

CHAPTER V

THE YOUNG EMPRESS AND LADIES OF THE COURT

THE young Empress, the first Lady of the Court after Her Majesty the Empress Dowager, was, to me, a charming character. She is the daughter of the Duke Chow, General of one of the Manchu Banner Corps and a brother of the reigning Empress Dowager. She is thus a first cousin of the Emperor, and is his senior by three years. Her mother, a lady of high birth, ancient lineage, and great distinction, brought her up with much care. She also had the advantage of being a great deal at the Court with her august Aunt, and is highly accomplished, according to Chinese standards. She was affianced at an early age to the Emperor, but, as the custom is, their marriage did not take place for several years later. It was celebrated with great pomp at the Winter Palace in February, 1889, the week before the young Emperor himself took in hand the reins of Government, held, up to that time, by the Empress Dowager, and became Emperor in reality.

The young Empress has the erect carriage and light, swift walk of Her Majesty the Empress Dowager. She is small, not quite five feet tall, with exquisitely dainty hands and feet, of most patrician type. She

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has a narrow, high-bred face, with a thin, high nose. Her eyes are more of the Chinese type, as we conceive it, than either the Emperor's or Empress Dowager's. Her chin is long and of the type generally called strong. Her mouth is large and extremely sensitive. Her eyes have so kindly a look, her face shines with so sweet an expression, criticism is disarmed and she seems beautiful. She has a sweet dignity, charming manners, and a lovable nature, but there is sometimes a look in her eyes of patient resignation that is almost pathetic. I should not say she possessed any great executive ability, though full of tact, but while Her Majesty the Empress Dowager was in retirement and she was the first Lady at Court, she is said to have shown great capability in her conduct of affairs. Her dignity, perfect breeding, and natural kindness of heart would insure this.

The next Lady, after the young Empress, is the only secondary wife of the Emperor. She is said to have been extremely beautiful at the time she was chosen as his second wife by the Empress Dowager. She belongs to an excellent family, being the daughter of a Viceroy, but though only twenty-eight years old when I knew her, she was already very stout, and there were few remains visible of great beauty. She has very large, full-orbed, brown eyes, and still has a beautifully clear complexion, but her nose is flat, her mouth large and weak; the contour of her face is marred by layers of flesh, her forehead does not indicate much intelligence, and she has very little distinction in appearance. She seems good-natured, but is neither very clever nor tactful. She is not a favorite among the

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Ladies generally, and is not nearly so interesting, in any way, as the young Empress. She is, however, treated with the most kindly consideration by the young Empress and has precedence over all the other Ladies, and her position at Court is second only to that of the young Empress. Whenever I mention the young Empress, it may be understood that the secondary wife followed immediately after her, coming before the Princesses or any other of the Ladies forming the Court of Her Majesty. I have often seen allusions made to the "Imperial Harem"; there is no such thing as an Imperial Harem at the Court of His Majesty the Emperor Kwang-Hsu. He has only these two wives.

Her Majesty's Ladies-in-waiting are principally Princesses of the Blood or the widows of Imperial Princes. Her first Lady, Sih-Gerga (Fourth Princess), daughter of Prince Ching, the Prime Minister, is a widow of twenty-four. She married, at the age of sixteen, a son of a high Manchu official, Viceroy of Tientsin, and was left a widow a few months later. She is a beautiful young woman, with face a perfect oval, large brown eyes, and a clear, magnolia-leaf complexion of exquisite texture. She would be called beautiful, judged by any standard. She has no children of her own, but, like most ladies of position who are widows or childless, has an adopted son. Adopted children in China are much closer relationships than is a child, by adoption, with us. In many instances their own parents are still living when they are adopted, and even these parents speak of their child as the son of the adopted mother or parents, and bow to her wishes in bringing up the child.



THE YOUNG EMPRESS YE-HO-NA-LAI
First Wife of the Emperor of China

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The next two Ladies of the Court are two Duchesses —also widows. Widows in China never remarry, or if they do, they lose caste and reputation. They are not sacrificed on the funeral pyres of their departed husbands, as in India; but a voluntary suicide on the part of a widow in China is still looked upon as a noble act. A widow who remains faithful to the memory of her husband during a long life is rewarded by the greatest respect and consideration during her life, and honored after death.

If a girl prefers to remain unmarried, if a widow remains faithful to the memory of her husband, she is honored after her death with much pomp and ceremony! And great memorial arches are erected in her memory! All over China, one is constantly coming upon these arches to widows and virgins. If the family is not sufficiently wealthy to raise these monuments themselves, public subscriptions are taken, all the relatives contribute, and often the inhabitants of the village or the country where the heroine lived beg to be allowed to have their part in raising a monument to her memory. These arches, of stone or wood, are elaborately carved, sometimes with remarkable sculptures of fabulous animals, flowers, and thousands of birds of every kind (these latter showing the immortality the soul has acquired). Across the entablature of the arch, cut deep into the stone or wood, and gilded or painted in glowing vermilion, shines the name of the virgin or widow to whom it is erected, and on the sides of the arch is inscribed an account of her virtuous acts.

A girl is sometimes affianced at the early age of

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from six to eight years, and the affianced is from that time spoken of as her husband. Should he die before they marry, which is never earlier than sixteen for the bride, she is considered a "widow," and must henceforth live the life of a recluse. She can never marry any one else. She may adopt a son, who will call her "mother"; but she may never hope for the joys of family life of her own, without calling down upon her head the obloquy of all whose respect she desires. She wears deep mourning the first three years after his death, and then second mourning; and she can never again put on the festive red, joyous green, or any other color except blue or violet—second mourning.

The Northern Chinese and the Manchu ladies use a great deal of paint and powder on their faces; but a widow can never add one artificial iota to the rose of her cheek, to the cherry of her lips, or the lily of her brow. She can nevermore use paint or powder. In most instances the Chinese ladies are but the prettier for this, for they have beautiful skins, and the use of powder and paint is carried to such an excess as to be quite unnatural.

There are only eight of Her Majesty's Ladies who live always in the Palace, but this number is increased about four times on festive occasions. The Princess Imperial, the Empress Dowager's adopted daughter, is the first of the Princesses at Court, and, when she comes to the Palace, ranks next to the Empress and the secondary wife of the Emperor.

One evening, at dinner, in the Throne-room, Sih-Gerga undertook to tell me the relationships of the

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different Princesses to each other and to the young Empress. Incidentally, this made them related to the Emperor and the Empress Dowager, but neither of Their Majesties' names was mentioned in this connection, for such would have been a great piece of presumption, amounting almost to sacrilege. They might be related, but no Princess would dare mention such a thing. It would be against all the laws of Chinese proprieties. I found, after this explanation of Sih-Gerga's, that the Ladies were all related by consanguinity or marriage to each other and to the young Empress.

There are a number of tiring-women and maids in the Palace who are called by outsiders "slaves"; but they are not slaves, or, if they are so, it is but for a time, a space of ten years. Every spring, the daughters of the lowest of the Manchu families, the Seventh and Eighth Banners, are brought into the Palace to be chosen from, by the Empress and Empress Dowager, for maids and tiring-women. One day, on going to the Palace, I saw a number of ordinary carts near one of the Postern Gates, and I learned they had brought crowds of these girls of the families of the Eighth Banner. They are first passed in review by the Head Eunuch, and he selects from them, those he thinks may please Her Majesty. These pass before her, and she tells the Head Eunuch which ones are to remain in the Palace. They are brought to the Palace from the ages of ten to sixteen years. They remain in service for ten years, after which time they are allowed to return to their families; and in case they have been satisfactory and pleased Their Majesties,

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they are given a comfortable dot and are provided with a handsome marriage outfit, which causes them to make much better marriages than they would otherwise do. During their so-called ten years' slavery in the Palace, they live upon the fat of the land, have beautiful clothes and many advantages. They wear, while in Her Majesty's service, blue gowns, with their hair plainly parted at the side and braided in a single long braid (tied with red silk cords), which hangs down the back. They wear bunches of flowers over each ear. The young Empress and secondary wife, as well as each of the Princesses, have their own maids and tiring-women, who remain in the private quarters of these Ladies.

Besides these young maids, there are in the Palace a number of old women, servants of Her Majesty, who have been married and have children; these overlook the younger women, direct the work of the lower eunuchs, and are in a position somewhat similar to housekeepers with us. Among these is a Chinese woman who nursed Her Majesty through a long illness, about twenty-five years since, and saved her life by giving her mother's milk to drink. Her Majesty, who never forgets a favor, has always kept this woman in the Palace. Being a Chinese, she had bound feet. Her Majesty, who cannot bear to see them even, had her feet unbound and carefully treated, until now she can walk comfortably. Her Majesty has educated the son, who was an infant at the time of her illness, and whose natural nourishment she partook of. This young man is already a Secretary in a good yamen (Government Office).

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No Chinese lady of position ever dresses herself or combs her own hair, and she generally has three or four personal maids. These are, in many instances, bought outright from their parents, and might be considered really slaves; but they are treated with great consideration and even friendliness by their mistresses, and have in most instances a happy lot. As these maids are bought when they and their mistresses are children, they grow up together, and though the maid never forgets the respect due her mistress, they are on a much more friendly footing than mistress and maid could ever be in Europe in such cases.

The first of a lady's maids stands behind her at table, no matter how many servitors there may be; goes out with her, sits with her, and sleeps either in her room or at her door, and is almost her constant companion. When the time comes for them to marry, they are given a comfortable outfit by their mistresses, and are cared for to the third and fourth generation; but the children of the so-called slaves are free, unless the mother or parents decide, of their own free will, to sell them, as they have been sold, to some good family.