

CHAPTER XXII

PALACE CUSTOMS

THE Empress Dowager is an early riser, but the joint Audiences which Their Majesties now hold are never at the extraordinary hours in vogue when His Majesty ruled alone. When there is a press of business, and many heads of departments to be seen, the Audiences begin very early, but they rarely extend past eleven o'clock—the usual hours being from half-past seven to eleven.

When the Empress Dowager sleeps, a maid watches in her room, two eunuchs stand on guard in the ante-chamber to the room, four watch at the door of the ante-chamber, and her body-guard of eunuchs fill the building where her private apartments are situated. The maid and eunuchs who watch in the night are changed every second day. Only the High Eunuchs are intrusted with the duty of guarding her bed-chamber and Throne-room. At the Summer Palace, Her Majesty's bedroom is not more than fifteen feet square; the bed, like all in North China, is built into an alcove in the room. Shelves run around the three inclosed sides of the alcove, and on these are placed Her Majesty's favorite ornaments—small jade curios, books, and, of course, clocks. In this bedroom I

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counted fifteen timepieces on the bed shelves, and all running. Their ticking and striking, not at all simultaneous, was enough to run a nervous European woman wild; but Her Majesty takes so much cat-door exercise, she seemed to have no nerves. There were no flowers in her bedroom, but the ante-chamber, leading into it, was always full of flowers, pyramids of apples, and "Buddha's hands."¹ The bed alcove is separated from the room by satin curtains, suspended from a handsomely embroidered valance, with two long embroidered bands to loop them back.

Her Majesty is a light and irregular sleeper. When she wakes and finds it impossible to go to sleep again, she rises, is dressed, and often goes for a walk in the grounds, at what we would call the most unseasonable of hours. She says Nature is beautiful at every hour of the twenty-four, with a different charm for each moment. As she loves it in all its phases, she likes to see it at every hour of the twenty-four, at least once a year! When she wakes and goes for a walk at night, the eunuchs who are on duty in her Palace accompany her with lanterns, but she never takes these night walks, except by moonlight, and when the night is beautiful.

Whether she has slept well or ill, she rises at six o'clock; for the morning is devoted to business, and she never misses an Audience. On rising, she takes a bowl of Lot milk, or lotus-root porridge; then her maids and tiring-women begin her toilet for the Audience. This is the "grande toilette" for the day, for full dress is worn by the Chinese in the morning, and in the evening they wear simple gowns. When her toilet is finished,

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the young Empress and Ladies, having "assisted" (from without) at her "lever," she comes out into the Throne-room and receives their morning greeting. The Emperor then comes to pay his respects to the Great Ancestress, and together they go in State, accompanied by all the Ladies of the Court, to the Great Audience Hall. The Ladies of the Court remain outside the Great Hall until the Audience is finished, when they accompany Her Majesty to her Throne-room. The business of the day is then over. Her Majesty lays aside her robes of State and gives herself up to duties connected with the Palace.

While I was painting the portraits, she would pose on returning from the Audience; or, if the Audience had been too tiring, she would first go for a walk. Then would begin her various self-imposed household duties. She would overlook the baskets of flowers and fruits sent into the Palace daily, select some to be sent as presents, and send others to the eunuchs of the kitchen to be cooked. Then she would look at new rolls of silk, just arrived from the Imperial looms, or examine new articles of toilet, fresh from the workshops of the Palace tailors. Sometimes she would play a game, of which she seemed very fond, and of which I know no counterpart. It was played on a large square board, covered with white silk and painted in fantastic designs, representing the Earth and Fairyland. The object of the game was to get an ivory chessman, representing "man," into Fairyland. The length of the move was decided by throwing dice. There was no box for throwing the dice: they were taken in the hands and thrown into a jade bowl. The numbers:

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uppermost were then counted and the move made. She would play this game with the Princesses; and sometimes two of the High Eunuchs, who were proficient, would be called in to make out the number. The game was played for money, but, if Her Majesty won, the others did not pay. If, however, they won, she paid, and at once. She was ever a cheerful giver. She had wonderful luck, and it was a rare occurrence for the others to win. I only happened to see it three times. The Princesses were always pleased to play this game, for they had a chance of winning and they never lost. One day I saw her get quite angry with one of the Ladies playing. This Lady could not bear to lose, and would get sulky and cross if she did. This annoyed Her Majesty, until finally she reproved her sharply. She asked her why she played a game if she were not willing to take her chances as they came, and meet loss or gain with equal equanimity.

The Empress Dowager only eats two solid meals a day—luncheon and dinner. These were exactly similar. The dishes, so far as I could see, were identical; but they were so numerous, and of such variety, one could make a change of menu by eating different dishes. The hours of these two meals were very irregular; in fact, Her Majesty had no fixed hour for anything except rising and attendance at the Audience Hall. "Early rice," as the Chinese call luncheon, was served the Empress Dowager at any time between half-past ten and half-past twelve. She was likely to order it at any hour after she returned from the Audience. "Late rice," or dinner, was ordered with the same irregularity. She was very fond of nuts and



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fruits, and ate them between meals, when she drank tea, hot milk, and certain fruit juices.

The young Empress and Ladies of the Court were not bound to these irregular hours. They ordered their meals in their own pavilions at the hours they wished. Sometimes they had but just finished their own meals, when the Empress Dowager would order hers, and, when she had finished, invite them to eat at her table. Then it would be a matter of etiquette to eat with, at least apparent, relish. At this meal at Her Majesty's table, her place remained vacant. When I was in the Palace and we were invited to eat at her table, the Ladies sat; but when I was not there, the Ladies stood to eat, if she were still in the building, thus observing a very old convention. The Empress Dowager was very rigid about the observance of all traditional customs, and a stickler for Court etiquette, but she was also very considerate of the Ladies. When she had eaten, she would leave her Throne-room, or would conceal herself behind some screen, so that they might sit and eat in peace. I have seen her return to the Throne-room while the Ladies were eating, but she would do it stealthily, not allowing the eunuchs to precede her, so that the Ladies might not be obliged to rise on her entrance.

When the Empress Dowager dined, she sat at the head of a long table absolutely groaning under the many dishes placed thereon. Huge silver platters stood on side tables with sucking-pig, steamed goose, whole fowls, etc. Before serving the latter, they were brought to her to look at, just as the butler, in Europe, shows the pheasant and set dishes to the mistress

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of the house. Her dishes were of yellow porcelain, with curiously chased silver covers of pyramidal shape and quaint design. When she arose to go to the table, a eunuch standing near would shout, "Remove the covers," the word would be repeated along the line of waiting eunuchs, who would spring forward and whip off the covers of the many dishes on the table as if by magic. At Her Majesty's place were two spoons, a saucer and bowl, a pair of chopsticks, and a small folded square of soft cloth, corresponding to our napkin. When she sat down, she attached to the front of her dress, by a quaint, golden pin, a large silken napkin,—for she was immaculately neat and had a horror of a spot on her clothes. She was an epicure and thoroughly appreciated any new dish the Palace cooks sent forth, and, like all epicures, she ate very slowly and seemed to enjoy her food. She never drank wine or anything else at meals. I only saw her drink wine on two occasions, when some new vintages had been received at the Palace, and then it seemed more to judge of their merits, as a connoisseur, than anything else. When she finished her meal and left the table, the eunuchs brought hot cloths for her hands and a golden "rinse-bouche." After this, one of the maids would bring her a silver basin, soap, and towels, and she would indulge in an elaborate hand-washing.

After "Early rice" came the hour of her siesta. She would retire to her bedroom, and her reader, bringing several volumes from which to choose, would come to read to her. She would remain in her room for an hour and a half, whether sleeping or being

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read to. When she awoke, she would make another careful toilet, the Ladies would join her, and she would go for a long walk before taking "Late rice."

On the first and fifteenth of the month, the Imperial players were at the Theater. On these days, the Emperor, instead of returning to his own Palace, would accompany the Empress Dowager and the Ladies from the Audience Hall to the Theater. The Imperial Hymn was played on Their Majesties' entrance into the court of the Theater, and when they had entered the Imperial loge, the players would come in a body on the stage and "kow-tow." Then the actors, splendidly gowned, would make the customary wishes for the Imperial Peace, Prosperity, Longevity, after which there would be a posture-play in costume, and then the plays for the day would begin. On Theater days Their Majesties would lunch and dine together in the Imperial loge. They did not sit at the ends of the great table, but at right angles to each other—the Emperor at the head of the table, and the Empress Dowager at his left. His Majesty was not much of an epicure. He ate fast, and apparently did not care what it was. When he finished, he would stand up near Her Majesty, or walk around the Throne-room until she had finished.

The Empress Dowager was very rigorous in the observance of all fasts, as well as feasts, prescribed by the rites. On fast-days, no meat nor fish was eaten at her table. The meals consisted entirely of vegetables, bread, and rice; but there was always a great variety of these dishes, and they were temptingly prepared. Meat dishes and fish were always prepared

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for me when I was invited to eat at the Imperial table on fast-days, until I learned that the Empress Dowager and the Ladies were fasting, when I asked to eat only what was prepared for them when I dined with them at Her Majesty's table.

On Festivals and Theater days, Princesses of the Imperial Family, wives of Marchu Nobles, and high Officials were invited to spend the day at the Palace. Sometimes their children would accompany them, little girls and boys under twelve. I never saw a boy over seventeen in the Palace; and only once, one sixteen years old. This was a son of Prince Ching. When these young people came to the Court, they observed the same rules of etiquette as their elders, and behaved with great decorum. Her Majesty is very fond of children, but very particular as to their manners. When a little girl did not make a graceful bow, Her Majesty would not correct her, but would ask the young Empress, an authority on etiquette and very graceful, to bow. Her Majesty would then tell the little girl to notice how the Empress bowed and try to do it in that manner. The child, or her parents, generally followed this suggestion, and the grace of the bow was improved on the next visit to Court!

On one occasion, a lady of high rank, married to a kinsman of the Empress Dowager, was invited to the Palace with her family. She had two little girls, and when the family went up to bow and repeat the salutation to Her Majesty, the younger daughter, only five years old, refused either to make the bow or repeat the salutation, but sat down on the floor and

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cried! The Empress Dowager waited patiently for the mother to correct the little girl, for she is very fond of children and disposed to condone their faults. The little girl would not, however, listen to reason and continued to show temper. Her Majesty could not allow such a breach of the "Proprieties," even in a child of this age, and the high rank of the family of the little girl made it the more imperative that she should conform to the rules of Propriety and observe the etiquette of the Court. When Her Majesty saw that all efforts at bringing her to reason were fruitless, she ordered the child to be taken away. Whereupon the mother began crying, and begged her not to be offended with the little girl. She replied, "Do you think a person of superior intelligence could be offended with a baby? I send you out of the Palace to teach you a lesson, which you must teach your child. I do not blame her; I blame you and pity her; but she must suffer as well as yourself. You must teach your child that 'it is by the rules of propriety that the character is established' (Confucius)"; and she was inexorable. The family left the Palace and was not invited again for some time.

¹ "Buddha's hand," a very fragrant fruit of the family of lemons, which is shaped like a hand, with long, curving fingers. Pyramids of this fruit are used for their perfume.