

## CHAPTER XV

### THE LITERARY TASTES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE EMPRESS DOWAGER

**W**HEN Her Majesty the Empress Dowager was Empress of the Western Palace, Co-Regent with the Empress of the Eastern Palace, who died in 1881, the Empress of the Eastern Palace was known as the "Literary Empress." All State affairs were left to the stronger executive ability of the Empress of the Western Palace; while she of the Eastern Palace gave herself up to literary pursuits and led the life of a student. She was a woman of such fine literary ability that she, herself, sometimes examined the essays of the aspirants for the highest literary honors in the University of Peking. She was also a writer of distinction.

During the long Co-Regency of these two remarkable women, widows of the Emperor Hsien-Feng, one led the life of a student; the other, the active, militant life of the ruler. For the present Empress Dowager has been the real ruler of the great Chinese Empire for the last forty five years. Had the Empress of the Eastern Palace not been such an exceptional light as a literary woman and had not Her Majesty, Tze Hsi, possessed so many other and more remarkable quali-

## The Literary Tastes of the Empress

ties, the latter's name might also go down to history as a "literary Empress," for the Empress Dowager has literary qualities of no mean kind. She writes a graceful poem, is able to express herself in elegant Chinese, as well as in the ruder, more forcible Manchu language. She can write in literary style, fine idiomatic Chinese, and this is a rare accomplishment for a woman. The written Chinese language is quite different from that spoken by even the most cultivated. Imagery and figure abound to such a degree, literary form is so important, that many fine scholars are unable to write the language acceptably, except for practical purposes. Aside from Her Majesty's literary acquirements, she has an enlightened taste, is a great reader of the classics, and a fine critic. She also loves poems of heroic adventure. One of her favorite historical characters is the Chinese Jeanne d'Arc, the warlike Maiden, Whar-Mou-Lahn, who went forth to battle in masculine guise, had many heroic adventures in her twelve years' service, and, through them all, remained a virgin pure.

The Empress Dowager has a wonderful verbal memory. Memory, so highly esteemed by the Chinese, is most carefully cultivated, and is generally better developed with them than with us. Her Majesty's memory is, however, considered exceptional, even among the Chinese. She can repeat pages, not only of the classics, but of her favorite authors. One of the widows of her son (the Emperor Tung-Chih), who came regularly every week to pay her respects to Her Majesty, is a very clever woman and a great favorite of her august mother-in-law. This lady also possesses

## With the Empress Dowager

a remarkable memory. On her visits to the Palace I used to hear Her Majesty and this Empress quoting from some of their favorite classics or poems. The quotations would pass from one to another, sometimes for a half-hour without stopping, and, at times, they would repeat in concert some favorite phrase. I will never forget how they looked: Her Majesty sitting at her Throne table with her flowers or some light occupation, her daughter-in-law standing beside her, each of their faces lighted up with pleasure as they repeated line after line.

When the Empress Dowager went to her own apartments for her "siesta," her reader would come bringing volumes of her favorite authors. Some days I could hear his voice rising and falling in regular cadence during the whole time she was resting in her apartments. When she was particularly interested in what had been read to her she would have the book taken out when she went for her daily promenade and would sit and read as she was carried along in her open chair, or was rowed along on the barge. This did not often happen, however, for she took such keen delight in all its manifestations, she preferred to read in Nature's book when out of doors.

She is a great lover of the theater and prefers the classic, the old plays, to the modern Chinese drama. She had one new play staged, while I was in the Palace, with which she seemed to be much pleased. She studied the play for several days before it was given for the first time, and, at the first representation, she followed every line with intense interest. She sent her eunuchs several times to the stage to suggest

## The Literary Tastes of the Empress

changes in the rendering of certain parts and in the interpretation of certain lines. The Theater generally begins with a short play, which is often a light farce. She seemed sometimes to enjoy these very much and would laugh heartily at the good hits, which were often original additions by the actors, allusions to some passing event. Contrary to my preconceived idea as to the Chinese, they are witty and appreciate humor in others. The Empress Dowager has a fine sense of humor. She not only sees the point of a joke, but she can turn one very cleverly herself.

She is very particular about the way Chinese is spoken, a great stickler for purity of expression and elegance of style. There are as many dialects in China as there are Provinces in the Great Empire; and although the literati and gentry speak, what is called Mandarin Chinese, some of the most highly educated of the literati from the Provinces speak it with an accent. Her Majesty, who has a musical ear and great discernment as to sounds, gets very impatient when listening to Chinese spoken with an accent. It is said, other things being not quite equal, she will give the preference, in an appointment, to an official who speaks perfect Chinese and who has a good voice, especially if his office brings him often into the Presence. However, particular as she is, bad Chinese in a man of merit is not a bar to advancement, for Li-Hung-Chang, whom she appreciated so highly, and to whom she gave such preferment, is said to have spoken very indifferent Chinese.

Whether it be, that Her Majesty's musical and exquisitely modulated voice, so fresh and silvery, so

## With the Empress Dowager

youthful, adds to the charm of her Chinese, when she speaks it, it sounds like beautiful rhythmic poetry. She speaks it so graphically, with such expression and graceful gestures, that it charms one even who does not understand the language.

One day when she was out for a walk, one of the directors of the gardeners was brought up to explain something to her, some change in the laying out of new flower beds. She listened a few moments, but I saw her frown and begin to look impatient. After a few more words from the poor man, who was evidently overcome by timidity and probably speaking worse Chinese than usual, Her Majesty turned to the Chief Eunuch and said, "Let him tell you and you can translate to me; I can't stand any more of that language," and she walked away, still frowning.

Another day, I heard the Empress Dowager tell one of the Ladies at Court (her daughter-in-law), who was also a great purist in the matter of language, about her own Chinese having been misunderstood by one of the eunuchs. There are many Chinese words almost exactly alike in sound, which are only differentiated by the inflection or tone. Thus there must be great accuracy of enunciation, and there must also be great accuracy of ear. Her Majesty had given an order to one of the eunuchs. The stupid fellow had misunderstood the inflection and had done the exact opposite. She was so amused and astonished, when she found that *her* tone had been misunderstood, that she did not reprove him for his stupidity.

One day, she corrected one of the Princesses for the pronunciation of a word, and she said (in an aside)

## Literary Tastes of the Empress

it was not strange this Princess did not speak better, for her father's Chinese was "execrable," thus showing that even Princes do not always speak the language correctly.

One of the most precious gifts the Empress Dowager makes, and which is sacredly treasured by its recipients, is a scroll with a single great character written upon it by Her Majesty's own hand. This is considered one of the most difficult feats of a Chinese writer. These characters are sometimes four feet long. One day we were invited to go into the Throne-room to see Her Majesty make some of these characters. When I went into the Great Hall, Her Majesty and the Ladies were already there. She was stirring a great bowl of India ink, for she is very particular as to its consistency and fluidity. When the ink suited her, she took from a eunuch standing near, who held a number, a huge short-handled brush, which she could hardly clasp in her small hand. She tried two or three, before she found one that pleased her, and, turning to me, said, "You see I also have my choice in brushes." I asked Lady Yu-Keng to tell her that I thought her large brushes were more suitable for my hands and that my smaller ones would have been more appropriate for her. She laughingly replied she preferred the Chinese brush, and that her hands, small as they were, were able to wield it very satisfactorily, which was no vain boast.

When all was ready, and the huge scroll spread out before her on a table, she dipped her brush into the bowl of ink, held by the eunuch, and began the first stroke of one of these famous characters, in which

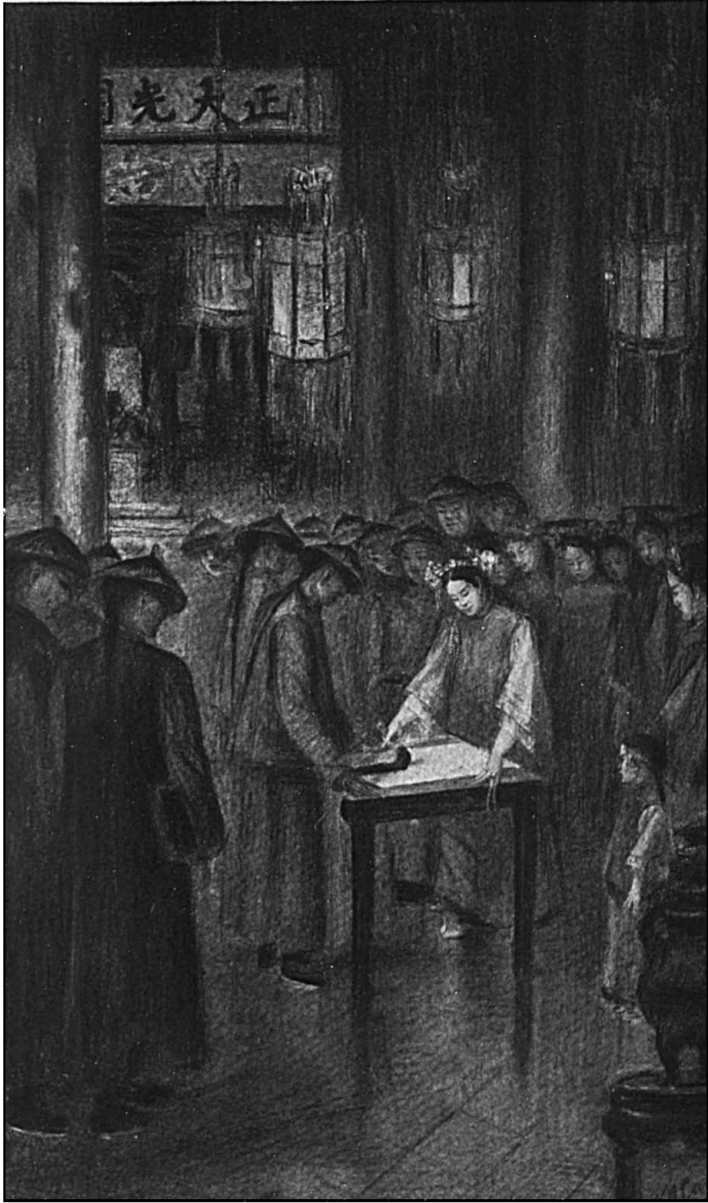
## With the Empress Dowager

she is said to equal the most proficient writers in China. I was amazed to see the firmness of her wrist and the beautiful clearness of her stroke, which deviated not a hair's breadth from the line she wished to follow. She made six great characters on six of the scrolls. These characters meant "Peace," "Prosperity," "Longevity," etc. When she had finished these, she said she feared her hand had no longer the firmness necessary for doing another.

While she was writing, the young Empress, the Princesses, and the eunuchs stood around, watching her with intense interest. They seemed to take great pride in her firmness of touch and her accuracy of line.

The Chinese written character must be made in a certain way. It must begin at a given part. The strokes must follow a given direction. The transversal strokes must be placed with mathematical precision. Nothing is left to the caprice or individuality of the writer. Any one, knowing the Chinese written characters, can tell you whether these complicated hieroglyphs were begun at the proper place or made in the proper way. They may look perfectly correct to the uninitiated observer who has a most accurate eye, and still not be so considered by the connoisseur.

The firmness of Her Majesty's touch is also very apparent in her painting, for she is very artistic, and paints flowers in a charming way; in fact, she is remarkably clever with her fingers. She does not embroider now, as she formerly did, nor does she paint so much, for she says her eyes are not so good as they were, though she does not and has never



THE EMPRESS DOWAGER WRITING A "GREAT CHARACTER"



## Her Accomplishments

worn glasses. There are a great number of artificial flowers made in the Palace, as no Manchu lady's coiffure is considered complete without flowers. Her Majesty is very particular about the way these flowers are made, and when they were brought to her for inspection, with a deft touch she would give a defective flower the required form.

She often makes new designs for the flowers, having them woven into quaint figures, or having a number of small blooms made into a representation of some large flower. She sometimes had her diadem made of the snowy blooms of the fragrant jasmine, set with leaves and other small flowers, representing jewels, and she would wear this instead of her real jewels.

She is a great believer in one of the rules that Confucius lays down for the attainment of "Illustrious Virtue"; she "cultivates her person." She is always immaculately neat. She designs her own dresses, and has her jewels set according to her own directions. She is very artistic in the arrangement of her flowers and jewels, and sees that they harmonize with her toilet. She has excellent taste in the choice of colors, and I never saw her with an unbecoming color on, except the Imperial yellow. This was not becoming, but she was obliged to wear it on all official occasions. She used to modify it, as much as possible, by the trimmings, and would sometimes have it so heavily embroidered that the original color was hardly visible.

She is a great epicure, and often designs new and dainty dishes. She has perfumes and soaps for her

## With the Empress Dowager

own use, made in the Palace. Although there are quantities of French and German soaps and perfumes bought for the Palace, she prefers an almond paste that she has made and often uses the soap made in the Palace. The maids would make these under her supervision. I have frequently seen them bring the mortar in which they were stirring it to Her Majesty, that she might see its progress, and she would energetically stir it herself. She is also a great lover of perfumes, and herself combines the oils of different flowers so as to produce most subtle and delightful perfumes. The Chinese say "colors, odors, and perfumes are good for the soul." The Empress Dowager's soul was certainly well cared for in this respect.

The Chinese are so near to nature, so simple in every way, that their influence over animals and birds is extraordinary, and seems to us almost magical. They are very fond of all animals, and especially so of birds. They train and teach these latter in wonderful ways. I have often seen a Chinese go near a singing bird's cage and tell it to sing, and it would pour forth its little heart in melody. Birds never seem to have any fear of them. In the afternoons, in early spring, or on a fine day in winter, one may see hundreds of well-dressed and dignified men each carrying a covered bird cage, taking the birds out for the air. When they arrive at some open space in the city, or beautiful spot in the environs, they uncover the cages and hold them aloft, or simply sit with them on their knees, and the bird will sing as if its little throat would burst. They have absolutely no fear, and, though caged, seem to have a perfect

## Her Accomplishments

understanding with their owners and obey their voices. They are often let out of the cages when taken out for exercise, but they will return to them at the call of their owners; and these birds are not hatched in cages—they are taken from the forests and trained.

Two of the religious precepts of the Chinese—"Hurt no living thing," "Protect all living things"—are carried so far, they will allow an animal to live in misery rather than put him out of it by a speedy death. They love all animals and fear none. They say if you do not attack an animal, however dangerous he is, he will not harm you.

The Empress Dowager seemed also to possess this almost magical power over animals. Her dogs never paid the slightest attention but to her voice, and would obey her slightest gesture; but, fond as she was of them, she rarely caressed them; and she was so particular about her hands that, when she did stroke or fondle one of her pets, she would immediately after have a cloth wrung out of hot water brought to wipe her fingers. I never saw a dog in her arms but once, and this was a puppy which she took a fancy to when visiting her kennels one day, and she brought him back to the Throne-room in her arms and played with him for some time.

On one of our promenades in the park I saw a curious instance of her wonderful personal magnetism and her power over animals. A bird had escaped from its cage, and some eunuchs were making efforts to catch it, when Her Majesty and suite came into that part of the grounds. The eunuchs had found it

## With the Empress Dowager

impossible to entice the bird back into its cage; nor would it come upon a long stick with a perch attached, which they held up near the tree where it rested. The eunuchs scattered at the approach of Her Majesty, and she inquired the cause of their being here. The Chief Eunuch explained what they were doing, and the Empress Dowager said, "I will call it down." I thought this was a vain boast, and in my heart I pitied her. She was so accustomed to have the whole world bow to her, she fancied even a bird in the grounds would obey her mandates, and I watched to see how she would take her defeat. She had a long, wand-like stick, which had been cut from a sapling and freshly stripped of its bark. She loved the faint forest odor of these freshly cut sticks, and in the spring often had one when she went out. They were long and slender, with a crook at the top. I used to think she looked like the pictures of fairies when she walked with these long, white wands. She would use them for pointing out a flower she wished the eunuchs to gather, or for tracing designs on the gravel when she sat down. To-day she held the wand she carried aloft and made a low, bird-like sound with her lips, never taking her eyes off the bird. She had the most musical of voices, and its flute-like sound seemed like a magical magnet to the bird. He fluttered and began to descend from bough to bough until he lighted upon the crook of her wand, when she gently moved her other hand up nearer and nearer, until it finally rested on her finger!

I had been watching with breathless attention, and so tense and absorbed had I become that the sudden



THE EMPRESS DOWAGER IN THE GARDENS OF THE SUMMER PALACE—CALLING A BIRD

## Her Accomplishments

cessation, when the bird finally came upon her finger, caused me a throb of almost pain. No one else, however, of her entourage seemed to think this anything extraordinary. After a few moments she handed the bird to one of the eunuchs, and we continued on our promenade.

I saw another instance of her magnetic power, this time with a katydid. One of the Princesses, seeing one on a bush, tried to catch it, but in vain. Her Majesty held out her hand toward the beautiful insect, made a peculiar sound like their own cry, and advanced her outstretched finger until it rested upon it. She stroked it gently for a few moments, and then removed her fingers, and the katydid made no effort to fly until she put it down!