

CHAPTER IV

HER MAJESTY'S THRONE-ROOM—SOME PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

WE arrived at the Palace in good time the next morning, as Her Majesty and suite were coming out of the Great Audience Hall. She greeted us with a charming smile and made her usual inquiry for my health. We joined her suite and went along to the Throne-room where the portrait had been begun. This Throne-room is a very spacious and lofty hall; one side of the great room is almost entirely of glass, with only the wooden columns that support the roof between the windows—the lower half of plate-glass, the upper of lattice-work with Corean paper as shades. In the center of this side of windows is a huge plate-glass door, reaching from ceiling to floor. The other three sides of the hall, which separate it from the apartments at the side and back, are of the same beautiful, open woodwork carving I have mentioned as serving as partitions in my pavilion. Those in Her Majesty's Throne-room were, however, of greater delicacy of workmanship and were more beautiful as to the painted panels. The poems, written on white silk, and alternating with the painted panels, were from Her Majesty's favorite authors, original poems

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written by an Emperor or Empress, or laudatory verses dedicated to Her Majesty. There were satin portières at the doorways, and blue silk curtains over the plate-glass windows. Blue, being the Empress Dowager's favorite color, is used for all the hangings in the Palaces which are not intended for official purposes; where yellow is the color.

On the right of the Throne-room is a small chapel with an altar, over which presides a figure of the contemplative Buddha seated on the lotus. This altar was always sweet with offerings of fresh flowers and fruit. In front of the figure of Buddha stood the incense-burner, with perfumes constantly burning. On the left of the Throne-room are Her Majesty's sleeping apartments, and behind the openwork partition at the back of the hall is a large ante-chamber where the attendants and Ladies await their turn to make their entrance into the Throne-room. In the rear of the hall is a magnificent five-leaved screen of teakwood, inlaid with lapis lazuli, chalcedony, and many other semi-precious stones. In front of this screen, on a dais, stood an immense, couch-like throne, with a large footstool. These couch-like thrones, where Their Celestial Majesties may recline when holding Audiences, are not at all favored by the Empress Dowager, who always sits extremely erect, without leaning upon a cushion or the back of the throne. Except in the Great Audience Hall, where she uses the traditional throne of state of the Dynasty, she prefers a much lighter and quite modern one, which she has introduced into the Palaces. The thrones favored by Her Majesty are of open curved teakwood, circular

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in form, with cushions of Imperial yellow. One of these stood in the front part of this hall, on which she sat for the portrait.

The great throne, which I have described above, was hence relegated to the back of the Throne-room and kept for the sake of tradition, but never used by Her Majesty. On either side of it stood two immense, processional fans of peafowl feathers, with ebony handles placed in magnificent cloisonné supports. Superb cloisonné vases stood at either side of these ceremonial fans; and huge bowls of rare old porcelain held pyramids of fruits—apples, sweet-smelling quince, and the highly perfumed “Buddha’s hand.”

And there were flowers everywhere! It was the season of the year when bloomed a sort of orchid, of delicious fragrance, of which Her Majesty is very fond. These were growing in rare porcelain jardinières, placed at intervals around the hall. There were also vases of lotus flowers and bowls of lilies. The combined odors of all these fruits and flowers gave a subtle, composite perfume quite indescribable and delightful, but not at all overpowering, for the Empress Dowager is so fond of fresh air that there are always windows open in the Palace, even in the coldest weather.

Aside from the fruits and flowers, clocks were the dominant feature of this Throne-room, as well as of every other one I ever went into in any of the Chinese Palaces. The love of the Chinese for clocks and timepieces is well known, and there are thousands in each of the Palaces I visited. In this Throne-room there were, as I have said before, eighty-five:

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magnificent jeweled and gold clocks, and specimens of all the varieties that were ever made; some with chimes; some with crowing cocks and singing-birds; some with running water; some with musical-box attachments, and others with processions of figures that came out at every hour and moved around the dial; some rare works of art and some commonplace examples of the clockmaker's trade. There are many foreign ornaments in the Palace, but, aside from the clocks and watches, Her Majesty the Empress Dowager does not seem to care much for European "objets de vertu." Unfortunately, what they have at the Palaces, aside from a few presents from European sovereigns, are generally very poor specimens of European art, and compare but lamentably with the beautiful Chinese curios. They are principally cheap modern stuff, bought by the Chinese nobles when abroad and sent as presents to Their Majesties. These presents, when they are accepted, are placed in apartments of the Palace not in general use.

When Her Majesty had her official garments removed (she always changed her dress after the morning Audience), and when the portrait had been placed upon the easel, she came over to look at it. After studying it for some time, she concluded that the nail-protectors on both hands were not artistic, and that she would have the gold ones (set with pearls and rubies) taken off, and show the uncovered nail on the right hand. I was delighted at this decision, for the nail-protectors destroyed the symmetry of the hand and hid the beautiful tips of her fingers. I had, of course, not presumed to make any suggestions as to

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her costume or ornaments. As the nail-shields are characteristic of the high-class Chinese ladies, it was well to have them on one hand.

After this change had been decided upon, she went over to a great vase, standing near, and took from it a lotus flower, held it up, in a charmingly graceful way, and asked me if that would not be pretty in the portrait, adding that the lotus was one of her attributes. As the color did not harmonize with the general scheme, I did not care for this suggestion, but temporized by saying "I was not ready to put it in then." After a little more than an hour's work, with the usual interruptions, she decided that enough had been done for that morning. When I suggested that I might work even after Her Majesty was tired, she said "No," that if she were tired sitting still, I could not fail to be more so doing the work and standing as I did. She said there was no hurry, that I had plenty of time to finish the picture, and must not run the risk of making myself ill.

After a short sitting in the afternoon Her Majesty ordered the boats, and we went out to the marble terrace, beneath which lay moored the Palace fleet, manned by blue-gowned oarsmen. We again took the Imperial barge, the Empress Dowager in the center, on her yellow chair, the young Empress and Princesses sitting around, Turkish fashion, on cushions. The barge, drawn along by the two great boats, glided as gently as a swan over the still waters of the lake. The air was soft and balmy. Two of the eunuchs were ordered to sing, and the minor chords of a curious air mingled their rhythm with the soft swish of the water.

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Beyond us lay the hills, the beautiful Western Hills, unchanging in form, but ever varying in color—sometimes blurred and gray, or a soft, warm violet; again a clear, deep blue, as if hewn out of lapis lazuli, and now and then, as a cloud passed over the sun, dark and threatening almost. I drank in deep breaths of delight!

The quaint picturesqueness of the marble-terraced banks, the summer-houses, the green and yellow tiled roofs, the vermilion walls and lacquered columns of the buildings, the curious fleet silently moving along, the eunuchs singing, the Empress Dowager sitting in state surrounded by her Ladies, the camel-back bridges—everything was strange, and, stranger still, I formed a part of this curious pageant! Only the beautiful hills beyond seemed familiar.

After drifting about for some time, we landed and went into the orchards and among the apple trees. The apple is a favorite fruit of the Chinese, and esteemed as much for its fragrance as its taste. It is emblematic of Peace and Prosperity, and is always placed among the offerings to Buddha, hence has also a sacred quality; but, though beautiful in form and color, the Chinese apple has very little taste, and the least savor of any of their fruits.

Her Majesty walked about among the trees and ordered several apples gathered, which she ate with greater relish than I could, for she graciously offered me one, and then told me to pull some for myself. A eunuch brought a basket and took them as I gathered them, and she told me to have them taken to my own apartments.

From the orchard she continued her walk to the

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flower gardens, where she picked some small blossoms and placed them behind her ears, Spanish fashion, telling the Ladies to do likewise, and herself choosing some for me and placing them over my ears. I knew these little marks of favor she showed me were not due so much to regard for me as to her desire to make the "stranger" feel at home. She hoped by showing me these special favors to insure a similar treatment of me by the Ladies and eunuchs. I have already alluded to Her Majesty's love of flowers. This was the one of her characteristics which seemed most incompatible with the idea I had formed of her from what I had heard, and her love of flowers and all nature caused me first to change that idea. It seemed to me no one could love flowers and nature as she did and be the woman she had been painted.

She had flowers always about her. Her private apartments, her Throne-rooms, her loge at the Theater, even the Great Audience Hall where she only went to transact affairs of state and hold official Audiences, all were decorated with a profusion of flowers, cut and growing—never, though, of but one kind at a time. She wears natural flowers in her coiffure always, winter and summer, and however careworn or harassed she might be, she seemed to find solace in flowers! She would hold a flower to her face, drink in its fragrance and caress it as if it were a sentient thing. She would go herself among the flowers that filled her rooms, and place, with lingering touch, some fair bloom in a better light or turn a jardinière so that the growing plant might have a more favorable position.



THE PRINCESS IMPERIAL, FIRST LADY OF THE COURT
A PRINCESS IN WINTER COSTUME A PRINCESS IN SUMMER COSTUME

PRINCESSES OF THE COURT

Some Personal Characteristics

The Chinese do not place certain cut flowers in water, but keep them dry in bowls or vases, to get their full fragrance. The Empress Dowager had some quaint conceits about the arrangements of these. She would have the corollas of the lily bloom or the fragrant jasmine placed in shallow bowls in curious, star-like designs, beautiful to look at, as well as most fragrant.

Her passion for flowers being generally known among the courtiers, Princes, and high officials, they send daily offerings to the Palace of all that is rare and choice in the way of plants and flowers, for they know this is one present Her Majesty will always accept and appreciate.

There are some quaint customs in the Palace, as to flowers and fruits that grow within the Precincts. Though the Princesses and Ladies have the freedom of the gardens and may pull as many flowers and cull as many fruits as they wish, it is not etiquette for them to gather the smallest flower or to touch a fruit when in the presence of the Empress Dowager, unless they are especially told to do so. When Her Majesty tells them to pull a flower or fruit, the permission is gratefully accepted and that special flower or fruit religiously kept. The first fruits of every tree and vegetable, the first flowers of every plant and growing shrub in the Palace grounds, are considered sacred to Their Majesties, and no Princess, attendant, or eunuch would touch a flower or fruit until the Empress Dowager had been presented with the first of them. All these, apparently trivial, marks of respect to the Sacred Persons of Their Majesties were religiously observed!