

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WINTER PALACE

THE Summer Palace was always the Empress Dowager's favorite Palace, but after the Boxer rising and the subsequent occupation of Peking by the Allies, when foreign troops were stationed in both the Peking Palaces, and so much damage done them, she would have preferred to have lived the whole year round at the Summer Palace. As it is, she occupies it from eight to nine months of the year, going out to it at the first opportunity in the spring, and leaving it only when it is so cold as to make it impracticable. There is a system of heating it by furnaces beneath the floors, but Her Majesty never used these, and the small Chinese porcelain stoves, sorts of braziers, were quite insufficient for heating the immense halls. This, however, would not have influenced her, as she never minded the cold, but it was very difficult for the officials to take the long trip to the Summer Palace during the winter, and this consideration alone caused her to move into the Winter Palace when the weather became very cold. The members of the Cabinet and the Princes had summer homes in the immediate vicinity of the Palace, but there were thousands of officials who were obliged to come out every day from Peking.

The Winter Palace

The time had now come for the Court to move in definitively to the Winter Palace, and shortly after the Birthday festivities, Their Majesties took up their residence in the Capital. Before I left the Summer Palace, the young Empress suggested that I should go to the Winter Palace the next day in time to assist in receiving Her Majesty on her arrival there, for, as usual, I left the Summer Palace the day before the Court, and went in to the United States Legation. At every change of residence of the Empress Dowager, the young Empress, Princesses, and Ladies of the Court precede her by a few hours, and stand upon the threshold of her own dwelling Palace to receive her when she arrives. Full Court dress is worn for this reception, and it is, as is everything touching Her Majesty, a ceremony!

The day of the Empress Dowager's entrance into her loyal City of Peking for the winter, in December, 1903, was a typical Peking winter day; the air was crisp and clear, the atmosphere positively sparkling, and like champagne. One seemed to breathe an elixir. For her "progresses" from one Palace to another the Empress Dowager always had, what they call in England, "Queen's weather."

The City of Peking is composed of three walled towns—the Chinese, the Tartar, and the Imperial City. Within the Imperial City lies the Winter Palace, its battlemented, turreted walls surrounded by a moat. After passing through one of the great gates, in the wall surrounding the Imperial City, and crossing the stone bridge that spans "the Grain-bearing Canal," we soon came in sight of the splendid walls and lofty

With the Empress Dowager

gates of the Palace inclosure. The red outer walls of the Palace, faded by Time and weather to a charming gray-pink, with their beautiful corner constrictions of airy-looking turrets reflected in the still waters of the moat beneath, were most picturesque. We were carried along the raised road beyond the moat until we came to a marble bridge (formerly a portcullis), that leads into the gate of the Palace in front of the Manchu Banner quarters, at the foot of the Coal Hill. Our chairs, by special arrangement, were allowed to enter the inclosure proper, of the Winter Palace; but even after entering the exterior gates, one winds in and out between high walls, through massive gates and heavy wooden doors studded with huge iron nails and ornamental copper balls. Against the high wall on either side of this approach, wooden sheds were built as sleeping-places for the guards and soldiers. Each shed had a front of lattice-work, with paper pasted over the interstices. Within was a cemented platform, which the Northern Chinese use as beds. These have a place underneath for building a fire, for they keep warm at night by sleeping on hot beds and use very little cover.

Just beyond the last of these guard-houses, our official "green chairs" were put down between two high walls, with forbidding gates in front of us. Here we took the red Palace chairs which were awaiting us. We were swiftly carried through still other gates and past a very labyrinth of walls. The courts were all paved in large flagstones of white marble, and surrounded by high walls with heavy doors. We finally reached a charming court, where, standing un-

The Winter Palace

der the overhanging branches of a beautiful cedar, we found the young Empress and Princesses, in full Court dress, already awaiting the coming of Her Majesty. It was a pretty group that stood there, gowned in their splendid Court costumes, the sunlight glinting upon the jeweled crowns of their fur caps, and giving a touch of nature to the brilliant flowers in their hair. My plain, foreign, tailor-made gown was the only dark spot in this bright group of gorgeously attired ladies.

Presently the cymbals and flutes sounded the weird notes of the "Imperial Hymn." The great wooden doors of the court were thrown open and the Imperial procession came in sight. Splendidly gowned eunuchs advanced in two lines, walking with rigid bodies and stately step. At a sign from the young Empress, a hush fell upon the chattering group of Princesses and each took her proper place. Then the Imperial chair-bearers crossed the threshold, with Her Majesty sitting erect in one of her "open chairs," for as soon as she gets into the Palace grounds she leaves the closed palanquin, in which she is obliged to travel abroad and which she very much dislikes on account of its stuffiness. The Ladies, as if moved by one impulse, made the formal bow at her approach, and repeated the usual Imperial salutation "Lao-tzu-tzung-chee siang," which I repeated with the others. Her Majesty had her chair stopped in the center of the Court and got out, and I went up to salute her. She shook hands, and said she hoped I would be happy in the Winter Palace, but that it was a dull, depressing sort of a place, with too many walls and gates, after the

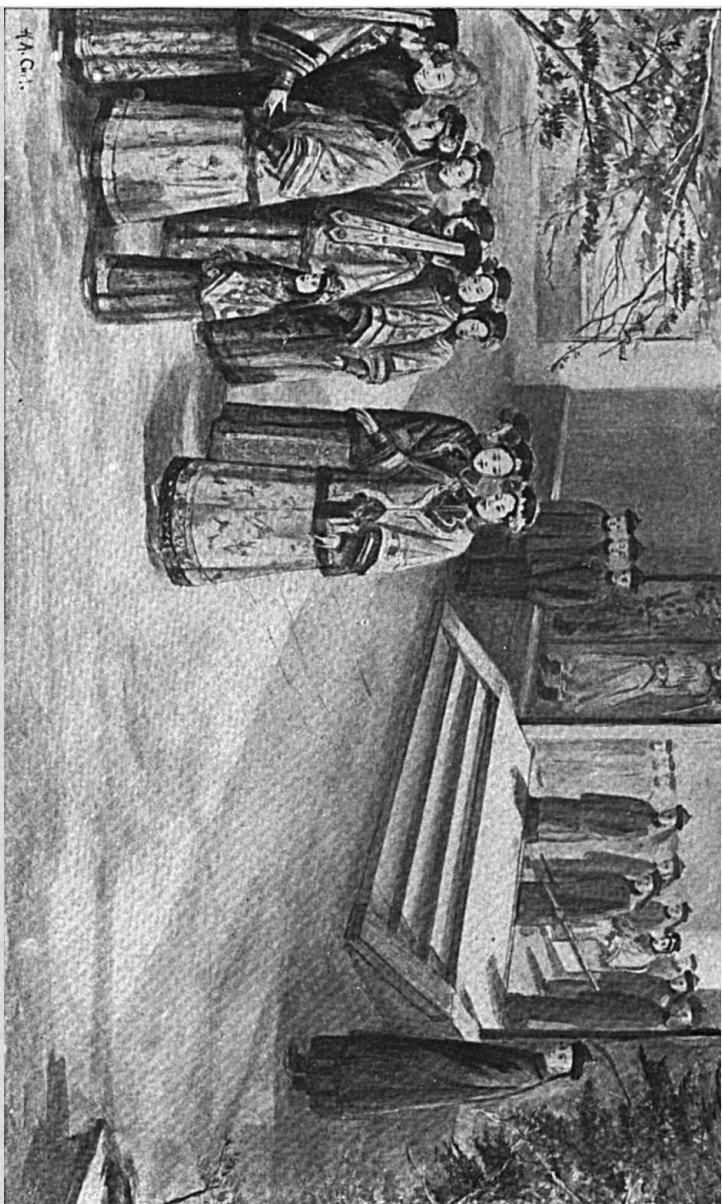
With the Empress Dowager

open brightness of the Summer Palace. After a few minutes' conversation she went into the Throne-room, followed by the Empress and Ladies.

Her Majesty's Throne-room at the Winter Palace fronted on a court which was surrounded by well-built walls with curiously shaped doors and windows and ornamental yellow and green tiled designs at intervals. In the center of the wall in front was the immense gateway, with wooden folding-doors, which had just opened for her passage. The verandah of the Throne-room had two rooms projecting upon it, making of it a rectangular space with walls around three of its sides. This verandah was quite different from any at the Summer Palace, where they run the whole length of the buildings, back and front.

Entering, I was struck by the beauty of the great central hall—the harmony of its proportions, the somber splendor of its color. It seemed to me the most satisfying, the most picturesque of all the restful, harmonious Chinese interiors I had seen. Its dull red walls, splendid coffered ceiling glowing in color and glinting in gold, its central dome, with elaborately carved pendants, was painted in brilliant primary colors, subdued into a rich harmony by the demi-obscurity, for it had no "lantern" and received its light from the windows below.

The curious feature of the domes in several of the palaces in the Violet City, so effective from within, giving elevation and space to the interiors, is that they are not visible from the outside of the edifice. The beautiful straight line of the roof, with its upturned



COURT IN THE WINTER PALACE—"HER MAJESTY COMES"

The Winter Falace

corners, remains intact in its purity and retains its restful simplicity.

The hall was paved with great blocks of highly polished black marble, which dimly reflected the glowing splendor of the walls and ceiling. In the center of one side was a low dais, richly carpeted, on which stood a great antique throne and footstool of red lacquer, framed in ebony and inlaid with cloisonné—the three-leaved screen behind was of bronze, with landscapes in low relief. On each leaf a poem in golden characters gave the needed touch of brilliancy to the somber massiveness of the dull bronze.

Great wooden doors, with huge gilded dragons in high relief, opened into apartments on the right and left of this splendid hall. These portals were always thrown wide, and heavily padded satin portières hung from the lintels. The front and rear of the hall was almost entirely of glass, with the pillars that supported the roof standing clear between the windows—the lower half of plate glass, the upper, of transparent Corean paper.

The apartments to the right, where, at a sign from Her Majesty, I followed the Ladies, were her day-rooms. Her sitting-room, projecting on the verandah, brilliantly lighted by two sides of windows, was in dazzling contrast to the somber splendor of the Throne-room. The sun pouring through the windows, the gay flowers and growing plants, the fruits piled high in great painted bowls, the divans, beneath the windows, with satin cushions, the touches of femininity, the subtle perfume, even the small shrine to Buddha—everything bespoke the characteristics of

With the Empress Dowager

its august mistress, who, in her hours of ease, loved sunshine and flowers, and reveled in beauty and perfume.

On entering, Her Majesty approached the small shrine, lighted three slender tapers of fragrant incense, and placed them upright in the perfumed ashes of the golden censer at the feet of Buddha. She rearranged the offerings, placed a picture of the Mother of Buddha behind the Image, and then stood in reverent attitude a few seconds before turning to her waiting tirewomen to have her outer garments removed.

As I had now learned that my interest in her surroundings pleased her, I looked around the room. It was as lofty as the Great Throne-room, but the rear wall was divided into two stories, and a hidden stairway led to the upper rooms. In an alcove, under the second floor, was built the bed where she took her siesta in the afternoon, screened from the sitting-room by beautifully embroidered satin curtains. The walls of carved teakwood had a rare frieze of panels of flying birds and bats in mother-of-pearl. There were scrolls bearing quotations from the classics; and, of course, many beautiful and curious clocks adorned the dragon tables, the window-seats, and carved chests!

In prominent places, each flanked by good-luck pennants, hung two steel-engravings: the first representing Queen Victoria in regal array; the second, the Queen and Prince Consort, surrounded by their children and grandchildren. I was surprised to see them here in Her Majesty's living-room, though I had heard

The Winter Palace

that the Empress Dowager had a great admiration for the Queen, and that she thought there were many points of similarity in their reigns. They had each been widows the greater part of their lives, and had each ruled over great empires. She said she noticed in the Queen's face the same lines of longevity that she, herself, had. She probably dreams of as long a life as the great Queen of England had.

The Empress Dowager was astonished that I had seen so many members of the English Royal family, and the Queen herself, when I had never had an "Audience," and was still more so when she learned that the Great English Empress took her daily promenade outside her Palace Walls in "an open chair," and could be seen by any one who happened to pass that way.

Her Majesty told me I might go up the hidden stairway, leading from her bed-alcove to the floor above, where was her private chapel. Here, on special occasions, services were held by lama priests. It was a beautiful haven, in whose dim, religious light one might meditate or pray.

Its high altar, with a great golden Buddha of fine design, had tall, golden candlesticks, shining with pearls and rubies. Richly wrought and enameled vases held bouquets of jeweled flowers, and censers, damascened with gold, sent up spirals of perfumed smoke. The floor was covered with a splendid silken rug of Imperial yellow, and small, exquisitely executed, paintings of the saints and personified attributes formed a dado around the walls.

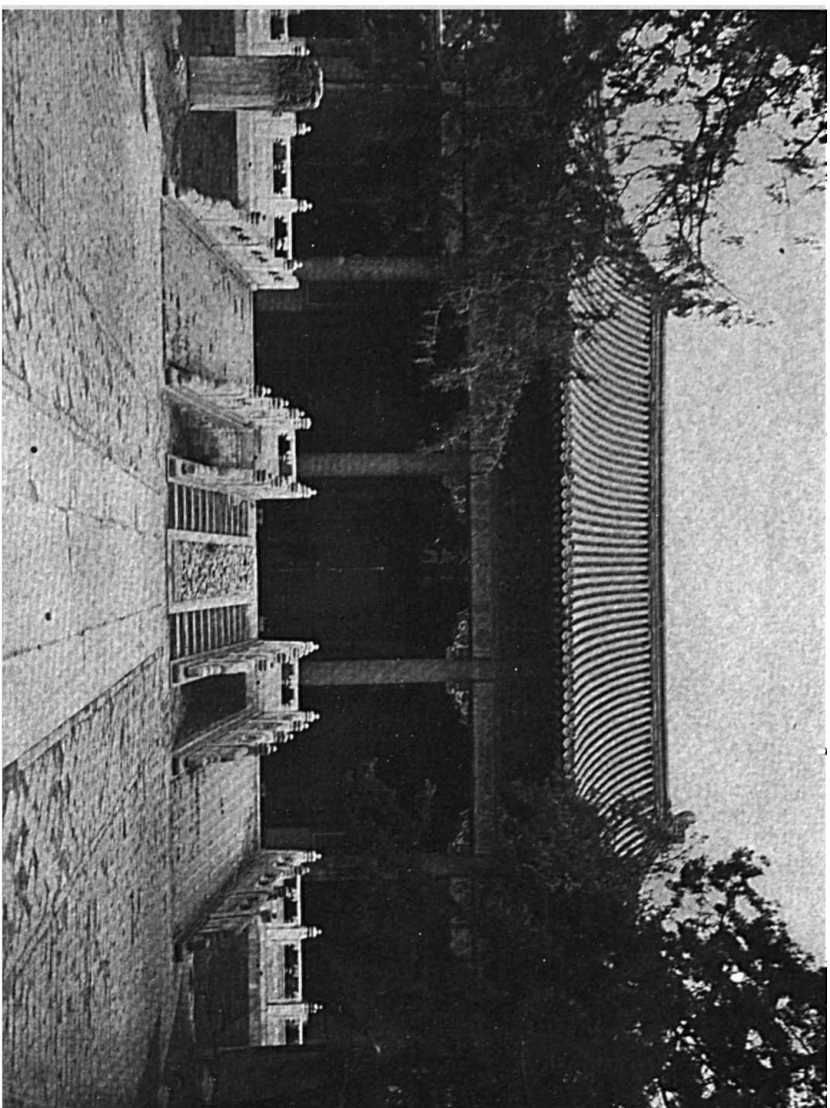
Curiously shaped windows, with bits of translucent

With the Empress Dowager

shell set into the elaborate lattice-work, shed but a dim light, and out of mysterious depths shone the splendid jewels of the altar ornaments, the dull gold of the Great Buddha, and the gleaming dado of red-and-gold clothed saints! This was Her Majesty's favorite chapel. She had followed me up and showed it with pride. She appreciated its perfect artistic quality as much, I am sure, as she loved its religious element.

Here she could come, from the privacy of her bed-chamber, mount the hidden stairs when she willed, unnoticed and unattended, and here seek that peace which seemed so far away those troubled days of January, 1904, when all looked so dark for her country.

Her Majesty's Throne-room is in the first of three large halls in the northeastern corner of the enclosure, which, with their courts, extend to the exterior walls of the Palace. The buildings are raised about eight feet above the marble-paved court and are approached by handsome, white marble steps. Leading up to the second, for the first time I saw a "spirit-stairway" used in secular architecture. This "spirit-stairway" consists of a block of marble placed in the center and reaching from the top to the bottom of the stairway. This block, instead of being cut into steps, is elaborately carved with the double dragon. It lies in the middle of the stairway like a beautiful heavy carpet thrown over it, too stiff to take the form of steps. The "spirit-stairway," not to be touched by mortal feet, is used in the approaches to all the fine temples; and when, as in the case of the Temple of Heaven at Peking, the stairs are high, the effect is as beautiful as it is original and unique.



CONFUCIAN TEMPLE—SPIRIT STAIRWAY IN CENTRAL FLIGHT OF STEPS

The Winter Palace

The hall with the "spirit-stairway" is the handsomest of the three in the Empress Dowager's inclosure. Its interior, a height of fifty feet, has a splendid coffered ceiling, and its walls are of wonderfully carved wood, with cloisonné medallions, which give great richness and splendor. A balcony surrounds this lofty hall, with openings from it into rooms over the side apartments, which are of but the usual height. This great front hall, with a dais and throne, screen and ceremonial fans, showed it was for more formal receptions than the beautiful domed room we had first entered. Opposite the Throne dais stood a "cistern" of splendidly carved jade to hold water for cooling the temperature in summer. A handsome music-box, which had been sent as a present to the Dowager Empress by Queen Victoria, and several other presents from European Royalties, stood around. The apartments on the right were for His Majesty's use when he came to the Theater, which was near. On the left were Her Majesty's night apartments. Two doors led through the openwork screen which separated the hall from the entrance at the rear. Here there was another magnificent block of jade, about five feet high, elaborately carved in designs representing the manner in which the jade is mined and taken from its native mountains.

From the central hall, a raised marble platform led into the third of the buildings. Here, again, the central hall occupied the entire height, while the sides were divided into two stories. This was one of the Emperor's Throne-rooms, and he had graciously given it for my use while painting the Empress Dowager's por-

With the Empress Dowager

traits. I had been told I was to have a "magnificent place for working" in the Winter Palace, and so far as magnificence went, I had it here. But, lofty and spacious as the hall was, it was very dark, and there was also a disagreeable reflection from the shining, yellow-tiled roof of the Palace in front. The court was very small, and the reflection from the roof was consequently unavoidable. My heart fell. It was a dreadful disappointment to find that my "studio," to which I had so looked forward, was so unsatisfactory as to light!

The Empress Dowager's quarters at the Winter Palace are separated by high walls and guarded gates from the Emperor's. The pavilions of the Emperor's inclosure are on a more magnificent scale even than those of the Empress Dowager. The Audience Hall of the Winter Palace is in the Emperor's inclosure. In Her Majesty's inclosure, there is a Theater, but the Imperial "loge" is small, indeed, when compared with the splendid hall at the Summer Palace. Tradition seemed to be more rigidly observed here than at the Summer Palace, and everything seemed to be referred to the Emperor; whereas Her Majesty seemed to be the first figure at the Summer Palace, and there, traditional laws were often in abeyance.