

CHAPTER XII

RETURN TO THE SUMMER PALACE

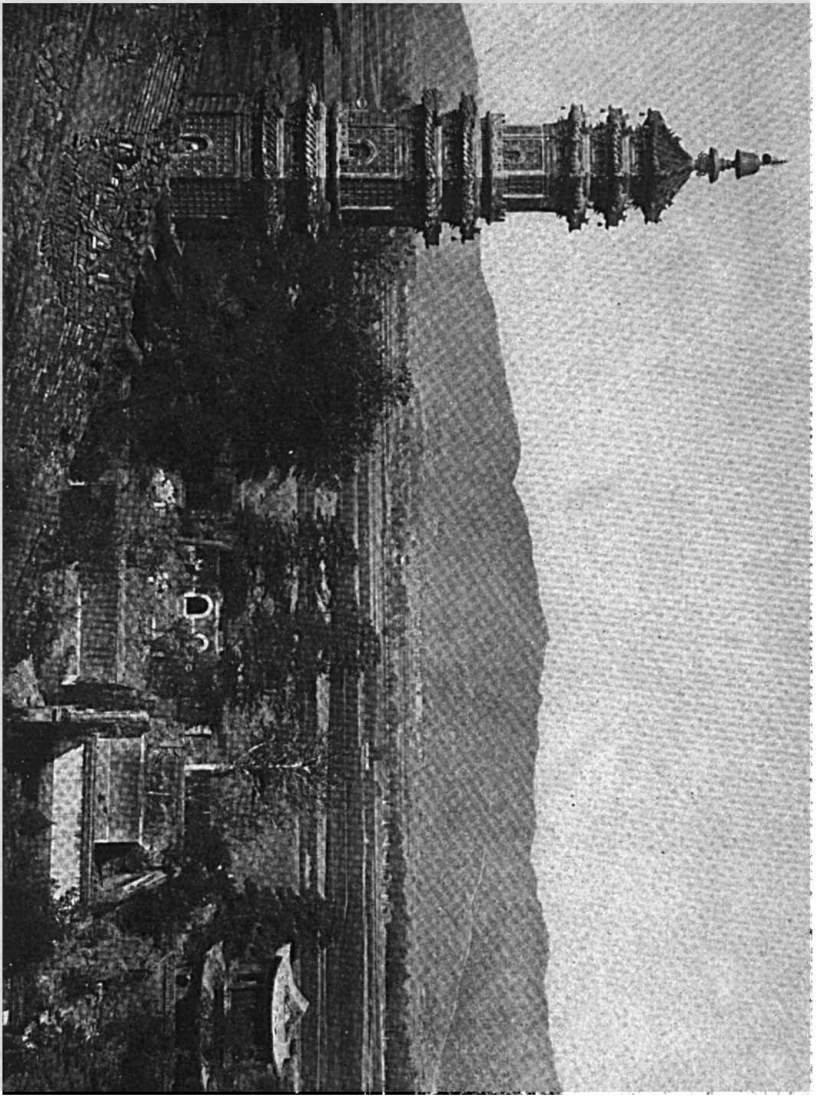
THE next day the Court returned to the Summer Palace. The festivities and sacrifices in connection with the Emperor's Birthday being now over and the Court settled down to its usual routine, I hoped I might be allowed to go regularly to work on the portrait, and that Her Majesty would allow me to paint when she was not posing. There was much I could do between times, and she could pose but for a short time each day. Up to that time, Her Majesty had treated me as a guest at Court, whose amusement was the most important thing to be looked after. She seemed much interested in the work, but my painting was an incident and even the "Sacred Picture" a secondary consideration. All these walks, these delightful excursions, were perfectly charming, and, had I gone to the Palace to enjoy myself, or to study Her Majesty and Chinese manners and customs, I would have been perfectly satisfied. I had, in the Empress Dowager, a psychological study full of ever-varying and constant interest. I was living through a unique experience, seeing what I could never hope to see again, but I was not allowed to paint on the portrait as much as I should have liked. Could I but have had permis-

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sion to work more, I should have been very happy. Had I been able to speak Chinese well enough, I felt I would obtain what I desired; she had shown herself so uniformly kind. She probably felt I was enjoying myself more in this way than working at my painting.

While I thoroughly enjoyed the promenades with Her Majesty, I loved the daily sittings. Every portrait-painter knows the sort of intimacy that establishes itself between him and his sitter, however unsympathetic the latter may be at first sight, which was certainly not the case in this instance. The effort of the painter to get under the exterior and discover the real person of his sitter; the desire to see the best side and make the most of it, meets generally with a sympathetic response. If the "rapport" is properly established, they get to know each other better by the time the portrait is finished than they could otherwise have done, perhaps in years. Though I saw Her Majesty so intimately at other times, I felt I was not seeing her "face to face" (figuratively speaking), except at the sittings.

The morning after our return to the Summer Palace, my easel was again placed in the Throne-room. The portrait was taken down from its resting-place and work resumed. Her Majesty gave me a long sitting, and the portrait made a step ahead. If I had only had a place to work alone, where I might study the picture, when she was not posing, I could have made so many improvements! But I was obliged to possess my soul in patience, and work along, for the short space of an hour or so a day and stop the mo-



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ment Her Majesty felt fatigued, when my brushes and palette were whisked away, as if by magic. There was no chance to study the portrait or to do anything, except when the Empress Dowager and the crowd of attendants were present.

I had taken to the Palace only a small folding easel, which was not at all suitable for regular work on so large a portrait, but it was impossible to get a better one in Peking. Her Majesty, who observed everything, noticed that it was not convenient, and suggested that I draw a design for a large easel and give it to the Palace carpenters to copy. She thought they would be able to make me one. I did so, and they made me a very satisfactory working easel. When the eunuchs found that this Palace easel suited me, five others of different sizes were made. I asked for what reason, and was told that everything for Her Majesty was made in sixes. It would have been establishing a precedent, making an innovation, to have fewer than six easels for her portrait.

Her Majesty also ordered some large flat boxes, with lock and key, to be made for my materials. These boxes were covered in yellow, for they were to be used for the Sacred Picture, and must be in the Imperial color. I forgot to say the six easels had all been stained a bright yellow! A table, surmounted by one of these yellow boxes, occupied a prominent place in the Throne-room during the whole time this portrait was being painted. When I finished painting each day, the Chief Eunuch, himself, removed the picture from the easel, and a number of others came and took my brushes and palette, put away the easel and

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closed the yellow box and locked it. Our head eunuch carried the key to the box.

When the afternoon sitting was finished, we went out for another of those delightful promenades around the grounds. The days were now growing visibly shorter, and the evenings were beginning to be cool. As we went through the gardens, Her Majesty stopped at all her favorite points and looked for a few moments at the view, as if to greet it again, after her absence. She loved the Summer Palace and it always seemed a pleasure to her to return to it. We had tea in one of the tea-houses where there were tables and seats. She ordered the eunuchs to make a sort of blanc-mange of lotus-root flour, which was delicious, and, as she said, most wholesome. When the Empress Dowager goes for a walk, portable stoves and all the paraphernalia necessary for cooking a light repast are taken along. It seemed wonderful to me to see the way the Chinese could cook, with apparently so few conveniences. After this we had tea. The finest tea in China is sent to the Palace. The first leaves of the plantations all over the Great Empire are reserved for Their Majesties. Her Majesty, who is a great epicure, has her choice of these chosen leaves. She adds to the delicacy of its already fine flavor by putting into her tea-cup the blooms of dried honeysuckle, the flowers of jasmine, or other fragrant blooms. The honey from these flowers slightly sweetens the tea, besides giving it a delicate, subtle flavor, quite unique. These dried blooms are brought in a jade bowl, with two long cherry sticks, with which Her Majesty takes the flowers and places them in her cup, stirring them

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into the tea with these graceful wands. The Chinese never use a teaspoon. Her Majesty drinks her tea from a jade cup, which is placed in a curiously fashioned, cunningly wrought, open-work silver saucer. The Chinese take their tea boiling hot, and the jade does not get so hot as a porcelain cup.

We continued our walk through the gardens after leaving the tea-house, and when we were passing a bed of flowers Her Majesty spied some curious grass, which she ordered the eunuchs to gather. When it was brought to her she deftly wove several blades of it into a perfectly recognizable representation of a rabbit. She did it so quickly I did not realize she was trying to make anything until she tossed the finished result over to me and asked me what I thought it was. It was unmistakable.

When we reached our objective point, one of the highest eminences in the grounds, with the whole panorama of the Western Hills spread out beneath us, and the setting sun glowing over all in brilliant splendor, it was a glorious scene. She called me up to her side and made a graceful, sweeping gesture of the hand that said, "This is all mine, but you may share it with me." She had that sense of possession of nature's beauties which all artistic souls feel, for their appreciation makes what they view their own. She felt it was hers, because she loved it so, and she knew I would appreciate it, which few of her "entourage" did, as none of them were such passionate lovers of nature as the Empress Dowager, and custom had dulled their perception of the beauty of the scene. The exquisite pleasure the contemplation of this glorious view gave me, made me tremble

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with delight. As the day was fading and as I was thinly clad, Her Majesty thought I was cold, and, seeing I had no wrap, she called to the Chief Eunuch to bring me one of hers. He selected one from the number that were always brought along for these promenades, and gave it to Her Majesty, who threw it over my shoulders. She asked me to keep it and to try to remember to take better care of myself in the future.