

## CHAPTER XXX

### HER MAJESTY THE EMPRESS DOWAGER

**T**HE current story that the Empress Dowager was a slave-girl and is of low origin is absolutely false. Her Majesty is the daughter of a Lieutenant-General of the Manchu forces, a position only attainable by members of the highest Manchu nobility. She belongs to the family of the White Banner, second only to that of the Yellow Banner, of which the Emperor of China, himself, is the head. At the time of the conquest of China by the Manchus, there was a fierce struggle between these two powerful families for the supremacy, and the Yellow Banner finally carried the day. The Empress Dowager was brought up with great care and highly educated by her father, a noble of great acquirements.

Like all young Manchu ladies of rank, she went to the Palace for presentation to the then Empress and Empress Dowager between the ages of seventeen and twenty. She immediately attracted them by her cleverness and wit, as well as by her charm and beauty, and, being of an honorable and high Manchu family, was at once considered as a possible wife for the Emperor. On presentation to the Emperor, she met also with his approval and was then chosen as one

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of the wives and given her establishment at Court. She was the fifth chosen, and hence ranked fifth on her marriage and was taken precedence of by the four others who were married before she was.

She became at once a favorite, both with the Dowager Empress and Empress, the first wife, as well as with the Emperor. She soon took precedence over the wife just over her and became fourth wife, for secondary wives can mount in degree. A brilliant woman, with exceptional qualities, takes her place in a Chinese family, as in the world, above that of her less endowed sister, unless this latter should be the first wife. Her place can never be taken, except in case of her death. The first wife of the Emperor Hsien-Feng died two months before he came to the Throne and was never Empress. There were two years of mourning, prescribed by the rites, during which time there was no official Empress. Then the first of his secondary wives was made Empress, and she it was who was the first wife when the present Empress Dowager went into the Palace as fifth wife.

Two years after her marriage, she gave birth to a son, and five years later, on the death of his father, this son became the Emperor Tung-Chih; the young mother, together with the Empress, the first wife, who had adopted him, were given the title of "Dowager Empress." They were appointed Co-Regents for the boy Emperor, and bore, respectively, the titles of Empress of the Eastern Palace and Empress of the Western Palace, with equal rank and power. She of the Eastern Palace was a woman of quiet tastes, given to literary pursuits, with none of the remark-

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able executive ability of her Co-Regent, the Empress of the Western Palace, the great Tze-Hsi, who still rules the destiny of China. Though so different, they lived amicably together, thoroughly appreciated each other's qualities, and are said to have had a sincere affection for each other, which never weakened during the whole of their long association, first as wives of the Emperor Hsien-Feng, then as Regents for his son, and afterward as Regents for the present Emperor Kwang-Hsu. The amicable relations of these two Empresses were only severed by the death of the Empress of the Eastern Palace in 1881, when posthumous honors were lavished upon her by the present Empress Dowager.

China was passing through troublous times when the young Tung-Chih, son of the Empress Dowager, came to the Throne. His father, the Emperor Hsien-Feng died at Jehol, far from Peking, where the Court had gone at the approach of the foreigners, who were aiding in quelling the Taiping rebellion. The times were critical. The integrity of China, the future, even, of the Empire, depended upon the action of its ministers and its rulers at this crisis. In the absence of the Court from Peking, some reactionary ministers, strongly anti-foreign, claimed they had been appointed by the late Emperor as Regents for young Tung-Chih. Had his mother and adopted mother, the two Empress Dowagers, joined them, anarchy might have followed; and, at least, there would have been serious foreign complications, for this anti-foreign party would never have come to terms with the foreigners, who were then in Peking. It was

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most important for the ruling Power, that is, the party which should become Regents, to have the support of the Empresses who held the Sacred Person of the young Emperor, under their care. They were approached by both parties. The young Empress of the Western Palace, absolutely unversed in Statecraft, and, up to that time, ignorant of all that was passing outside the Palace walls, showed wonderful perspicacity and rare judgment in her keen grasp of the situation at this time. She repudiated the anti-foreign party and joined forces with Prince Kung, whose name was then synonymous with Progress in China — an enlightened Prince and the most pro-foreign of all the Imperial Family — and she and the first Empress were appointed Regents for the young Emperor. Prince Kung was the Minister who, thanks to this coöperation of the Empress of the Western Palace, carried the negotiations with France and England to a successful conclusion.

This first political act of the young Empress of the Western Palace brought her into immediate notice, and showed the progressive statesmen of China that they had an intelligent aid in her. The Grand Council and the Princes of the Imperial Family at once recognized her superior ability and they have always staunchly supported her throughout her career and remained true to her in all vicissitudes. In fact, she has known how to inspire loyalty and great devotion in all by whom she has been surrounded.

It was through her wonderful grasp of the situation at this time and the great executive ability she showed later, that the two Empresses brought the Emperor

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Tung-Chih through his minority, and when he began to reign in his eighteenth year, internal troubles had been quelled and foreign complications avoided, and China was in a much more settled and prosperous condition than when he came to the Throne, twelve years before.

There was an interval of but two years in their long Regency for the two Emperors, when the Emperor Tung-Chih, having reached his majority, reigned. The death of her son, the Emperor, at the early age of twenty, after only two years of actual reigning, was a dreadful blow to the Empress of the Western Palace. She had, however, but a short time for grief. With heart bleeding and sore, she was obliged almost immediately to again assume the duties of Co-Regent with the Empress of the Eastern Palace, for her nephew and adopted son, the young Emperor Kwang-Hsu. The two Empresses had then another boy Emperor only five years old, to protect, prepare for reigning, and to govern for.

One has only to be cognizant of events in China since the Dowager Empress Tze-Hsi has ruled, to know the facts of her government. When she took up the Regency, China was seething with rebellion and there were foreign complications, requiring great tact and keen intelligence. She has steered the ship of State between the two extremes, though she has sometimes run it against the rocks of Scylla in trying to avoid the whirlpool of Charybdis, and she has always been a "moderate" in her political course. China having, for so many centuries, had no relations with foreign powers, her statesmen being so absolutely unversed in mod-

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ern methods of diplomacy, has not made a brilliant record in her foreign relations, and she has so frequently been made the dupe of European diplomacy, it is not wonderful China has tried to defend herself by duplicity: using what she thought the same methods she saw were so efficacious in the hands of Europeans.

When the Empress Dowager gave up the reins of government to the Emperor Kwang-Hsu, in the year 1889, after twenty-eight years of Regency, the Great Empire was at that time in a prosperous condition. Its ports had been opened to foreign trade, a fine Customs organization had been established upon a firm basis, and China was at peace with the world.

The first part of the young Emperor's reign was uneventful. He was directed in most things by his ministers, and followed the moderate policy laid down by the Empress Dowager. He seemed to have no special views of his own and no designs of progress for China. Until the war with Japan with reference to the suzerainty of Corea, in 1894, he was a passive figurehead. The Japanese victories changed all this. Their victory gave China one of her most humiliating lessons; for the Chinese, who had given Japan the nucleus of its literature, its art and architecture, looked down upon the Japanese as a race of imitators and had a deep-seated contempt for them as a nation. This victory almost awoke the passive leviathan—that is, China—from its long sleep of national self-content. The young Emperor, smarting under this galling defeat, felt that China had only been conquered by Japan's use of modern methods of warfare and determined on sweeping reforms in the government. Full of youthful en-

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thusiasm, he felt he could put the Great Empire on the road to progress and wished to institute sweeping reforms in all departments. He immediately abandoned the moderate policy of the Regency and surrounded himself by a number of hot-headed, self-seeking reformers, each pushing some new method of reform. The reformers wished, at one fell swoop, to change the system of education, the system of government—in fact to make such sweeping changes that this conservative nation would have risen in a mass had they been carried out. Besides the Radicals, who were the reform party, there were also a number of discontents among the ultra-Conservatives, who, seeing the Emperor's anxiety and desire for change, began to push forward certain schemes of their own. Finally, the ultra-conservatives and reactionaries decided they would join forces with the Radicals, hoping by so doing to change the National policy and the then existing state of government. In the turmoil that would follow this upheaval, each hoped to carry out his own designs, quite different in scope. Each party made the Emperor believe that progress was its aim. The coalition of these two diametrically opposed parties was for the purpose of persuading the Emperor to depart from the moderate opportunist policy which had been the motive power of the Empress Dowager's régime. The adherents of the Reform party were opposed to this moderate policy because it was too conservative. Those of the Reactionaries objected to it because it was too progressive. The power of the central government vested in the young Emperor seemed likely to be crushed between these two self-seeking factions.

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China's wisest statesmen saw the peril, sought the Empress Dowager, beseeched her to return from her retirement and, for the salvation of China, to give the Empire again the benefit of her wise counsels. When she realized the danger she returned. Such is the ascendancy of the "ancestor" in China, the Emperor could not refuse to accept the counsel of his August Ancestress, thus forced upon him. He issued an edict in which he recalled "that Her Majesty the Empress Dowager has on two occasions taken the reins of government, with great success, at most critical times. In all she has done, Her Majesty has been moved by a deep regard for the welfare of the Empire. I have implored Her Majesty to be graciously pleased to advise me in government, and I have received her assent." The Emperor's authority was not wrested from him—he was not deposed. He still remained the Emperor of China; but the Empress Dowager's counsels were forced upon him, he could not but accept them, and she became once more the real Ruler of China. This was what foreigners call the "coup d'état" of 1898.

Her Majesty's keenness of insight and fine judgment (as far as Chinese questions are concerned), served her well again in this crisis. She dismissed not only the self-seeking Radicals, but the self-seeking ultra-Conservatives. Such of the Reformers as were caught were tried, convicted of treason, summarily and cruelly punished. Those who escaped, among them Kang-Yu-Wei, the ringleader of the Reformers, were outlawed. The leader of the ultra-Conservatives, the Emperor's tutor, was not beheaded, but was sent into exile; for a tutor in China occupies almost the



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position of a parent to his pupil, and this position exempted him from more cruel punishment. These summary proceedings on the part of the Moderates, led by Her Majesty, were considered by the foreigners, who were altogether in sympathy with the Reformers, as a reversion to anti-progress ideas, and hence were considered anti-foreign. It certainly was an "anti-reform" movement that caused the "coup d'état" of 1898, but had the adherents of the so-called reformer Kang-Yu-Wei, whose subsequent career has proven how self-seeking he was, carried the day; had his sweeping measures been inaugurated, it might have brought China into a state of anarchy and would certainly have been most pernicious to the Nation, for she was not ready for the drastic measures the Reformers advocated, and the great mass of the people would have rebelled against them.

The "coup d'état" and the consequent check upon the Emperor's dreams of progress was a great blow to him. He was not only chagrined at the failure of his efforts for reform, by which he hoped to show the world that China still counted as a power and to retaliate upon Japan, but he was also profoundly discouraged when he discovered the real nature and designs of his chosen instruments. He saw that he had been oversanguine in hoping to realize at once his enthusiastic dreams for the immediate rehabilitation of China's prestige: he saw that his ardent desire for progress was not enough, and that to hope to reform in a few years the century-old traditions of his most conservative people was but the wild irrealizable dream of youth, and absolutely impracticable. Though he

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know he had been led away, by his wishes for reform to expect the impossible, the disappointment was none the less severe and was most depressing to his sensitive nature. The reaction took place. His never-too-strong constitution broke down under the strain, and this breaking down of his health lent color to the reports, which were immediately circulated among Her Majesty's enemies as well as among the foreigners, that the Empress Dowager was trying to kill the Emperor! She was reported to have imprisoned him, was said to be trying to poison him at one time and at another to starve him to death—the nephew she had brought up through a delicate boyhood and whom she cherished as her own son! Time has shown the truth of these reports, for, had she so desired, she would have had no difficulty in accomplishing his death. She had any number of instruments at her hand, fanatically loyal to her and ready to carry out any of her wishes.

She still "assists" the Emperor in ruling; and, according to Chinese tradition, she, being his "ancestor," must always take the first place. She sits upon the Throne, he upon a chair at her side. It would be improper, according to all Chinese law, were it otherwise. The foreigners speak of the Empress Dowager: forcing the Emperor to stand in her presence and to sit upon a stool while she occupies the Throne. It is not Her Majesty who forces him to do this it is an immutable thousand-year-old tradition in China that a son must take a lower place than his parent in his presence, be he Emperor or peasant. The Empress Dowager still reigns. The times are still too troub-

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lous for her to withdraw her experience from the councils of State, and though longing for the quiet and rest so necessary to a woman of her age, and though really anxious to retire, she feels the time has not yet come.

The Empress Dowager, having crushed the Reformers, and reseated herself upon the Throne, was, from the time of the "coup d'état," considered to be anti-foreign and responsible for all the attacks upon foreigners by ignorant Chinese that took place after that event. When, only two years after the "coup d'état," the secret society of the Boxers began their sanguinary attacks upon the foreigners, Her Majesty was considered responsible for them, was looked upon as aiding and abetting the Boxers; and, by the foreigners at least, she was considered to be the high priestess if not the originator of the order. But the Boxer movement had no such high origin. It started among the people, the humble people, in the Northern provinces of China, far from the Capital, and had been in existence for a number of years before the attack upon the Legations in 1900.

The open contempt of many of the foreigners living in China, not only for the Chinese as a race, but for their most cherished customs and traditions; the fact that the Chinese converts of the foreign missionaries may break Chinese laws and still not be amenable to Chinese punishment; the constantly renewed demands of the foreign powers for territory, for the punishment of high Chinese officials and hundreds of other acts that no body of foreigners in any country but China would dare to try to force upon the people,

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finally aroused even this peaceable, long-suffering Nation.<sup>1</sup> The worm turned. The secret society of the Boxers took "China for the Chinese" as its motto, and to "drive out the foreigner," or, at least, curtail his rapidly growing power, became its object. This society gained in force and grew in volume until it reached the Capital. Here, from the obscure classes among which it had its origin, it spread to the upper stratum of society and had followers among the highest in the land. Certain Princes of the Imperial Family even joined the ranks—among these latter the father of the next heir to the Throne, the Prince Tuan. These gave the movement an added force and made of it a patriotic effort.

Then from smoldering discontent, it burst into open acts of violence against the foreigners. The final spark which caused the outbreak in the Capital and the attack upon the Legations is said to have been the report, which gained immediate credence among the discontents, that the Foreign Ministers were going to interfere with the Government itself, and ask for a change in it; that they were to insist upon the Empress Dowager's retiring from the management of State affairs. This interference, by the foreigners, with the sacred prerogatives of China as a Nation; this attempt at the removal of the Person of one of its Sacred Rulers, aroused the people to a wild fury. Without waiting to find out the truth of this report, and thinking, in their blind ignorance, that by getting rid of the representatives of the Foreign Powers, they might then be left in peace, the mob first attacked and killed the German

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Minister, the Baron von Ketteler, as he was on his way to the Tsung Li Yamen, which the Wai-Wu-Pu now replaces. Then followed the general attack on the Legations.

The movement then became a veritable torrent, rushing madly along, dashing aside all opposition and overwhelming right and reason.

The Emperor and Empress Dowager, powerful and autocratic as they are, could not stem the current, and only by going with it could they ever hope to bring judgment and reason to the surface again. No ruler in the world can or ever has been able to stop an uprising of his people when the latter felt they had right on their side or had been downtrodden or oppressed. Their Celestial Majesties were obliged to wait until the popular fury had somewhat abated before they could even attempt it. No sane person could believe that the Empress Dowager, with her natural intelligence and after thirty years of government and knowledge of foreign methods, did not know that this attack on the foreign representatives by the Chinese people would bring on severe reprisals. But she was powerless to do more than she did at the time. Their Majesties could not go against the people in their maddened state of mind. They hoped by joining the Imperial forces to the wild insurgents that these seething masses might be brought to reason. The mob was given a semblance of right by a declaration of war on the part of the government after the forts of Taku were taken by the foreign war-ships (which was really the first act of war of this unfortunate episode).

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When I saw the position of the Legation quarter and especially that of the British Legation, where all the foreigners finally congregated—open to attack on every side, lying under the very walls of the Palace and the Imperial City—I felt convinced that had there not been some restraining force within their own ranks, the Chinese could have wiped out the foreigners in less than a week. Bad firing on their part could only have availed, for a short space, the inevitable result to the Legations. Had there not been some power that was acting as a check upon the Chinese, no European would have been left to tell the tale; and this restraining force I feel confident came from the Emperor and the Empress Dowager themselves.

The Empress Dowager (with the Emperor) was at the Summer Palace, as usual, during the summer of 1900. Though urged by her ministers and the Princes to remain there, where she was out of danger or could easily escape at its approach, she insisted on returning to the Capital and went into the Winter Palace a week before the Allies reached the city. She hoped as a "dernier resort" that the presence of the Sacred Persons, Their Majesties, in the city might serve as a check upon the soldiers and people, now maddened by their own fury; for the Imperial troops, instead of checking the insurgents and leaving the masses by their right and reason, had, instead, become imbued with the same spirit as the Boxers themselves! But the Empress Dowager, on this occasion, counted too strongly on her popularity and upon the respect that the people felt for

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the "Sacred Persons," for even after their return to the Capital, even Their Majesties' presence—even the issuing of Imperial edicts posted all over the city for the people to protect, or at least cease their attacks on the Legations—were powerless to do more than intermittently check the attacks.

Finally the Allies reached and entered the city! The Empress Dowager, discouraged and finding herself powerless, finally succumbed to the fears of her entourage for her Person. She, herself, became almost panic-stricken at the thought of falling into the hands of the foreigners, whose depredations and cruelty to the Chinese on that memorable march from Tientsin had all been reported to her with the usual exaggerations. Her indomitable spirit was broken. She consented, in an agony of womanly fear, to fly. She was disguised as a common woman, her long finger nails, which would have revealed her exalted rank, were cut off, and, in a common cart, she made her escape from the city. As she had refused to go until the last moment, everything at the Palace was left in the wildest confusion. Neither her jewelry, nor hardly sufficient clothing, was taken. She did not leave the Palace until several hours after the foreign troops had passed the Water Gate and were already within the walls of the English Legation. She had held out as long as possible.

The memorable flight to Singan Fu began that night. The Court was accompanied by a regiment of Imperial troops, but such was their demoralized condition, so many Boxers were among the soldiers, that rank insubordination prevailed. Neither the officers,

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nor even the presence in their midst of the Sacred Persons, served as any check upon the soldiers. The greatest confusion prevailed. The maddest of the insurgents had begun to look forward to retribution and to realize that punishment would be inevitably visited upon them either by the foreigners or by the Chinese Government when things calmed down, and this thought seemed but to madden them further.

As the flight led the Imperial party through the section of country where the society of Boxers had the greatest number of adherents, the people, in many instances, refused food and shelter to the Imperial fugitives. They felt the Court had been against them and for the foreigners. Prince Su, in his account of the journey to Singan Fu, relates that neither Her Majesty nor the Emperor had enough to eat; that the soldiers stole the food that was prepared for Their Majesties. I heard at the Palace that it was only His Majesty who suffered the pangs of hunger. He, as well as all in the great company that formed the Court party, deprived himself rather than see the Empress Dowager suffer. I heard Her Majesty say that the Emperor's food was stolen, and she did not know for several days that he was depriving himself for her. She thought all the Imperial party had her own, meager enough allowance.

The Empress Dowager saw and heard many new and strange things on that memorable journey, but she bore it all bravely. After the first panic of fear, her indomitable spirit resumed its natural poise. Her capacity for seeing the humorous side of things also helped her to bear it, and furnished her with a fund



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of witty anecdotes later, though she once remarked that, at the time, she did not appreciate the humorous side to its full extent. Their experiences at this time were often the theme of conversation among the Ladies at the Palace. While I was there they were constantly referred to by the Princesses and even by the eunuchs of the Court. These pampered individuals had then their first experience with the hardships of the outer world, though, to do them justice, they rarely referred to their own hardships, which must have been severe, only speaking of what Their Majesties and the Ladies had to endure. This flight from Peking to Singan Fu marks an epoch in the Palace. Everything is dated as before or after that time. After Her Majesty had accomplished this perilous journey and borne it so bravely, she was given a new title, a dearer, higher one. She was called Lao-Tzu-Tzung (the Great Ancestress) by her enthusiastic admirers.

<sup>1</sup> Since the above was in type I find the following in F. Laur's "Siège de Péking." In speaking of the cause of the Boxer rising, he quotes Dr. Matignon as saying:

"C'est l'Europe tout entière qu'il faut mettre en cause. C'est parce qu'elle n'a pas compris les Chinois, c'est parce qu'elle a cru que ce peuple doux, somnolent, passif, pouvait, sans regretter, accepter toutes les innovations, toutes les humiliations, que l'Europe s'est laissée entraîner, et par ses missionnaires, et par ses ingénieurs. . . ."

"Voilà pourquoi le mouvement Boxeur s'est produit. Ce mouvement, c'est l'éveil du patriotisme chinois, avec toute l'intransigeance d'un *nationalisme* aveugle, ignorant, mais légitime."