

CHAPTER XVII

THE FESTIVAL OF THE HARVEST MOON—WORK ON THE PORTRAIT

WE think the Chinese so unemotional, so little given to pleasure or amusement; but there are more popular festivals in China, indulged in by all classes of people, than in any country in the world, except perhaps Japan. The people, from the highest to the lowest, enter into these celebrations with whole-souled earnestness and real enjoyment, and all the popular festivals, as well as the religious ceremonies, are celebrated in the Palace with apparently the same zest as among the people.

The Mid-Autumn Festival, popularly known as the Festival of the Harvest Moon, which is at its full at the time of the celebration, was, of course, observed with due ceremony at the Palace. For these festivals there are always representations at the Palace Theater, and one of the plays on such days is the dramatization of the Legend of the Festival. The legend of the Harvest Moon is this: One day an Emperor received the visit of a fairy. When she left she gave the Emperor an herb, saying, should he eat it, he would be endowed with Immortality. The Emperor was called out, soon after the fairy's visit, and forgot

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the gift for a time, and the herb lay upon his table. During his absence from the Throne-room, a young handmaiden entered and, seeing the root on the table, with childish curiosity, tasted it, and, finding it good, ate the whole of it. When the Emperor again thought of his precious gift from the fairy, he hastened back to the Throne-room, to remove it from the table where he had left it. What was his horror to find it gone! Learning that the little handmaid was the only person who had been in the Throne-room, he called her up to find out what she had done with it. When he found she had eaten it, he ordered her killed, that he might thus again obtain the herb. Before the eunuchs could accomplish their task, the charm began to work, and she felt the wings of Immortality; and borne up by them, she flew to the skies and took refuge in the Moon, where she still lives with the pet white rabbit she had in her arms at the time she flew away from the earth. She is now an Immortal, and in the Moon she compounds the Elixir of Immortality. The rabbit, also, shares her immortality, and ever watches at the lunar threshold.

The drama, with this little maiden as heroine, was played by Her Majesty's actors on the day of the Moon Festival, and the finale of the plays that day was one of the most beautiful spectacular tableaux I have ever seen. The Chinese obtain most artistic effects in their illuminations, and by the most simple means. The stage represented a lake covered with luminous lotus, with the full moon floating above. Thrown on a gigantic lotus flower in the center of the lake sat an immense, golden Buddha, impassible and

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serene, ingeniously illuminated lotus flowers and luminous birds, emblems of Immortality, hovered over the lake, and the whole tableau was supposed to represent Nirvana, when the soul is absorbed into Nature and forms a part of it. It was really fairy-like.

The Ladies dined in Her Majesty's loge, and this beautiful, illuminated tableau was scarcely finished before we were obliged to hurry away to join Their Majesties, who had already started for the gardens where the ceremony was to take place. The procession, with the Emperor and Empress Dowager and Ladies in full dress, as usual for a ceremony, was accompanied by hundreds of lantern-bearing eunuchs. It wound, in and out, through the verandahed corridors and the paths of the garden like some great glow-worm, until it came to the marble terrace beneath the Temple of the Ten Thousand Buddhas, on the great terrace over the lake.

Here, in an open space bathed in the rays of the softly glowing moon, with the glory of the setting sun still in the west, in front of the great Stone Pai-lou stood a beautifully illuminated floral pai-lou and an altar decorated with the usual pyramids of fruits, floral offerings, and flagons of wine. The pai-lou to the Moon was entirely of chrysanthemums, with an inscription "To the Glory of the Chaste and Pure Celestial Orb" in white blooms, like gleaming stars, across the top.

Their Majesties first made the bows and prostrations to the Moon, and placed floral offerings on the altar. Then the young Empress and Ladies did likewise, while the eunuchs recited a poem in melodious

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and rhythmic cadence. The Chinese "recitative" is very musical, much more so, to the foreign ear, than their music. This poem to the Moon was recited by two voices in alternating rhythm with wonderful effect. When the recitation was finished, an "auto da fe" was made of the offerings, to which were added sticks of sweet incense and paper cut in curious designs. Over all was poured some of the inflammable wine from the flagons on the altar, and the flames leaped high above the huge incense-burner that stood on a great bronze tripod in the center of the moonlit terrace. It was a wonderfully picturesque sight—the brilliant circle of splendidly gowned Ladies, with the Emperor and Empress Dowager in their midst, around the flaming censer, whose leaping flames glinted and glowed upon the jewels and gold embroidery of their costumes. The lantern-bearing eunuchs formed a faintly glowing circle around this shining center; and over the whole fantastic picture the brilliant Harvest Moon shone with unwonted splendor, as if to show itself worthy of the obeisances it had just received from this brilliant group.

When the flames no longer leaped from the censer, when only the white smoke of the incense curled through the interstices of its cover, Their Majesties turned away, and the lantern-lit procession followed them to the banks of the lake, where the whole Palace fleet, brilliantly illuminated, lay moored beneath the marble terrace. The eunuchs, holding aloft their gleaming lanterns, stood along the terrace and knelt on the steps leading into the water, while Their Majesties descended them. On two of the boats, at either

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side of the Imperial barge, the eunuchs held their lanterns to form the characters "Peace" and "Prosperity." The waters of the lake were now glowing with the reflections of the myriad lanterns and dancing under their many-colored lights. A faint glow still illumined the western sky, while the reflection of the resplendent Moon gleamed like liquid diamonds across the lake! When we reached the Imperial landing-place, its great arc-lights on the two tall, painted poles sent their reflections shimmering, in long, wavy lines, far out into the lake, and almost rivaled in their splendor that of the celestial orb itself.

Although I took part in all these Palace festivals, my work on the portrait was advancing, but I longed for more opportunity to quietly study it and for a little more freedom in working. I felt I needed more time also for my painting. I ardently desired to be able to work some when Her Majesty did not pose, and I finally decided to ask her to allow me to remain at my painting when she and the Ladies went for their morning walks after a short sitting. It was a deprivation for me to give up even one of these delightful walks, when I saw such a charming side of the Empress Dowager's character, but I felt it must be done. She reluctantly consented to excuse me on a few occasions, but she seemed to feel it was not hospitable on her part to leave me alone; and when she did so she would remain out a shorter time than usual. She seemed so concerned at my working while the others enjoyed themselves, that I soon ceased to ask to be left at work; I could only try to make the best of the time I had at my disposal.

Work on the Portrait

My desire to have more time for my painting and more opportunity for studying the work was not the only cloud in the heaven of these delightful days. As the portrait progressed I found myself constantly running up against Chinese conventionalities as to the way it was done. They wished so much detail and no shadow. Had Her Majesty been alone to be considered, she was artistic and progressive enough to have, in the end, allowed me more liberty; but she, also, was obliged to conform to tradition, and no fantasy could be indulged in painting the portrait of a Celestial Majesty. It was necessary to conform to rigid conventions.

I had such a fine opportunity to do something really picturesque in painting this great Empress and most interesting woman, and I found I was to be bound down by the iron fetters of Chinese tradition! I could neither choose an accessory, nor even arrange a fold according to the lines of the composition. I was obliged to follow, in every detail, centuries-old conventions. There could be no shadows and very little perspective, and everything must be painted in such full light as to lose all relief and picturesque effect. When I saw I must represent Her Majesty in such a conventional way as to make her unusually attractive personality banal, I was no longer filled with the ardent enthusiasm for my work with which I had begun it, and I had many a heartache and much inward rebellion before I settled down to the inevitable.

The Empress Dowager, however, knew nothing of my discouragement, and seemed perfectly contented with the progress of the portrait then on hand—so

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pleased, in fact, she asked me if I would not like Mrs. Conger to come and see it. I, of course, replied that I would, and an invitation was accordingly sent, through the Foreign Office, inviting Mrs. Conger to come to see the portrait.

As Her Majesty was to receive her in the Throne-room where I painted, it was decided I could not work on that day. I fully expected the portrait would be exhibited in the Throne-room, the only place where it had a proper light; but, to my disappointment, Mrs. Conger was asked to look at it in the small room where it was kept when I was not working on it. When we went in, the Chief Eunuch ceremoniously removed the yellow covering over the "Sacred Picture," which hang flat against the wall in a very bad light, with annoying reflections. The small room was also uncomfortably crowded with Her Majesty and suite, so that it was impossible to see the whole canvas at once. Mrs. Conger was, however, so pleased with the likeness and lifelike expression in the eyes, the upper part of the picture being in a fairly good light, that the comment stopped here.

This first portrait represented the Empress Dowager sitting on one of her favorite Cantonese carved Thrones. The figure was life-size. In one hand she held a flower, and the other lay over a yellow cushion. The tip of one small embroidered shoe, with its jeweled, white kid sole resting on a dragon footstool, showed under the hem of her gown. The head was a three-quarters view, with the eyes looking at the observer. A jardinière, with her favorite orchid, stood behind the Throne at the right. It was painted in full light.

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The canvas was four by six feet in size ; and there was thus no place for any of the emblems or insignia of Her Majesty's rank, save that she was clothed in her official costume of Imperial yellow.

This was the conventional reality, and I had dreamed of painting Her Majesty in one of her Buddha-like poses, sitting erect upon an antique Throne of the Dynasty, with one beautifully rounded arm and exquisitely shaped hand resting on its high side, contrasting in their grace with its severe lines. I should have exaggerated her small stature by placing her upon the largest of these Dynastic Thrones. Her wonderfully magnetic personality alone should have dominated. At the left of the Throne, I should have placed one of those huge Palace braziers, its blue flames leaping into the air, their glow glinting here and there upon her jewels and the rich folds of her drapery ; the whole enveloped in the soft azure smoke of incense, rising from splendid antique bronze censers. Across the base of the picture, under her feet, should have writhed and sprawled the rampant double dragon. The Eternal Feminine, with its eternal enigma shining from her inscrutable eyes, should have pierced, with almost cruel penetration, the mystery of her surroundings. Her face should have shone out of this dim interior, as her personality does above her real environment. I should have tried to show all the force and strength of her nature in that characteristic face, exaggerating every feature of it, rather than toning down one line.

With all these possibilities that the Empress Dowager's person and surroundings would suggest to the

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most unimaginative of artists, and with the conventional traditions, which I was obliged to follow. No wonder I became discouraged. But I had always the solace of her personality—the fascinating study of herself to delight and console me. New phases of her character and personality were constantly opening out before me. She dominates everything and everybody in the Palace, and is far and away, the most interesting personality there, not because she is the first figure at the Court, but because she is really the most interesting one, and she would be that in any position. No wonder that when she smiles the Court is gay—her smile is so entrancing. No wonder that when she frowns the Court trembles, for she excites sympathy in all her moods.