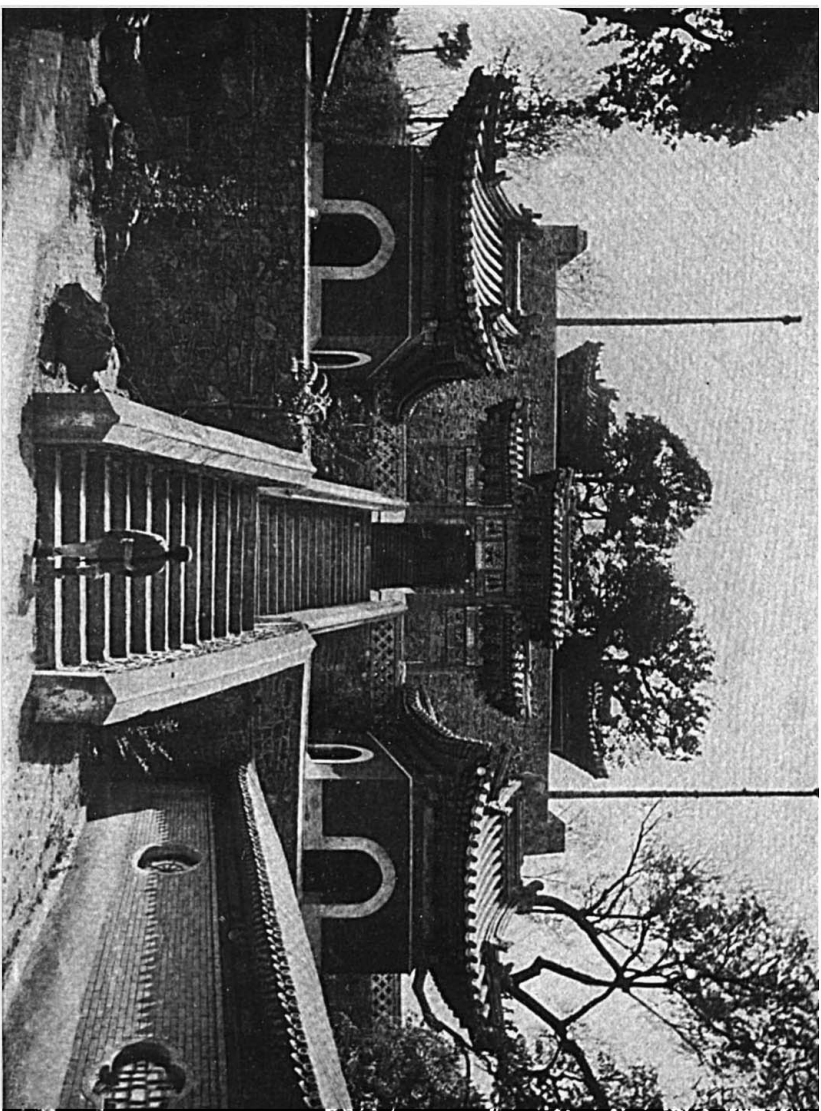
great hall is used only for receiving the Mongolian Princes on their annual visit to Peking, when they come in state, with hundreds of followers and retainers, to pay homage and tribute to the Emperor of China. The rear of the hall opens on a court surrounded by smaller buildings, which are used as waiting-rooms for the retainers and followers of the Princes.

From this hall we were carried in our chairs along the banks of the lake, beyond the Marble Bridge to a distant part of the grounds, where stands the famous Dragon Wall. Most of the Chinese houses have a sort of stone screen opposite the principal gate of entrance. This screen, called "A Wall of Respect," often has some sort of painted or carved representation of a dragon, which is supposed to chase away evil spirits. This superstition does not seem to obtain as regards the residences of the Son of Heaven, for I never saw a dragon wall built in front of any of the entrances to the buildings in the Palace inclosures. Perhaps the Son of Heaven is immune from the visit of demons, or is it that the rampant Double Dragon on everything Imperial serves as sufficient protection to the Palace? The Dragon Wall, in the Sea Palace, must have formed a part of some of the outside palaces or temples which were brought into the sacred inclosure when the Emperor Hsien-Feng decided to make it a place of residence and enlarge its domain. Many foreigners in Peking can remember when the beautiful Marble Bridge, of such noble proportions, of such exquisite design, now within the Precincts, was used by the public. However it got there, the

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Dragon Wall is at present within the Palace inclosure, though in an unused part of the grounds—lot in front of any “residence,” and hence not filling its mission as a “Wall of Respect,” to keep the wicked spirits from crossing the threshold. This Dragon Wall of beautiful white marble is of great beauty, exquisitely carved in its minutest details, and fine in general conception and line.

Her Majesty had returned from the Audience when we got back to the Palace from our morning promenade. She was now attending to household affairs. The eunuchs were bringing up, for her inspection, the baskets of splendid fruits, which are daily sent into the Palace. Among others, there was a basket of magnificent grapes. She was delighted with their beauty, and held up one splendid bunch against the light, before she tasted them, remarking that “the beautiful color lent an added zest to the delicious fruit.” Her Majesty then lunched, while we joined the Empress and Princesses on the verandah, after which we lunched again in this beautiful Throne-room. The meals taken with the young Empress and Ladies of the Court had now come to be gay reunions. Her Majesty would ask us every day to lunch or dine at her table, and I rarely took a meal in my own quarters. I had discarded the knife and fork and was learning to use the chop-sticks. I thought them such graceful implements when wielded by the beautiful hands of the Chinese Ladies, that I determined to learn their use. Though I never became an adept with them, I found these dainty implements perfectly adapted for eating the Chinese food. They are used



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both in the same hand like twin fairy wands, and seemed to me much more delicate and graceful than a knife and fork. My efforts at using them, and my desire to try all the new dishes, amused and pleased the Ladies. Each would give me special tidbits from her favorite dishes; they tried to teach me the Chinese names of the viands. My efforts at pronouncing these names, or my giving them to the wrong dishes, sometimes raised peals of laughter from the whole table. Her Majesty often heard the merriment, and would ask us, when we went into her private apartments after the meal, what had been the cause; and sometimes she would say, "What has 'Kergunia' said?"

We had scarcely finished luncheon, on this my second day at the Sea Palace, before the chairs were ordered for a promenade. It had begun to rain, and the air was chilly; but Her Majesty had made up her mind to have a walk at that hour, and nothing ever interfered with her plans, in so far as she was able to carry them out. No weather, however disagreeable or severe, ever kept her from an outdoor promenade that she had planned. The open chairs were brought, as if the day were fine. Her Majesty and the Empress took their seats in their yellow chairs. Their attendant eunuchs unfurled the huge yellow umbrellas, used only for Their Imperial Majesties and the young Empress; the second Empress took her orange-colored chair; the Princesses and the rest of us seated ourselves in our red chairs, and our eunuchs raised the red umbrellas over us. Her Majesty the Empress and Princesses, clothed in the brilliant colors daily

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worn, the eunuchs still wearing their richly embroidered gala costumes, the chair-bearers still clad in the festive red, the yellow and red chairs with the big yellow, orange, and red umbrellas made a quaint procession, bright with color, that started off through the courts into the gardens.

Her Majesty loves every phase of nature and every kind of weather; but it seemed to me as if she particularly loved rain. She once said it lent such a poetic charm to the landscape, bathing it in a soft mystery and washing away all defects. Peking is a dry place, and rain is a rarity, which probably accounts for this predilection. Her Majesty was in great good humor, but her partiality for rain was not shared by the other Ladies of the Palace, and these rainy promenades were never indulged in by them with any great show of delight. Her Majesty likes moving swiftly, and the chair-bearers always run when she leads the procession. We sped along for about fifteen minutes, when the chairs suddenly stopped. I looked to see for what reason, as we were in the open, with no shelter anywhere near, and the rain still falling. I was surprised to see Her Majesty was already out of her chair and walking off toward a "gourd-arbor" at the side of the paved walk.

The gourd is much esteemed by the Chinese. It is emblematic of Fruitfulness and Prosperity, and is a special favorite of Her Majesty's. Those cultivated at the Palace, and known all over China as the "Imperial Gourd," have long been famous; but have reached a greater state of perfection than ever before, under the special care and training given them during

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Her Majesty the Empress Dowager's reign. They are of one shape only, with a contracted neck and two equal parts above and below; but they are of all sizes, from one to twelve inches, the one-inch size being as perfect as the larger ones. They are grown on trellises, about seven feet high, and the vines are very carefully trained, so that each of the much-prized fruit may attain its best development and have its proper quota of light and sun.

Her Majesty walked through the mud to the arbor. The white kid six-inch-high soles of her shoes sank deep into the soft, rain-soaked soil. The eunuchs made vain attempts to protect her from the rain, but she went imperturbably on and was soon under the gourd-arbor. Here she leisurely tried several of the gourds, to see if they were properly ripe; for they must be pulled at a certain time or they do not dry well. After looking at and trying a number, she had several gathered and went back to her chair. The young Empress and the other Ladies had, of course, got out of the chairs when Her Majesty stopped. Luckily, she did not ask us to go into the arbor with her; but etiquette obliged us to stand on the marble walk, which though not muddy and not so disagreeable as the walk to the gourd-arbor, was, however, running with water. When Her Majesty took her chair again, we resumed ours, with a sigh of relief; for, though we were unprotected even in the chairs, we felt the truth of the Oriental saying, "It is better to be sitting than standing," etc.

After another quarter of an hour, the chair-bearers stopped again. We had come to another gourd-

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arbor! Her Majesty got out of her chair and examined the gourds in this arbor with the same deliberation and interest as she had looked at those where we first stopped. The rain was now falling in torrents, but Her Majesty's spirits seemed to go up in proportion to its coming down. The Ladies were again obliged to get out of their chairs! They stood in two dejected lines, with the eunuchs holding, as best they might, the red umbrellas over each, and they vainly tried to keep up an appearance of interest and enjoyment. The brave finery of the eunuchs, who may not carry umbrellas when on service, was now hanging in limp folds about them, and their fine feathers were much bedraggled. The Chinese Ladies had their two-inch-high, kid-covered cork-soles to protect their feet from the water; but mine, in thin kid slippers, were soaking. The picture of the dejected Ladies, the rain-soaked eunuchs, was, however, so amusing, that I quite forgot my own discomfort and thoroughly enjoyed the situation. After another twenty minutes' run, with the rain still falling, Her Majesty gave the word and the procession turned toward the Hall of the Mongolian Princes. The great doors were thrown open, and we were, at last, under shelter.

A yellow chair was placed for Her Majesty in front of the dais, and she had some of the gourds she had gathered brought to her. She selected one for herself, gave one to her principal Lady-in-waiting, Sih-Gerga, and handed one to the Chief Eunuch Li—the Princess and the Chief Eunuch both being proficient in the art of scraping them. A sharpened piece of

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bamboo was brought to Her Majesty and she began to work on the gourd she had taken, scraping off the outer skin. She told me to stand near and watch her scrape it, as it was a very difficult thing to do well! She certainly did it well, and it was most interesting to watch her beautiful little hands, as they gracefully moved the piece of bamboo back and forth, quickly removing the outer skin, in the most approved way. Though apparently thoroughly interested in scraping her gourd, she asked me how I had enjoyed my promenade of the day before, and what I thought of the Sea Palace. She called my attention to the inscriptions on the tablets behind the Throne, saying they were in Manchu and Chinese characters, pointing out their difference of form and also speaking of the differences in the two languages. She said she thought Manchu would be easier for a foreigner to learn than Chinese, as Manchu has an alphabet and is constructed more on the lines of a European language. Presently Her Majesty turned to speak to some one else, and I immediately withdrew, as is the custom at the Palace. We went out and joined the Empress and Princesses, who had already retired from the Throne-room and were having tea and cigarettes reclining on the couches in one of the rooms in the rear. After an hour's rest in the Mongolian Hall, the rain having ceased, we continued our promenade through the grounds much more pleasantly than we had begun it, and Her Majesty took me for a walk in the Gardens of the Sea Palace, as she had promised.

After dinner, we were rowed over the lake to the Gates.

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Just beyond them a company of archers was practising with their bows and arrows; for archery is still in vogue in China, and fine marksmanship among the archers is rewarded by substantial advancement in the army. Archery is also practised as a sport by the young Manchu nobles. It is said to educate the eye and materially develop the chest and arms. The Chinese pay great attention to position in archery. They stand stiffly erect, the chest thrown well forward, the head held high; the bow and arrow at rigidly prescribed angles; and if this position be not observed, however true the flight of the arrow, it goes for naught. From the shelter of my chair, I watched the company's practice until I heard the "Sunset call" resounding through the Palace grounds; echoed and reëchoed until it reached the outer gates, which began to move upon their huge hinges until they clanged together for the night.

¹ My Chinese name.