

CHAPTER XXXV

RETURN TO THE SUMMER PALACE

SENDING off the picture to St. Louis did not sever my connection with the Palace, for I had still other work to finish! At the end of April, a month later than usual, the Court moved out to the Summer Palace for the rest of the year. The country was beautiful, the trees were almost in full leaf, and lilacs, blue and white, bloomed everywhere. My garden in the Park of the Palace of the Emperor's Father was full of them, and over my entrance gate clambered a beautiful yellow rose-bush laden with masses of blooms. Wild flowers were springing up at every turn, and my dog "Melah" in his wild races through the park, when we were out for our walks, would often start up coveys of birds; or rabbits would scurry away at his approach. I went back to my favorite haunts in the park, to the summer-house, where upon the threshold, cut in stone, lay the plaint of the Seventh Prince! It was a delightful change to be in this beautiful spot after the four months in Peking, and to see Nature everywhere budding into perfection. The grounds of the Summer Palace were one maze of delight. The peonies in all their royal splendor, the fragrant lilac, the stately magnolia, and the budding

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elms, each added their charm to this beautiful spot, where everything was lovely. I could not wonder at the Empress Dowager's desire to come back again to all this beauty.

A charming studio was fitted up for me at the Summer Palace on our return. Her Majesty saw how much more satisfactory it was for me to have a proper place to work in, where I would be undisturbed, and even had she not seen the utility of a studio, I think she would have granted my request for one, for she was always kind and considerate. Upper windows of plate glass were put into the north side of one of His Majesty's Throne-rooms, behind the Imperial loge. It looked over a charming terrace of the garden. The days were long, and it was a delight to live and breathe, and the quiet of the studio, where I could work at leisure, made me resume my work with renewed vigor.

I began at once to finish up the small sketch of the St. Louis portrait, which Her Majesty wished to keep, and then to put the final touches on the two portraits begun at the Summer Palace. The Throne-room that was now my studio had only one disadvantage. It was so near the Theater that on theater days I could hear the music and the voices of the actors. And on those days, the court outside my windows was filled all day with eunuchs and Their Majesties' attendants, moving to and fro. I decided if it was necessary for me to go into Peking at any time, to take a "Theater day" to do so.

One Theater day I did go into Peking, and on my return to the Summer Palace the next day I found

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that His Majesty the Emperor had taken advantage of my absence to occupy his Throne-room the day before, for I found his Theater program, distinguishable by being written on Imperial yellow paper, and he had also left a few papers scattered around with characters and phrases written with the "Vermilion Pencil," which may only be used by His Majesty. On one paper he had evidently been trying to draw a plan of the part of Manchuria where the war operations were then being carried on. He had also drawn a part of the Great Wall of China, and the dividing line between China and Manchuria.

So the Emperor, notwithstanding his stoical smile, his apparent unconcern, was not indifferent to affairs in Manchuria. He was watching the course of events there, and he probably worried and grieved as much as even the Empress Dowager, about what might be the result for China. He had probably schooled himself to appear indifferent. The ceremonies and festivals at the Palace had been going on as usual, but the two central figures of all these functions had their own secret anxieties and cares. The Emperor was following the campaign in Manchuria, and the Empress Dowager was probably planning and thinking of the best course for China to follow.

In May, the Empress Dowager had another Garden Party for the ladies of the Legation, at which she, as usual, asked me to assist. When I went into the Audience Hall for this reception, a few moments before the ladies were to arrive, Her Majesty, after greeting me and scanning my toilet, which was all in gray without any color, took a pink peony from a vase at

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hand, and pinned it on my dress, saying I needed a little color. I had just finished the largest of the other three portraits I had painted at the Summer Palace, and Her Majesty told me she liked it so much that she had decided to show it to the foreign ladies at this Garden Party. As I had heard nothing of this plan before leaving my studio that morning, I had made no preparations for it. The picture was on my easel, unframed, and I told her I would prefer it to be placed in its frame, before it was shown. This frame, designed also by the Empress Dowager, and made by the Palace workmen, was a magnificent piece of work, elaborately carved and beautiful in form. It was in the natural color of teak-wood, and this quiet tone admirably set off the vivid color of the gown and accessories, and was a great improvement to the picture. When she heard what were my wishes on the subject, Her Majesty said she would see that the picture was placed in the frame, and it was arranged that as soon as I had finished my luncheon, I would return to the studio and overlook things myself, and arrange the portrait as I wished.

The Audience passed off as usual. Immediately after luncheon the ladies were invited to go to the studio to see the portrait. The Empress Dowager had evidently forgotten about my wish to go there first, and as she herself, contrary to all precedent, led the way, followed by the ladies, I could not, of course, precede her. I had not thought that she would make such an innovation as to, herself, accompany the ladies to the studio. I felt greatly honored, but I feared the eunuchs had not arranged things as they

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should be, and knew I could do nothing with Her Majesty present, and what was my chagrin on reaching the hall in the wake of the Empress Dowager and the ladies, to find that the portrait, though placed in the frame as I had desired, was in the center of the narrow hall, and every window on both sides had been opened to its widest extent, and the light came in from all sides! I had shut off all the lights of this hall, except the double windows to the north, where I had the upper glasses put in, and this is where the picture should have been placed, but as Her Majesty's Throne always occupies the center of the Throne-rooms, the eunuchs evidently thought that was the proper place for her portrait when on exhibition. As the halls are narrow in proportion to their length, no one could get further off than four feet from this life-size portrait. This, added to the cross-lights, was heartrending. I was in despair. Her Majesty's presence prevented my ordering the eunuchs to change the position of the portrait, and, besides, every one had already seen it! The ladies, who could not do otherwise than express their admiration in the presence of both the August Subject and the artist, duly praised the portrait. Her Majesty, who knew how it looked in its proper light, and who only glanced at it here, did not realize at what a disadvantage it appeared, and was perfectly satisfied with the effect.

An amusing little incident took place while the ladies were looking at it. The Empress Dowager, in her cursory examination in this light, noticed a part of the trimming of the gown where the design was not



THE PORTRAIT OF THE EMPRESS DOWAGER IN ITS FRAME

This Frame is Made of Camphor-wood Carved in the Palace after the
Empress's own Designs and under Her Direction

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well worked out. She came up to me, as I stood in a group of ladies, and pointed out the defect. She took my hand in hers, and said in an almost pleading way, "There is a bit of trimming that is not well finished. You will arrange it for me, will you not, Ker-Gunia?" She did not believe in leaving anything to the imagination, and wished every detail fully worked out!

This portrait was very successfully photographed, and Her Majesty concluded she liked it much better than the one which had been sent to St. Louis. She said it would make me "famous." But when I thought of how I might have painted this wonderfully interesting woman in the unique setting in which she was placed, I realized that "it might have been" are really the "saddest words of tongue or pen."

The precedent having been established, the idea of a representation of the Sacred Person of a Chinese Majesty being seen by the world having been accepted, the painting of Her Majesty's first portrait not having been followed by the dire results that the Chinese had prophesied, the traditional prejudice was overcome, and when she saw how quickly the photograph was made of the portrait, and how satisfactory it was, she decided she would have the photographer try one of herself, and she was not one to stop at a single trial. After waiting sixty-eight years to see a counterfeit presentment of herself, I know she will now indulge this new fantasy of hers to its fullest extent, and perhaps some other artist may at some time paint her according to western ideas, and represent her attractive personality in its best setting.

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But there must always be a pioneer, and he it is who suffers the hardships and makes the way clear for others, which must be my solace and consolation for not being able to paint her as I should have liked. The Empress Dowager "consented" to have a portrait of herself painted. Before I finished the first one she told me she wanted "many," and suggested my passing the rest of my life out in Peking. I painted four. Who will do the others?

I felt I could not go on forever painting portraits, according to Chinese traditions, of the Empress Dowager. I could not spend my life in this dalliance with Oriental splendor. The world beyond the Palace gates called me. I hurried to finish my task. The last portrait was nearing completion. My sojourn at the Palace was drawing to a close. Though I longed to be where I might paint in a freer way, I looked forward with real regret to leaving the Palace, and especially to leaving the Empress Dowager and the young Empress, for I had come to really love them. I found Her Majesty by far the most fascinating personality it had ever been my good fortune to study at such close range. The young Empress was a sweet, kind nature, full of dignity and pathos, for whom I prayed there might be greater happiness in store than had yet fallen to her lot. My sojourn at the Palaces of Her Imperial Majesty the Empress Dowager of China, my association with herself and the Ladies of her Court, I shall always remember as one of the most charming experiences of my life.