

CHAPTER XXVII

PRESENT-GIVING IN CHINA

PRESENT-GIVING is really carried to great excess all over China, and whatever obtains in China obtains at the Palace. The Palace is spoken of in Peking as the "Inside," that is, the heart of the Empire. From this "Inside," customs and habits flow and pulse over the rest of China, as the blood does from the heart, by a thousand arteries reaching to the very confines of the Empire, and it also receives the impress of what passes on outside among the people. Whether it be, in the instance of present-giving, that the custom has grown from the "Inside" to the "Outside" or vice versa, I know not, but it is universal in China. However, it probably reaches its greatest excess in the Palace.

Births, marriages, and deaths are all marked by presents, and there is a very riot of present-giving at the New Year! Every one then exchanges them, from the lowest to the highest. Next comes the anniversary of the birth. This is celebrated with an unheard-of pomp in China. The more exalted the rank and the greater the age, the more splendid is the celebration and the more magnificent the presents. The Emperor's Birthday was the first I saw celebrated, and I

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was astonished at the number and elegance of the presents that flowed into the Palace on this occasion. But at the Empress Dowager's Birthday all this was far surpassed; and her presents exceeded in number and elegance His Majesty's, for she was celebrating more years than the Emperor, and the number and value of birthday presents increase in proportion to the years. Their elegance and number are also regulated by the rank. The presents the Grand Secretary and the Prime Minister receive on such occasions would quite astonish a Westerner, and, of course, far surpass in number and magnificence what would be offered to the president of a department, as his would exceed, in elegance, those offered to secretaries of the Board.

Every festival, every ceremony, and all anniversaries are marked by presents, in the Palace. There is scarcely a day that presents are not sent into the Palace, that some are not sent out, and rarely a day when some presents are not exchanged by those "Inside." The Empress Dowager and the Emperor receive the greatest number, and, of course, they give the greatest number. This seemed to me the greatest extravagance of the Empress Dowager. At every change of season, she presents the young Empress, the Princesses, and Ladies, without reference to her favorites, with silks, dresses, shoes, and ornaments appropriate to the season, and not only do the Ladies receive these articles of wearing apparel at the changes of the season: she gives them many presents at each festival. Besides this, she gives nearly all the expensive Court dresses that are worn at the Palace, which cost, with

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their embroideries, from three to six hundred dollars each. She presents the Ladies with coiffures and many jeweled ornaments as well. On the occasion of a wedding among the Manchu nobility, which must be announced to the Court before it takes place, Her Majesty presents the bride handsome rolls of silk, embroideries, and jewels. On the occasion of births among the courtiers, she sends handsome ornaments to be worn by the new-born child. Even on the death of certain people, she sends handsome presents to the family, or something to be worn by the departed, if it should be a widow, who had led a long and exemplary life of widowhood, and had devoted herself to charity and good works.

When the ladies of the Legation were first received at the Palace, the Empress Dowager naturally followed the Chinese Imperial custom of giving each lady a present. This precedent having been established and seeming to have given pleasure, when the ladies were received the next time, which was after the Boxer rebellion, she gave them presents again. Unfortunately, this act was construed into a desire on her part to wheedle the foreigners, and curry favor, so that she might receive better treatment at the hands of the Powers. The truth is, she loves to play the Lady Bountiful, and she never mixes up the social with the political, and I am sure she had no "arriere-pensée" but was simply indulging her usual bent. After the first few Audiences (when the presents were really of value), Her Majesty gave small and unimportant presents at the garden parties, which were made the subject of ridicule. Her Majesty had heard that the ladies did

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not wish to receive such handsome presents as she had first given, and she hence gave inexpensive souvenirs. Finally, the Ministers asked the Chinese Foreign Office to request the Empress Dowager to give no more presents at the Audiences, and the custom was abolished; though Her Majesty continued to give presents in private, and she still sends, on the four great Chinese festivals, flowers, fruits, and confectionery to all the ladies of the Legation, as well as to every lady who has ever been received at the garden parties, and on the departure of any Minister from Peking, she sends his wife some parting presents.

But though present-giving has been stopped at the Audiences of the foreign ladies, it goes on with the same excess in the Palace and among officials in China. At each of Their Majesties' Birthdays, in spite of their protests and edicts to prevent it, presents pour into the Palace! Every official who has ever been presented in Audience, or who has the right, by his official position, to send anything, does so. Edicts from the Throne to prevent it will remain as ineffectual as those with reference to the binding of the feet of the Chinese women (which Her Majesty has for years been "recommending" in edicts to be abolished), for it has become so thoroughly a part of Chinese life as to be almost indispensable. Present-giving in China is one of those "unwritten laws" whose tyranny is hardest to break away from. Though the system of present-giving is a great tax on the officials, as well as their subordinates, in this instance the change must come from the people.

As I was an inmate of the Palace for so long, of

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course I came in for my share of presents from the Empress Dowager. At every festival I was remembered, as well as the Princesses and Ladies of the Court, and when presents were sent to the ladies of the Legation, she sent similar ones to me. Many of the presents she made me showed a real consideration for my comfort and displayed much forethought. When the weather became cool, and the Ladies of the Court put on wadded dresses, Her Majesty sent one of her maids to my apartments to get one of my tailor-made dresses. She had the Palace tailors copy this in wadded silk. It was wonderful how well they did it, too, for, as I knew nothing about it, I could give no advice. She ordered a few changes made in the severity of the tailor-costume, thinking it was too hard in its lines. She had a long, soft sash to tie at the side, which, she decided, made it look more graceful. When the Princesses put on furs, Her Majesty, herself, designed for me a long fur-lined garment which she thought would be comfortable to paint in. She had some trouble in arriving at a result which pleased her, which would be warm enough, and which, at the same time, would not interfere with the freedom of movement necessary for me to work with ease. At the time of the Chinese New Year, she sent me two curiously fashioned fur-lined dresses. She had the skirts copied from old pictures. They were not unlike our pleated skirts, with an embroidered panel down the center of the front. The jackets were a sort of compromise between European and Chinese, and the costumes were not only pretty but very comfortable.¹



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For wearing with these she ordered a sable hat, for the Chinese ladies wear some sort of coiffure on the head winter and summer. This had an embroidered crown of pale lavender satin, with long satin streamers embroidered in gold with good-luck emblems. The brim could be worn either turned off the face or pulled over the ears and tied under the chin with lavender strings. She said she had some trouble in finding a design which she thought would suit me. This hat she had also had copied from old prints. I learned later she had tried three sorts of sables before she got a color which she thought would be becoming to my unfortunate blonde hair! On the front of the brim she placed a Princess Button. This is worn only by Ladies of the Court, and represents the Flaming Pearl of the Dynasty. It was established by the founders of the Dynasty and is the distinguishing jewel of the members of the Imperial family. It consists of a large pearl, surrounded by three alternating rows of seed-pearls and corals, which are supposed to represent flames! This Flaming Pearl, symbol of the "Unattainable," is the eternal quest of the double dragon!

Her Majesty also presented me with a number of other charming things that I shall always treasure as coming from her, and as evidence of her consideration for "the stranger within her gates," or as spontaneous offerings from her naturally generous nature—ever desirous of giving pleasure. I wish I might have preserved the flowers and curious grasses which she, herself, gathered and gave me on our many promenades

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around the beautiful grounds of the Summer Palace,
but which, alas! are withered and gone!

Her Majesty said my individuality was not lost in these costumes, and that I was clothed in attire suitable to the Chinese interior. She had now devised a costume for me which was really in harmony with my new environment. Our rough tweeds and somber garments, outlining and defining the figure, looked mesquin and out of place in these great halls. The bright colors and simple lines of the gowns of the Chinese ladies are much more in keeping with their interiors. Her Majesty's artistic taste had divined this, and she had made several attempts to devise something for me that was in harmony with the Chinese "milieu" and at the same time comfortable.