

CHAPTER XXXI

THE EMPRESS DOWAGER'S CHARITIES, SENSE OF JUSTICE, EXTRAVAGANCE, AND PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS.

THE Empress Dowager's charities are extensive; she feeds the poor and succors the unfortunate. When her sympathies are aroused, she gives freely and generously. Her edicts are constantly ordering sacks of rice and food to be distributed among the poor and sent to districts where famine reigns. There is a great refuge in Peking, which she supports, where ten thousand poor are succored and fed during the year. During the winter, edicts are constantly appearing similar to this—commanding “The distribution from the Imperial granaries of fifteen hundred piculs (133½ pounds to the picul) of rice for refuges and gruel stations for the poor in North Tung Chow.” Edict of November 6, 1904.

She also sympathizes with misfortune, tries to right the wrongs she knows of, and correct the abuses that come to her ears. From the “North China Herald” of November 19, 1904, I copy the following, and this paper cannot be accused of viewing any of Her Majesty's acts with a partial spirit (much to the contrary):

“During the Boxer troubles a bad character, by the name of Wang, owed money to a certain Chinese Mohammedan. Wang

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had been frequently dunned, and was finally condemned by the courts to pay the debt; he was, besides, ordered to be beaten, as he had been insolent to the Mandarin trying the case. This incensed Wang, and he swore vengeance. When the Boxer troubles were in full swing in Peking, he became the leader of a band of insurgents and led his band to the house of the Mohammedan whom he had been forced by the courts to pay. Wang and his band massacred not only his old enemy, but eleven members of his family; leaving only a young daughter-in-law who had hidden in a loft and saw the whole tragedy; she also saw them march off, carrying, on spears, the heads of the old man and four of his sons.

"The poor daughter-in-law escaped from Peking soon after, and was not able to return there until a few months since, in 1904. She discovered the dwelling of the murderer of her husband's family, and had a petition drawn up on the subject.

"One day when Her Majesty was proceeding from one Palace to another, the young widow threw herself before the Empress Dowager's cortège. Her Majesty saw the prostrate girl (only nineteen years of age), and commanded her guards to ask what she wanted. The girl, dressed in deep mourning, held above her head her petition, calling for justice against her husband's murderers. Her Majesty read the petition, and her brow became black as night. She called to a eunuch in her train and commanded him to take the young petitioner and her petition to the 'Board of Punishments,' and deliver the Imperial Commands that no time be lost in arresting the murderers; that they should be tried, and the result reported to Her Majesty. This was done, and on the first of November, 1904, the chief murderer Wang, his two sons and a nephew were decapitated to expiate their cruel crimes."

The Empress Dowager is said to be recklessly extravagant in her own habits as well as in the management of Palace affairs. As for extravagance in the Palace, bad management doubtless exists, and extravagance does prevail. Abuses always creep in where the management of great establishments is intrusted to

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money-seeking officials, and to eunuchs, as is the case in the Palace at Peking.

Extravagance in the Palace has been the theme of Chinese economists for many generations, for hundreds of years before the Manchu Dynasty came to the Throne. Several of the Emperors have themselves attempted to stem this extravagance by personal efforts and private economy, but to no avail. It is related of one Emperor that the sleeve of his State robe being a little worn, he called up his Master of the Household to ask what a new robe would cost. He found that it would cost three thousand taels, and as only the right sleeve of this gown was worn (as he used his arm a great deal in writing), he decided, in order that he might himself show a good example, and inaugurate economy, to have a new sleeve made, instead of ordering an entire gown. He gave his commands, in consequence, and the gown was taken out of the Palace and remained several months. When it was returned, what was His Majesty's astonishment and chagrin to find that the cost of the new sleeve had exceeded that of a new gown!

In his walks outside of the Palace, another Emperor bought an article of food for a few pence. The next time he had it in the Palace he asked what the dish cost and was told it was "four taels." When he remonstrated, saying what he had paid for it outside of the Palace, his Master of the Household told him it was impossible to have it "inside" the Palace or on His Majesty's table at any less than the sum of four taels. If His Majesty wished it for a few pence, His Majesty might buy it outside the Palace and bring

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it in himself for that sum, but no one else could bring it inside for the price it could be bought outside, as it had to go through so many official hands before it reached His Majesty's table, that it actually cost the sum of four taels.

After several efforts of this kind at reducing the Palace expenses, even these wise and economical Emperors were obliged to give it up. If these Emperors of ancient times, when the Palace was conducted on more simple lines than it is to-day, were powerless to check extravagance in the Imperial household, how much more difficult must it be to do so now that the system has become petrified with age—especially for the Empress Dowager, who can never go outside and see things for herself! It is said that each egg at Their Majesties' table costs three taels, but Palace reform, necessary as it is, must come from without, from the officials, and no private effort of Their Majesties can change things.

As for the Empress Dowager's personal extravagance, aside from present-giving, I saw no evidence of it. Her wardrobe, in point of actual cost, aside from her jewels, would not be superior in price to that of the wives of some of our American millionaires; for the styles do not change in China, and furs and embroideries are handed down from generation to generation. Her jewels, even, are not more gorgeous or more numerous, though they are more unique, than those of any of the European sovereigns. She has an immense number of pearls—for the pearl is her favorite precious stone, besides being the jewel of the Dynasty—but she has no diamonds, no emeralds, and very few European

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precious stones. She has a quantity of fine jade jewels, but these, as well as pearls, are cheaper in China than elsewhere.

I saw several incidents which seemed to point rather to personal economy on Her Majesty's part than to extravagance. While I was painting one of the portraits, she decided that the trimming on the gown must be changed. She had bolts of different kinds of ribbon brought in to select from and finally decided upon a certain piece. She called a maid to sew some around the neck. When I wanted to have this piece cut off, so that some might be sewed around the hem where it was also visible, she said the ribbon had better not be cut, for it was a "handsome piece," and, if cut, it might spoil it for use in "trimming another gown." These pieces of ribbon and embroidery come in lengths for one dress only. One day when she was drinking some fruit juice, her hand slipped on the polished jade bowl and some of it fell upon the front of her jacket. She was most annoyed, and after several ineffectual attempts of her own and the attendants to remove the spot, she said she had heard that the foreigners had some wonderful processes of cleaning and she must have them investigated, for it was too bad to have a thing spoiled by an accident of that kind when a good garment was rendered useless for any one!

She had the good of China at heart and was really a patriot; in fact, I observed more patriotism, more National pride among the people I saw at Court, than I ever noticed elsewhere in China. I feel convinced the Empress Dowager has strong National feeling and

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really loves her country, and is as patriotic a Chinese as there is in China. When there were internal troubles, or exterior complications, she seemed to be really worried and to grieve, as if it were a personal thing. She made mistakes, of course, and grave ones, but when it is remembered that her knowledge of what takes place "outside," comes entirely from the reports made to her, that she has no opportunity of seeing things for herself, it seems wonderful she does not make more.

Last winter a new scheme of taxation, by which the revenue would be largely increased and which taxation would be scarcely felt by the people, was presented to Their Majesties for consideration. Her Majesty soon grasped the entire scope of the scheme and thought it good and feasible; but though the payment of the foreign indemnity made it imperative to increase the revenue by every means possible, she hesitated over the inauguration of this new scheme, fearing it might give the officials a new opportunity to oppress the common people, for it is not the laws that oppress the people in China. This is done by the officials who enforce them. She evidently realized this power that the officials have of "squeezing" the people, and she wished to be assured of the manner in which this taxation would be enforced before she gave her consent to the scheme. At the first presentation to her of this plan of taxation, she repeated several times, "I fear it may harass the people; we cannot harass the people; they have enough burdens to bear." She was not so particular about not harassing the Officials, for they were called upon all

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over China to make great contributions to the Imperial Treasury for the purpose of assisting in paying the foreign indemnity.

Notwithstanding her penetration of character, her naturally good judgment, she made mistakes in her appreciation of those who surrounded her; but this was not strange, for she had almost no opportunity of seeing them in their true light. She was a good physiognomist, but one cannot always trust to physiognomy. She was in the habit of giving all who surrounded her a certain amount of latitude, until they came to rely on her favor and revealed themselves in their true light to her. Then she would quickly suppress them or cast them aside. This often seemed cruel and heartless. She sometimes would take another's estimate of a character which she had favorably judged, for, of course, there is a great deal of jealousy and intrigue among her entourage, and she was influenced by reports that she heard; for she was obliged, in order to form an opinion, to listen to the gossip of the Palace. Her own penetration, however, would generally come to her aid and, in the end, her judgment would right itself.

She had strong prejudices, and often allowed herself to be deceived by the favorites to whom she had given her confidence. After several preliminary trials of their character, and when she thought she had arrived at a proper estimate of it, she was an easy victim. These favorites could then act with impunity, and she was sometimes made the dupe of their schemes. Thus Ministers, courtiers, friends, and attendants, who had once thoroughly established their positions with her,

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could often get the advantage of her and impose upon her natural acumen.

She could be most sarcastic, sometimes cruelly so, but I generally found there was some reason for her sarcasm. She was very impulsive and had her share of temper, but there was never any unladylike display of it. When she was angry her voice was never raised; it simply lost its silvery sweetness and took the quality of some ordinary metal, and she was always quiet and well-bred.

From what I saw of the Empress Dowager, it seemed to me she would not brook interference in the accomplishment of a design she had set her heart upon—that she would not hesitate even at crushing an individual who stood in the way of the realization of some plan she had fixed upon. But her judgment was so good, she did not decide upon a thing unless she felt it was absolutely imperative to carry it out.

As for tact and social savoir, she is remarkable. I never knew any one to possess these qualities to a greater degree. At her first Audience to foreigners, Sir Claude MacDonald, in reporting it, spoke of the Empress Dowager as “a kind and courteous hostess, who displayed both the tact and softness of a womanly disposition.” Lady Susan Townley says of her: “Where has she learned the ease and dignity with which she receives her European guests?” These opinions of her social tact, so far as I could learn, are held by all the members of the Foreign Legations in Peking.

When the young Prince Adalbert of Prussia was received in special Audience by Their Majesties, on his visit to Peking, he was accompanied not only by the

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German Minister and his staff, but by a number of officers as his personal escort. This made an unusually large number of presentations necessary. I have been told that at the Audiences of the Diplomatic Corps, where only gentlemen were present, the Empress Dowager had a sort of shyness and did not show the same ease of manner as when she received the ladies. But at this Audience of the young Prince she became interested in talking with him, and I heard one of the gentlemen who was present say it was the first time he had seen Her Majesty thoroughly at ease at one of the Audiences to the Diplomatic Corps, and that on that day she was perfectly charming, seeming to take the liveliest interest in questioning the young Prince and conversing with him in a motherly way, and that he then realized to its full extent her wonderful charm and her great social instinct.

I have heard it said that the Empress Dowager puts all this charm on for these occasions; that she is a consummate actress, but during the whole time I was in the Palace I never saw her other than the charming hostess, considerate of the comfort of those who surround her and readily sympathizing with sorrow, and I have seen her under all circumstances, at Audiences and in private, in anxiety and sorrow and in joy. She was too great a lover of Nature in all its phases to be cruel and heartless, and I am convinced she is really genuinely kind. She apparently greatly admired intelligence, and goodness always seemed to appeal to her. She was ever a fascinating study, and her magnetic personality full of charm. I found her thoroughly human and perfectly womanly.