

CHAPTER XIV

THE PALACE EUNUCHS

THE internal affairs of the Palace are managed by eunuchs, among whom there are all grades, all sorts and conditions. Some are clever literati given to study; some have the polished, insinuating manners of the courtier; some have a Mandarin rank of high degree; some are menials. There are actors and singers, cooks and gardeners, teachers and pupils, writers and readers. They occupy all sorts of positions, from Their Majesties' body-guard to gate-keepers. In this hierarchy, Their Majesties' Chief Eunuchs held the first place. Under each of these there are six eunuchs of high rank, all exceptionally clever, who have raised themselves to the positions they occupy in the Palace by their own efforts or by some special qualification.

Each of the hundreds of pavilions and palaces in the Inclosures has a corps of eunuchs, presided over by a head eunuch. These act as guards to the premises, as well as servants, and keep things in readiness for a visit from Their Majesties. There is a head eunuch who directs the large corps of Palace gardeners; another who presides over the dozens of cooks in the Imperial kitchen; one is at the head of each of

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the departments, and each of these head eunuchs, chiefs of the different departments, is under the jurisdiction of the Chief Eunuch, for Her Majesty's Chief Eunuch may be called the real Chief Eunuch of the Palace. He is not only older than the Emperor's Chief Eunuch, but is more capable. The two Chief Eunuchs, from their position near the sacred persons of Their Majesties, have unusual power. They may make or mar the career of the eunuchs beneath them; and they not only have this power inside the Palace, but from their exceptionally fine opportunities to present petitions, to speak for or against certain people, they also have a great deal of power with people outside the Palace. Her Majesty's Chief Eunuch has almost the power in Peking, among officials and courtiers, that "Son Eminence Grise" had at the Court of Louis XIII of France. He is courted and fawned upon, receives magnificent presents, and nobles of high degree wait upon his pleasure; but while he occupies this high position with outsiders, in the Palace I saw no evidence of his having any unusual power with Her Majesty, beyond that of one who has been in the life-long service of his master and who has the privileges resulting therefrom.

The peculiar position of a Chinese Emperor, which shuts him in his Palace like a Buddha in a temple, makes some sort of confidential private messenger an absolute necessity. There is much business of an unofficial kind, which must be transacted in a private way. The Chief Eunuchs are naturally called upon in such cases. When the Ruler of the Celestial Empire

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is a woman, the Palace becomes more of a gilded prison, a shut-in shrine, than even in the case of an Emperor. She cannot see officials, or even members of the Imperial clan, except in the Audience Halls. Thus a Chief Eunuch under an Empress would have even greater power than under an Emperor; and in this instance, Her Majesty's Chief Eunuch, Li Lien Ying, is really of exceptional ability!

In person he is tall and thin. His head is, in type, like Savonarola's. He has a Roman nose, a massive lean jaw, a protruding lower lip, and very shrewd eyes, full of intelligence, that shine out of sunken orbits. His face is much wrinkled and his skin like old parchment. Though only sixty years old, he looks seventy-five, and is the oldest eunuch in the Palace. He has been there since the age of ten. He has elegant, insinuating manners, speaks excellent Chinese—having a fine enunciation, a good choice of words, and a low, pleasant voice. If one may judge from appearances, he possesses ability in a marked degree. Of His Majesty's Chief Eunuch I can say nothing. I only saw him on the days of the Theater, or some festival, when His Majesty passed the day with the Empress Dowager and the Ladies, when he was always accompanied by his suite.

Her Majesty's second eunuch, Sui, who is of equal rank with Li Lien Ying, is as unlike him as two people could possibly be, both as to person, character, mental and moral nature. This one has none of the qualities of the intriguer—no Macchiavellian schemes would be forwarded by him. He is almost a giant in size, tall and heavy. He is forty-six years old, and

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has a round, full face, without a line—a typical Chinese face, as we know it from pictures, benevolent and kind. He, also, is a good Chinese scholar, and, of course, speaks it elegantly. Her Majesty will have no one around her person who does not speak it well. If it be true that Her Majesty, in choosing her ministers, tries to have them the opposites of each other, so that she may thus hear the different sides of a question and arrive at more just conclusions, her two Chief Eunuchs seem to have been chosen in the same way.

There is a eunuch appointed to administer the punishment, ordered by Their Majesties for the eunuchs around their persons. For the higher eunuchs, this is generally the deprivation of a certain amount of their annual wages, or the loss of their buttons, for the buttons on the hats of Chinese denote their rank, and to be deprived of a button, or to have one of lower rank given, is considered a disgrace. I once saw Her Majesty very angry over the failure to carry out one of her orders, by two of the high eunuchs, and she ordered them to be deprived of two months' pay. The head eunuchs of the different departments administer whatever punishment they see fit, to those over whom they are placed. This punishment is generally corporal. Sometimes they abuse their authority and are very cruel in administering this, but, as a rule, the eunuchs seem to be of a mild and peace-loving nature, rather than cruel and vindictive—inclined to condone the faults of their inferiors rather than punish them to the full extent of their authority. There seemed to be a feeling of "esprit

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de corps" among them—a spirit of mutual helpfulness.

Each of the higher eunuchs has a number of pupils among the lower grades, who call him "Master," and whom he trains in manners and teaches his own specialties. The higher eunuchs seemed to take the liveliest interest in the good conduct, and literary, or other, advancement of these pupils, and they push their interests with Their Majesties in every way possible—each one, of course, trying to advance his pupils beyond those of some other eunuch.

Her Majesty has a great horror of opium smoking. If a eunuch, however high his position, indulged in it, the severest punishments she ever ordered were administered. They were not only deprived of so many months' pay and loss of their buttons, but were sometimes banished from the Palace for a certain length of time, and even severe corporal punishment would be ordered. These stringent measures did not prevent some of them, however, from indulging surreptitiously in the narcotic, but they took the most extreme precautions to prevent its being found out. Her Majesty has unusually acute olfactories, especially for opium. This, it seems, can be detected by its odor, which hangs around the clothes, and, like the odor of the rose, one "can break the vase, it lingers there still." But it seems the eunuchs have special linen clothes, which they put on for smoking, and these are given to be washed, immediately the fascinating pipe is finished. Unless one is an habitual smoker, the drug has very little outward effect and, except by the odor, it cannot be detected.

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The eunuchs are very fond of all sorts of pets, and have in their quarters dogs without number, cats and birds. While the younger eunuchs generally depend for their advancement upon their teachers, who report favorably on them to Their Majesties, they sometimes attract the attention of Their Majesties, and may be raised out of their places by Imperial favor. Among the eunuchs assigned to my service in the Palace, was one who was fortunate enough to attract the Emperor's notice. His Majesty had happened to notice him, carrying my wraps on one of the promenades with Her Majesty. He liked his face and manners and took him into his own service. The eunuch had a "button" bestowed on him and promised to mount very fast in grade. This eunuch had been in the Palace about fifteen years; and had His Majesty not happened to notice him, he might have lived and died in oblivion, and never had a button, for his "master" was dead and he had no protector to push his interests!

When one realizes that the Palaces of the Chinese Emperor are like towns, that their affairs are administered principally by the eunuchs, one can see there must be a good deal of intelligence among them, as well as great opportunities to add to their personal wealth.

I heard, before I went into the Palace, of the great power and unscrupulousness of the Chief Eunuchs; that it would be necessary to be very conciliatory toward them and make them many handsome presents. I did not find it so. I never made an effort to conciliate any of them, nor gave any handsome pres-

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ents, and I found them all respectful, and I had every consideration shown me by them, and found them, on the whole, pleasant enough to deal with. Some of them were clever and interesting even, and they all had very good manners. In fact, I cannot too highly praise the manners of the Chinese, as a race. I quite concur in the opinion of a clever Frenchman, who said of China, "Aujourd'hui c'est là où les bonnes manières se sont réfugiées."