

CHAPTER XXIII

HER MAJESTY'S ANXIETY—HER BIRTHDAY

HER Majesty was looking tired and anxious these days; the Audiences were unusually long, and despatches were arriving all during the day. She would often go to the Gardens immediately after her Audience for solitary walks, unattended by the Ladies, and when she went out for the walk, accompanied by the Empress and Princesses, she would sit distraught and abstracted before the finest views and those she loved most. She seemed absent-minded, and when some eunuch with the official message would kneel before her, awaiting her order to deliver his message, she would recall herself with an effort. One day when we were out, after days of this anxiety, and she was sitting alone in front of the "Peony Mountain," the Empress and Princesses standing in a group at a little distance, she looked a pathetic figure. Her strong face looked tired and worn. Her arms hung listlessly by her sides and she seemed almost to have given up, and I saw her, furtively, brush a tear away. The days were so like each other at the Palace, the Chinese dates being different from ours, I lost my reckoning until I had a Tientsin paper, and I saw that the date on which the Russians had promised to evacuate

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Manchuria had passed and they were making no move toward doing so; and that there were rumors of war between Japan and Russia. This, then, must be what was weighing upon the mind of the Empress Dowager. A few days later a telegram was handed her in the Throne-room while she was posing, that seemed to greatly agitate her. It was from Kwang Hsi, and reported the ineffectual attempts of the authorities to put down a serious rebellion there. Thus, there were interior as well as exterior troubles to make her anxious. She seemed to take these State troubles to heart; and it was touching to see her anxiety, which she made but little effort to conceal when surrounded only by the Ladies. The Emperor, on the contrary, preserved his usual calm exterior, and if he was racked by anxiety, showed no evidence of it. This may have been because he had schooled himself to hide his feelings. Be that as it may, his face had always that enigmatic smile lurking around the corners of his mouth. I fancied, though, his eyes looked more resigned and sadder than usual.

The date of the Empress Dowager's Birthday (November 16) was approaching, and preparations to celebrate it were beginning. She was determined to keep this celebration very simple. She issued edicts prohibiting the high Officials and Viceroys from sending the extravagant presents which always pour in at the celebration of the birthday of any one of her age in China. She recommended great economy in expenditures for the celebration, saying it would be improper and unworthy at this time of National distress, when the Foreign Indemnity was not yet paid, to make a

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large outlay for her Birthday. The celebration of a birthday in China is a great event, almost a religious ceremony, and is observed with great rejoicings by all classes. The poorest in the land, if they are not able to keep any other festival, always celebrate with as much pomp as possible the birthdays of their parents. This is one of the duties enjoined by the Book of Rites, and, in spite of Her Majesty's expressed wishes on the subject, the Emperor could not allow her Birthday to pass without a fitting celebration.

The Emperor beseeched Her Majesty "on bended knee" to allow him to have her Birthday celebrated with the same pomp as usual—to permit him to add another honorific title to the sixteen she already possessed—but though she was very proud of her titles, which the Ministers and Emperor had conferred upon her at different times, she was inexorable on this point, for the adding of a new title would necessitate an annual grant of twelve thousand dollars in gold. She also insisted that everything must be on a smaller scale than usual. She was, one could well see, in no happy frame of mind. There was none of the enthusiasm she had shown over the preparations for the Emperor's Birthday. Then she was in good humor. She then evidently fully believed that things were going well for the State, that China would soon obtain her full rights in Manchuria again; that everything seemed brighter for the Nation's outlook than now. It was her duty, however, to go through these Birthday celebrations, which, curtail as she would, must, nevertheless, be very elaborate, owing to her age as well as to her high rank. The Empress Dowager's

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wishes as to the adding of a new title were observed, and it was not conferred, but the preparations for the Birthday went on, on a magnificent scale. Presents came pouring into the Palace, and even more elaborate festive decorations than those used for the Emperor's Birthday were being put in place.

Her Majesty was to receive the prostrations of the Emperor and Empress,¹ Princesses, and members of the Imperial Family, on a Throne in the Palace, that was built half-way up the terraced hill crowned by the Temple of Ten Thousand Buddhas. She did not receive these prostrations in the Great Audience Hall: this was set aside, by tradition, for the Emperor, alone. Had she been reigning for him, she would have received them there, but as she was reigning with him, she received them in the other Palace. The elevation of this Palace permitted all who were allowed to enter the Precincts to offer their congratulations, to get a glimpse of Her Majesty. As the weather was getting cold, the marble steps leading up to this Palace, the courts, and even a large part of the terrace over the lake, were covered with carpets of gala red.

The congratulations and prostrations were to begin at 2 A.M., the hour of her birth. There were three pairs of huge silver chandelabra standing at either side of the Throne to hold the enormous wax candles of Imperial yellow, entwined with golden dragons, which weighed fifty pounds each. They stood five feet high. Lanterns with the ever-present character "Sho" and others inscribed "Wan-Sho-Wu-Chiang" (no limit to Imperial longevity) stood on each step of the long flight leading up to the Palace. The whole terrace below, all the

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temples and buildings in the grounds, were brilliantly illuminated with splendid lanterns, elaborately ornamented with tassels of red silk, with the characters for longevity emblazoned thereon in vermilion.

With the few changes necessitated by the different season of the year of the Empress Dowager's Birthday, everything was carried out as for the Emperor's except on a larger scale, as she was celebrating more years than His Majesty. The Palace was filled to overflowing with the many ladies invited to be present. Some came from the heart of distant Manchuria, the cradle of the Dynasty. The winter Court dress of the ladies, worn for Her Majesty's Birthday, was of satin, lined and trimmed with fur, with sable collars. Like the summer Court dress, the winter gown was elaborately embroidered in the golden double dragon. The picturesque summer coiffure had also been replaced by winter hats of fur with jewels across the front and an elaborate crown, studded with precious stones. Brilliant bunches of flowers were worn on either side of the coiffure, in winter as in summer.

The celebration of birthday festivities in China is always accompanied by rites and worship of the ancestral tablets, and Her Majesty was obliged to go into Peking several times during the celebration. The ceremonies, themselves, were also very tiring. All this effort to keep up, and to properly carry out her part of the ceremonies, added to her real anxiety, made the forced celebration of her sixty-ninth Birthday far from a happy event to the Empress Dowager of China, who found the Empire she was trying to guide, in so perilous a position—war threatening on its confines,

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foreign complications of all kinds to deal with, and rebellion within.

¹ It has been said by foreigners, that Her Majesty the Empress Dowager obliges the Emperor and Empress to make the prostrations before her on her Birthday as an indignity to them and to show her authority. The truth is, that every son in China kneels before his parents on their birthdays, and should the Emperor fail to do so, the whole of China would be horrified and cry out against his unfilial conduct. Her Majesty is not only the wife of his uncle, the Emperor Hsien-Feng, but the sister of his mother, and, more than all else, the Empress Dowager is the Emperor's adopted mother. The duties of an adopted child to his adopted parents are the same, in China, as to his own parents. In the Viceroy Chang-Chih-Tung's famous ode to the Emperor, he speaks of this filial piety as one of the Emperor's greatest qualities: "Who does not admire the filial reverence and piety with which he waits upon his august mother? Setting a brilliant example to all, he inquires early and late after her well-being and watches over her meals in person. Let us now add a new ode, extolling to the skies our Emperor's fidelity to his Imperial mother."