

## CHAPTER XXI

### A EUROPEAN CIRCUS AT THE PALACE

CHINESE ceremonies and celebrations were not all I was destined to enjoy while at the Summer Palace. There began to be talk of some "foreign entertainment" soon to be given, and when I found this foreign entertainment was to be a circus, a real European circus, I was delighted. I had been out in China two years, and had not had much European entertainment during that time, and—shall I confess it?—I dearly loved a circus if the horses and animals were fine. This circus was then in Tientsin, and some one had suggested to Their Majesties it would be an interesting thing to see. A young Manchu was sent to Tientsin to investigate. When he returned, flaming posters were submitted to Their Majesties by the Chief Eunuchs. When the Empress Dowager saw the vulgarly colored picture of a summarily clad young woman of the show, I was watching her face and I saw a look of contemptuous scorn pass over it. She brightened up, however, when she saw the pictures of the animals at their tricks, and the men on horses, and it was decided that the circus should be brought up from Tientsin! The animals and performers were to be domiciled in one of the parks near by, but the

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tent was to be stretched within the inclosure of the Palace.

Sites for the ring were discussed, and it was finally decided to have the tents pitched at the extreme western end of the lake. There was a large open field here, planted in turnips! As the turnips were ready to be gathered, it was decided that the crop should be pulled up and this place prepared for the tents.

One day we went out into the turnip field, and the Empress Dowager herself pulled the first turnip; then the Empress and all the Princesses pulled some, and when they found a curiously shaped one, it was given to Her Majesty. It was a strange sight to see the Great Empress Dowager, sitting there at the side of the field, on her yellow camp-stool, smiling and interested, with the turnips piled around her, and the gaily dressed Empress and Princesses in their silken gowns flitting in and out of the field, apparently enjoying, to its utmost, the simple task of pulling these prosaic vegetables. The eunuchs and attendants stood in crowds around to take the turnips when pulled. They were not allowed, however, to pull any themselves. When a small square was denuded, Her Majesty and the Ladies returned to the Palace, and an army of workmen came and pulled up the whole field and began to prepare the ground for the circus tents.

As the performance of the circus was to be on the first day of the month, the Imperial players were at the Theater. When the morning Audience was finished, Their Majesties and the Empress and Ladies went to the Theater and listened to two or three plays. After luncheon, taken in the Imperial loge, Their Maj-

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esies started for the landing-place, followed by the young Empress and Ladies. The lake was gay with beautiful barges, great house-boats, and numbers of flat boats for the eunuchs. The barges and house-boats were picturesquely decorated with flying banners, pennants, and tasseled wands. Two steam-launches, puffing away, gave an air of modernity to this most Oriental fleet. One of the steam-launches was splendidly decorated with yellow banners, with gorgeous yellow silk scarfs festooned around the cabin and the Imperial flag flying above it. The Empress Dowager and the Emperor descended the marble steps to this gaily decked launch, and started off alone for the other end of the lake, the Imperial banners and colors flying.

The Empress and Princesses went in the Empress's State boat; the visiting ladies followed in another of these ponderous but picturesque affairs. In size they are as large as an ordinary Chinese pavilion. The Empress's cabin was carpeted and splendidly upholstered in cloth of gold, with the usual tea-tables and lounges. It had one of those gallery-like prows with silken awnings, where the Princesses stood. The young Empress sat within, on one of the gold-covered couches. As she had been brought up with several of the Princesses as playmates, the young Empress generally waived ceremony with them; but she knew how, when necessary, to maintain a sweet dignity that was charming and perfectly in accord with her exalted position. To-day was a State occasion. She sat alone, and the Ladies remained outside on the prow. She asked me to come in and showed

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me the interior and some of the curiously inlaid tables. She knew I was interested in all these things. She made me sit at her side, and when I demurred she said she knew it was not the foreign custom to sit on cushions on the floor, as was the habit of the Ladies when in her presence, and that I must sit beside her. This was the consideration they always showed me at the Palace, which I fully realized was not due to any special liking for me, but simply to their exquisite breeding—their desire to make me feel comfortable and at home.

When we arrived at the other side of the lake, the Empress and Ladies stood while Their Majesties landed. They were welcomed by a great burst of music from the bands. A number of Princes and Officials stood waiting to receive them and conduct them to the handsome loges that had been prepared for them.

It was a picturesque procession that started from the landing-place—the Empress Dowager and the Emperor, under the big, embroidered, yellow silk, State umbrellas, preceded and surrounded by gorgeously attired attendants and splendidly gowned officials, the young Empress and Ladies, in gala attire, following after, with their eunuchs and attendants. The day was perfect, and glorious sunshine added to the brilliant effect. The side of the tent toward the Imperial loges was open. There was a railed platform before the pavilions that had been erected as “loges.” These pavilions were luxuriously fitted up: Their Majesties’ loges were hung with the Imperial yellow. A yellow satin chair (with a smaller one at its left) was placed in the center of the raised platform, under the silken awning, and

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Their Majesties could sit here or within as they chose. The Empress and Ladies stood in groups on either side of this platform.

About two hundred officials had been invited to see the circus, and, contrary to the usual custom, there was no screen between them and the Imperial party. On the right were two bands of foreign music, or rather of Chinese musicians who played foreign music on European instruments. These were the bands of Yuan-Shih-Kai, Viceroy of Tientsin, and of Sir Robert Hart, the Inspector-General of Imperial Customs. Sir Robert's band was formed about eighteen years since, when, as music is his hobby, he decided to try to have some Chinese taught European music on European instruments. He has now a well-equipped band of twenty trained Chinese musicians under a competent European conductor. They play on both brass and stringed instruments. His efforts have been so successful that his example has lately been followed by several high Chinese Officials, first among whom was Yuan-Shih-Kai. The latter's band is military, with fifty musicians, who play only on brass instruments. The two bands played alternately during the intervals of the performance.

For the first time during my residence at the Palace, I now had an opportunity of seeing the Imperial Princes and many of the great nobles and officials. Though they were often asked to the Theater at the Palace, the screen between them and the Imperial loge was never removed, except at the end of the performance, when they bowed their thanks and when the Ladies retired to their own loge. The gentlemen,

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however, could be well seen at the circus; and though the Chinese Ladies did not glance in their direction, I took advantage of being a foreigner, and when I was behind the others, and could do so without being seen, I closely scanned their faces and attire. Several of the Princes of the Imperial Family came up to the platform where Their Majesties sat and made their bows to them, afterward slightly saluting their relations among the Ladies and Princesses.

Among these young Princes at the circus was a son of Prince Kung and an adopted son of the Imperial Princess. This young man not only had a remarkably fine figure, tall and slender, with broad shoulders, but his face was very handsome. His bow, on coming up to pay his respects to Their Majesties, was as graceful as that of a young chevalier. His regard was so ingenuous, his expression so clever and withal so modest, his whole demeanor so gracious, I was much struck with him. His dress was elegant, and his jewels chosen with discretion. There was none of that overloading of belt ornamentation that the young dandies of the Imperial set were then affecting. His father was one of the great Princes of China, and if this young man develops and carries out the promise of his youth (he was then only seventeen), I fancy he will be heard of also. Like most of the young Manchu Princes, he held a position in the Imperial household, such as Master of the Horse or Captain of the Archers.

It was not much of a circus, but none of the Imperial party had ever seen one before, and the setting was so gorgeous, it was unique as a circus performance even to me. The Empress Dowager and the Emperor

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had splendidly jeweled opera-glasses, which a eunuch held ready for their use. The Emperor, disliking to be looked at, held his own glasses before his face most of the time. It seemed to me he used them principally for the purpose of screening himself. The animals pleased both Their Majesties; but aside from the dwarfs, of which there were two, the rest of the performers seemed to have but a mediocre interest for them. Her Majesty was particularly interested in the dogs and trained animals, and His Majesty in the horses and fancy riding. I was standing near him, and he looked keenly at me several times to see how the performance struck me; and one of his head eunuchs asked me in English—the Emperor would not try it—whether I thought it was “good or bad.” Their Majesties sat through the performance, the Empress Dowager only retiring to her loge once during the time, which was while one of the summarily clad young ladies was gyrating on a trapeze. There was a magnificent tigress which the circus master had trained, and which was his “*pièce de résistance*.” The Empress Dowager would not allow this to be taken out of its cage, and though it was brought out in front of the Imperial platform, it was too cat-like to interest her. She has a great antipathy to anything feline. When the performance was finished, the Imperial party left in the same state in which it had arrived, Their Majesties accompanied to the launch by the Princes and high Officials, the music of the two bands playing simultaneously. The Ladies of the Palace and Their Majesties, themselves, have so little novelty in their lives, I think, on the whole, the innovation of the circus was generally appreciated.