

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CHINESE NEW YEAR—OFFICIAL AUDIENCE

THE Chinese New Year, the greatest of the popular festivals, is, of course, celebrated with much pomp and enthusiasm at the Palace. Splendid decorations, hundreds of beautiful horn lanterns, with their long, red silk tassels, the great red "Shò" emblazoned on their sides, made the courts and verandahs gay with color. Painted figures of red-clothed gods regarded one at every turn. Hideous monsters with vermilion faces, painted on the outside doors, branched spears to frighten away the bad spirits. There were the usual gala representations at the Theater; and the Palace, as at all festivals, was filled with visitors.

The Chinese pay all their debts at the New Year. If they have not the ready money to do so, they will dispose of anything valuable they have, in order to begin the New Year free from debt. It is considered tempting Heaven to begin it otherwise. A great deal of silver imitation money is exchanged at this season. This is an old custom and supposed to bring abundance during the year. At the New Year, present-giving reaches its culminating point in China. Every one, rich and poor, high and low, gives presents then.

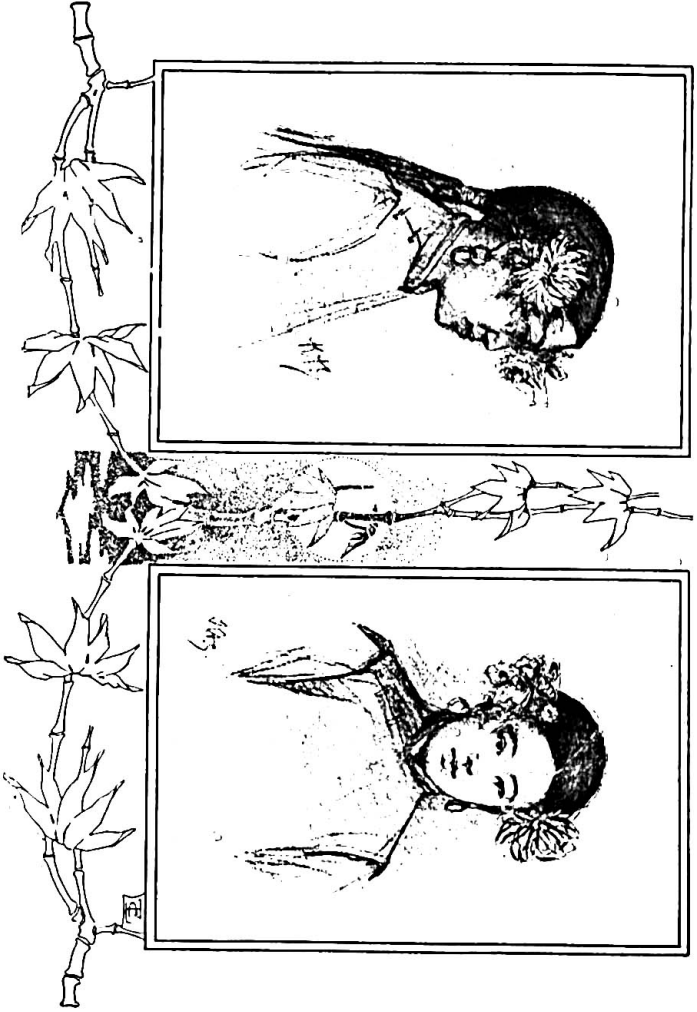
Their Majesties not only gave to all the Ladies and

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Princesses, but to every inmate of the Palace, and even the beggar at the gate was not forgotten; but the presents exchanged at the New Year are never so handsome as those given for a birthday. The presents the Empress Dowager received on this occasion were principally flowers (her Throne-room was full of them, as well as her private apartments)—dwarf fruit-trees twisted into fantastic shapes, laden with fragrant blossoms and splendid plants of peculiaries in full flower, and countless vases of the Chinese Lily, as they call the Narcissus in China. The Empress Dowager tried to be cheerful and not dampen the gaiety of the Festival by her alarm, but the long-looked-for and much-dreaded war between Russia and Japan had then actually begun, and she was mortally anxious! The Japanese were already in Manchuria, and no one knew how it might affect China!

Though I did not work on the portrait during the New-Year's festivities, it was now really advancing. When Her Majesty saw how the hands looked when they were drawn in, with the palms of the hands hidden by the long fur undersleeves, in the position I had dared to find fault with at the first sitting, she at once suggested having the fur undersleeves taken off, but she still said nothing about changing the position of the hands, though I saw she had her doubts about them, and I felt confident her good taste would finally prevail and she would want them changed. I painted them in with a thin wash of color, knowing they would be changed later. A few days after this, she remarked that my "idea about the position of the hands was not bad," and suggested that the left hand "would look well on a

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cushion." I made this change in the small study, much to her satisfaction, and then did the hands likewise in the large portrait.

The New-Year festivities were hardly over before the Empress Dowager decided to move the Court to the Sea Palace. This Palace, though not so much a favorite with her as the Summer Palace, she liked better than the Winter Palace; the latter's small, shut-in courts, walled-in walks, and rigid traditions seemed to depress her. At the Sea Palace she had gardens for her promenades and there was a lake. It was not so beautiful as the Summer Palace, but was an improvement over the Winter Palace.

This move to the Sea Palace necessitated another change of studio for me, just as I was comfortably installed in my quarters in the Winter Palace, and had begun to progress with my work. I knew I should be obliged to have the new place arranged with upper glass windows and that I would again lose time, and the date of the opening of the St. Louis Exposition was approaching! But there was no help for it; I must go with the Court to the Sea Palace. I was told that there I was to have a magnificent pavilion on the lake, with a perfect light for painting. As to the pavilion's being magnificent, I had no doubt, but I did doubt, from past experiences, whether the light would be all that could be desired.

One morning our chairs carried us to the Sea Palace instead of to the Winter Palace. All my painting-things, materials, canvases, as well as Her Majesty's Throne, on which she was seated for the portrait, had been moved. Not the smallest piece of paper, nor

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even a bit of charcoal was missing. I had painted until the last moment at the Winter Palace, the day before; and early the next morning my things were in perfect order—the portrait on the easel, and the Throne in the proper position in my quarters at the Sea Palace. It was an “Aladdin's-Lamp” move.

The group of buildings that had been set aside for my painting fronted on the lake, and were really charming, but the overhanging verandahs to each pavilion forced me again to have the upper windows put in. After this was accomplished, it was the best working-room I had ever had at any of the Palaces. The days were getting longer and the light better, and I hoped now to soon finish the portrait.

A few days after the Court moved to the Sea Palace, the members of the Corps Diplomatique were received in Audience to present their congratulations to the Emperor and Empress Dowager on the occasion of the Chinese New Year. They were received in the Great Audience Hall; but the ladies of the Legation, whose reception took place the following day, were received in Her Majesty's Throne-room opening on the Court of the large Theater at the Sea Palace. As it was cold, the Theater and its court were entirely inclosed and roofed over in glass, in panes of about a foot and a half square. On each pane was painted, in red, the ever-present character “Sho” (longevity), surrounded by five bats. The marble pavement of the court and the steps leading up to the Throne-room were carpeted in red; and when the great doors were thrown wide, there was a good effect of size given,

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although this Throne-room was one of the smallest in the Sea Palace.

As this was to be a formal reception, several members of the Wai-Wu-Pu were present as interpreters. The ladies of the Legation were presented by the Baron Czikan, the Austrian Minister, Doyen of the Corps. He made a graceful address in French, wishing Their Majesties a Happy New Year, and China much prosperity. This was translated into Chinese by one of the Secretaries of the Wai-Wu-Pu. The Empress Dowager replied for herself and the Emperor, in Chinese. Her Majesty's words were interpreted by His Excellency Liang Fang, a good French scholar. Then the Doyen presented the ladies individually, and the usual order of ceremonies followed. When the presentations were over, the Doyen, foreign attachés and interpreters, with the Chinese officials, repaired to the hall which had been set aside for their luncheon; while the ladies, accompanied by the Princesses, went to their repast in another part of the Palace!

Only a few days after this, came the lantern festival; but this was not an interruption to my work, for I painted all day, and only went to the Theater for the final piece and the spectacular tableau. We dined in the Imperial loge, and after dinner there were beautiful lantern and torch-light processions. In the court opposite the Throne-room where we dined, there was a beautiful pai-lou of transparent gauze, painted in charming designs, illuminated from within, and hung with luminous flowers and quaint lanterns. Tall eunuchs, in gala red, stood around the courts, holding great lanterns aloft, like huge carya-

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tides with luminous burdens. Others with fanciful vermilion lanterns wound in and out through corridors and courts. When they reached the court of the softly glowing pai-lou, they manœvered and made intricate designs and luminous tableaux, holding aloft their red-globed lanterns to form characters and phrases of "felicitous omen." These huge, luminous characters were wonderfully accurate.

After the torch- and lantern-like processions, and the glowing tableaux, a pair of illuminated dragons writhed into the court and struggled for the "flaming pearl," which flitted around with elusive fantastic movements, ever beyond their grasp. I was not able to find out the origin of the Imperial legend of the Double Dragon and the Flaming Pearl, representations of which appear everywhere at the Palace on whatever is meant for Imperial use, or for any official function over which the Emperor is supposed to preside. It is on all the Thrones of the Dynasty; it adorns the Imperial pennant; it is cut into stone, carved into wood, and painted in pictures. It decorates the gowns of the higher officials, and is embroidered upon the Court dresses of the Ladies of the Palace. At the Birthdays of the Emperor and Empress, and at all Dynastic celebrations there are realistic representations of the immortal struggle where the Double Dragon strives to absorb the "flaming pearl." The significance of the legend seems to be: The Double Dragon represents the Powers of Earth or Evil which try ever to absorb the Flaming Pearl, Emblem of the Dynasty, symbol of Heaven or Perfection. The Flaming Pearl, the Unattainable, keeps ever beyond

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and above their grasp, seeming to serve always as an incentive for further effort.

For a fortnight after the lantern festival, there were fireworks every night on the bank: of the lake. We would dine in the Throne-room, and then Her Majesty and the Emperor, accompanied by the Ladies, and attended by the usual number of eunuchs (each bearing transparent horn lanterns), would go through the courts and paths of the garden to the lake, on the banks of which the fireworks were sent up. Here, in full view of the set pieces, stood four large, roomy sleds. When the lake was frozen, these sleds were used to push Their Majesties and the ladies over its glassy surface. They had not been used as sleds this winter, for the ice had not been sufficiently firm, the winter having been comparatively mild. But when the lake was well frozen, as is usual at this season in Peking, Their Majesties viewed the fireworks from these sleds as they skimmed along over its smooth surface. There was a sled for each of them—one for the Empress and second wife, and one for the Princesses. They were cloth-covered, lined with fur, and had great fur rugs. There were seats around the three sides; the wadded curtain, with its large square of plate glass that hung down over the front, was taken off for the fireworks. Their Majesties occupied each of theirs alone, but the Empress had several of the Ladies in hers.

The fireworks were superb. There were beautiful set pieces, pagodas, with ladies on balconies, pavilions with grapevines, wistaria arbors, and beds of flowers so lifelike they seemed to grow at the side of the

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luminous cascades, and many other effects I had never seen before in fireworks. One day, during the time of the lantern festival, we had fireworks in the brilliant sunshine. When these day rockets exploded, all sorts of curious paper devices fell to the ground—fish dragons and animals, as well as flags and baskets. When anything interesting was revealed, Her Majesty would send the eunuchs to pick it up as it fell and bring it to her that she might examine it. Many fell outside the Palace walls, and she said these would give pleasure to the “poor people outside.”

Formerly, at these fireworks in the Palace to celebrate the lantern festival, the public was admitted into the Inclosure, but this practice stopped when the two Empresses were Co-Regents for the first boy Emperor, Tung-Chih. As this was coincident with the establishment of the first Foreign Legations in Peking, the latter fact may have had some influence in changing the custom. The Chinese people were shut out because it was feared that the foreigners might also come into the Precincts. These beautiful fireworks I could enjoy without any qualms of conscience, for I could not paint at night, and they were consequently no interruption to my work.