

CHAPTER III

THE PALACE OF THE EMPEROR'S FATHER (PRINCE CH'UN, THE SEVENTH PRINCE)

THE Palace of the Emperor's Father, which the Empress Dowager had set aside for me to live in while I was at work on her portrait, was a splendid demesne, with a noble park and spacious buildings. It had been much injured by the foreign troops in 1900 and had been unoccupied since, until Her Majesty decided it would be a suitable dwelling-place for her "Portrait Painter." She had it hastily restored and refurnished for our occupation but many of the pavilions and summer-houses in the grounds were in ruins, and the stables but partly rebuilt. Except the grounds immediately surrounding the buildings in which the Yu-Kengs and I lived, which were well kept and garnished, the greater part of the extensive park was in a fascinating state of natural wildness. The Palace, like all others in China, consisted of a network of verandahed pavilions built around spacious courts. There was a small Theater with the Prince's loge and stalls for his guests, and numerous tea and summer houses were scattered over different parts of the grounds.

I selected, as my abiding-place, a charming group

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of buildings in a walled-in garden, fronting on a lotus-covered lake, with a winding stream at the back, spanned by a picturesque bridge. The principal pavilion of this group had a lofty central hall, out of which opened, on one side, bedrooms and dressing-rooms, and on the other dining-room and dependencies. Great doors in the center of the hall, which I had decided to use as my living-room, opened on a wide verandah which ran the whole length of the building. Marble steps led from this into a court filled with flowering shrubs. Two sides of the charming court had smaller pavilions similar to the central hall, and opposite this latter was a quaint stone wall, the upper part of tiled lattice-work, with curiously shaped openings at irregular intervals. In the center of this wall, massive wooden doors opened out on a beautiful terrace, shaded by fine old elms, over the lake. It was a charming dwelling-place, and this group of buildings soon came to be known as the "Ker-Gunia Fu," "Ker-Gunia" being "Miss Carl" rendered into Chinese, and "Fu" meaning "Palace," for the Chinese are very fond of nicknames. I learned later that these pavilions had been the dwelling-place of the Seventh Prince's son, the present Emperor Kwang-Hsu, after he had been chosen as Heir to the Throne and until he went to live regularly at the Imperial Palace.

As Her Majesty gave me my morning sittings after the Audience was finished (which lasted from eight A.M. to ten or eleven), I had plenty of time, after my cup of tea, to explore the grounds of our Palace, and I discovered new beauties each day. The Park was

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inclosed by high walls, for the Chinese are jealous of their privacy. Parts of the grounds were gently undulating, and all the eminences, where views could be had, were surmounted by charming summer-houses and belvederes. In one of these, where I loved to go in the early morning to refresh myself by the contemplation of the calm and peaceful lake beneath, and drink in the faint perfume of the stately lotus flowers, which grew in rich profusion on its bosom, I found an inscription on a large flat stone at the left of the entrance. I had seen enough of Chinese characters to know the inscription looked like a "poem." The Chinese poem is rarely more than a phrase: the expression, in elegant and concise form, of some dainty fancy, some bit of philosophy, and is more properly a "verse" than a poem.

I found, later, the inscription on the stone at the entrance of the summer-house was really a "poem," and had been written by no less a personage than the Seventh Prince himself! This had been his favorite place for rest and contemplation, and one day, as he reclined upon a cushion at the entrance, he had written this poem on the flat stone which lay conveniently near. The Chinese write with a brush well charged with liquid India ink, and their writing accommodates itself to almost any surface. Their characters, one for each word, take up less space than our combination of letters, and are infinitely more picturesque! Chinese gentlemen, or some attendant, generally carry about with them tablets of writing-ink and a brush, and they thus have the means at hand for jotting down a thought as it comes to them.

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This little poem had been written with a brush, and some of the Prince's followers had afterward cut the characters in the stone, so that it became a permanent record of a fleeting thought. It had evidently been inspired by the lotus flowers growing beneath; so gloriously beautiful to-day, and to-morrow shorn of their splendor. It was a plaint on the transience of worldly glory—

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. . . Which to-day, like the lotus fair,
Lifts its head in pride;
But to-morrow lies low,
Bathed in the stagnant waters of oblivion.

One day I came upon a number of small tombstones, in a beautiful shady corner, near the stables. I learned that these marked the last resting-places of the Prince's favorite dogs and horses. Each stone had an inscription with the name, and extolled the virtues of the favorite, whose bones lay beneath it. The Prince was a great lover of animals, and is said to have had the best kennels and stables of any of the Imperial Princes.

In my morning rambles, I also often came upon stones engraved with some character or a phrase from the classics. The ideographic Chinese characters, always picturesque, are doubly so when deeply engraved, or standing out in high relief on some rugged stone in a charming spot in the landscape. The picturesque form of the characters is sometimes heightened by being painted in vermilion or gilded; and the glowing color makes a delightful contrast with the cool gray of the

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stone. Even though I could not decipher the characters, nor read the phrases, I loved to come upon them in my morning walks. How much more interesting they must have been to the scholarly Chinese who understood them! How fine, when out for rest and contemplation, to come upon some thought of their great Sages cut in the living rock, or to see some character meaning "Peace" or "Prosperity" standing out, in bold relief or glowing color, from some shady nook, as if to bless him!

From another of the summer-houses in the Park I could see the stone-paved highway leading from the Capital to the Summer Palace. During Their Majesties' residence at the Summer Palace, this is a busy thoroughfare. When I did not care for peaceful contemplation or quiet rambles over the grounds, I would go to this summer-house, whence I could see the carts and "chairs" of the officials, with their outriders, going to and from the Palace; messengers galloning past, bearing despatches, all sorts of itinerant vendors, with their wares; heavily laden wagons, with small yellow banners flying, which showed they carried supplies to the Palace. Sometimes a group of horsemen would dash gaily past, the retainers of some splendidly attired young Prince, who rode in their midst on a red-saddled, handsomely caparisoned horse with silver trappings. Anon, the cumbersome, red, fringe-bedecked cart of some Princess, preceded and followed by from fifteen to thirty outriders, according to her rank in the Princely hierarchy, the black carts of her women bringing up the rear.

One can tell the rank of the Chinese from the out-

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sides of their chairs or carts. Only a reigning Emperor and Empress can go abroad in yellow chairs. The Emperor's secondary wives ride in orange-colored chairs. The relicts of an Emperor, first or secondary, go in yellow or orange-colored carts. Princesses go abroad in red carts. Mandarins of the first and second degrees ride in green chairs; those of the third and fourth in blue chairs; and there is still another shape and style of chair for the ordinary individual, who may prefer a chair to a cart. The rank and file go in carts. These carts, peculiar to Peking, curious two-wheeled vehicles with heavy, iron-studded wheels, are uniformly covered in blue cloth. The wealth and standing of their occupants are discernible from the quality of the cloth and its trimmings, and the richness of the harness and trappings of the mule which is always used in the Peking cart. The mule in North China is a magnificent animal, much finer than the Chinese horse, which is only a pony.

The Seventh Prince (Prince Ch'un) must have been a most interesting personality. He was brother to the Emperor Hsien-Feng, the husband of the present Empress Dowager; and his wife, the mother of the present Emperor, was Her Majesty's sister. This Prince was a valued friend of the two Empresses, the present Empress Dowager and She of the Eastern Palace, while they were Co-Regents during the minority of the late and a part of that of the present Emperor, and he remained, up to the time of his death, one of the most trusted advisers of the Regency. He was recognized by foreigners, as well as by the Chinese, to be an enlightened Prince as well as a man of fine

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character. The esteem in which he was held may have had something to do with the choice of his second son as the Successor of the late Emperor Tung-Chih, who died childless. The Chinese Emperors and their Council may choose the Successor to the Throne. If there be but one son, he is chosen as the next Heir; if there be a number, a selection may be made from them of the one seeming to be most suited for the exalted position. If there be no sons, the Successor is chosen from the nephews without reference to their age or to their being the sons of an elder or younger brother. The present Emperor's Father, Prince Ch'un, was the seventh brother of the Emperor Hsien-Feng, hence his Chinese name of "Seventh Prince."