

## CHAPTER IX

### THE EMPEROR'S BIRTHDAY

**WE** went to the Palace early the day of His Majesty's Birthday, and were in the Empress Dowager's Throne-room at six o'clock in the morning; but long before that time, the outer court was filled with the red and yellow chairs and carts of the visiting members of the Imperial Family, who had come in from Peking and from the neighboring Palaces for the day. The high eunuchs were in gala costume, wearing silken gowns of great beauty, embroidered in the Double Dragon. The eunuchs of lower rank were more simply gowned, as the representation of the Double Dragon on the Court gown is only allowed to those of a certain rank. Our chair-bearers were clad in the festive red, with brocaded figures, representing the characters for Longevity.

We passed through the beautifully decorated courts, past the gaily decked Palaces to the Throne-room of Her Majesty, where the Emperor had come to receive the private congratulations of the Princesses of the blood and the Ladies of the Court. It would have been against the laws of Chinese etiquette for these Ladies to go into the Emperor's Palace to congratulate him, even on such an occasion as his Birth-

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day. When we entered the Throne-room, the Emperor was seated, or rather, reclining upon a lounge in the most informal manner. He was not averse, as was Her Majesty, to the reclining position when on the Throne. His greater Orientalism was evidenced here, for the Oriental proverb says "It is better to be sitting than standing, to be lying than sitting," etc. He sat up a little straighter on our entrance, and the Ladies made the formal Chinese bow, which he returned by a friendly nod and kindly smile. I made the European reverence as usual.

His Majesty was dressed a little more elaborately than usual, in a yellow gown, tightly belted in around his slender waist with a handsome belt-buckle of jade. At this morning salutation by the Ladies of his family, his hat lay beside him on the couch, which showed it was unceremonious, for ceremonies are carried on by the Emperor and all Chinese with their hats on. The great Imperial Pearl, one of the most precious of the Imperial jewels, formed the button of his hat on his Birthday. The seven official ranks of Mandarins are shown by the different colors of the buttons worn on their hats. The color of these buttons denotes the rank acquired by their wearers, those of the Manchu Princes, alone, being hereditary. The buttons of these latter are generally of jewels or semi-precious stones. The Emperor, the most simply dressed man I saw in China, wears, as a rule, a plain red silk button, but the Pearl, which can only be worn by a reigning Emperor, is used on state occasions.

After we had greeted His Majesty, we moved further into the Throne-room to await the "lever" of the Em-

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press Dowager. When she came out of her sleeping apartments, the Ladies fell upon their knees and simultaneously repeated the words of greeting used every morning to Her Majesty, "Lao-Tzu-Tzung Chee-Siang" (Great Ancestress, be happy). After acknowledging their salutations, she advanced and held out her hand to me, and I took it and, as was now my custom, raised the tips of her fingers to my lips. I, of course, never made any but a European salutation to either Her Majesty or the Emperor. She was very gracious and said I would be the first foreigner who had ever seen the birthday celebration of any of the Sons of Heaven, and she hoped I would enjoy it! She then commented on my dress and ornaments, examining the few jewels I wore. After this she turned to the Ladies and, with a quick glance, took in all the details of their Court costumes, calling their attention to the way their official beads hung and signaling any little deviation from traditional forms that she noticed in their attire. She was extremely rigid as to all the details of Court dress.

The Court costume of the Ladies is magnificent. That worn at the Emperor's Birthday (the summer costume) was of the stiff transparent silk I have described in the gown worn by Her Majesty for the portrait. The Court costume of the married ladies is of dark red, embroidered in golden dragons. The widows wear blue; the unmarried girls, bright red—all with the Double Dragon embroidered thereon. The married ladies and widows, when in Court attire, wear a magnificent court head-dress with jeweled crown. The young girls, even in Court dress, wear

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the ordinary Manchu coiffure, with the long red silk tassels falling to their shoulders. The young Empress was charming on the Birthday. Her head-dress was of golden filigree, thickly set with jewels. Across the front, nine beautifully chased golden phenix, with jeweled tails outspread, held in their bills strings of pearls that fell to her shoulders and veiled her forehead. Square, conventionalized bunches of flowers projected from either side of this curiously and elaborately wrought head-dress. Her gown was of the Imperial yellow, embroidered with the golden Double Dragon. She had, around her neck, a solid piece of chased gold, like a huge open ring, with balls at the ends; and she wore the official beads that are always worn in Court dress by Princes and Officials and their wives. The Emperor and Empress Dowager are the only members of the Court who wear, neither the Double Dragon on their Court dress, nor the official beads. Suspended from the Empress's neck was a magnificently embroidered stole, about four inches wide, which reached to the hem of her gown. This stole is only worn by the wives of Emperors, during their husband's lifetime. The young Empress seemed unusually happy to-day, and this was the first time I had ever seen her and the Emperor in conversation. Next to the young Empress came the only secondary wife of the Emperor. She was dressed exactly as the young Empress was; the same gown, the same head-dress, the same embroidered stole, only her jewels were not so handsome, and her dress, instead of being of the Imperial yellow, was of orange. Yellow can only be worn by the first wife of an Emperor!

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After the salutations to the Emperor and Empress Dowager in Her Majesty's private Throne-room, Her Majesty went out into the court and took her place in her yellow chair of State, the Emperor following, on foot, as was his custom. The cymbals clashed. The flutes sounded and all the instruments of the Imperial Band played the curious minor air, with its tragic undertone of sound, its rhythm like a Gregorian chant, which is only played at the passing of Their Majesties for some great ceremony or official function; and which I soon called the "Imperial Hymn." This is the only approach to a National air that I ever heard in China.

Their Majesties went in ceremonious procession to the Great Audience Hall, where the Princes, Nobles, and high Officials privileged to enter Precincts, were to present their homage and congratulations to the Son of Heaven on the happy occasion of his Birthday. Besides these privileged visitors, there were a number of officials whose rank was not high enough to allow them to enter the Great Hall of Ceremonies. These kneel and make the prostrations in the outer courts.

The young Empress and Ladies of the Court did not follow Their Majesties to the Great Hall, but stopped at the Palace of the young Empress, to await there their turn for the official congratulations, which were not to be made until after those of the Princes and Nobles. The young Empress is a charming hostess, and her eunuchs and women handed us tea and cigarettes while we were waiting. She also had her dogs brought in for me to see. Her apartments

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opened on a sunny court, full of flowering shrubs and fruit trees. Around the other three sides of the court were built the pavilions for the use of her attendants and ladies. We spent half an hour in her pavilion, waiting for the congratulations of the Princes and Nobles to be finished:

The Emperor, for these official congratulations, was seated upon the Dynastic Throne, erect and stiff as an archaic figure; no longer the shy boy, but the Monarch clothed in all his power, and, for to-day, alone upon his great ancestral Throne. He was attended by his Master of Ceremonies, gorgeously attired, who stood in the rigid attitude prescribed for this ceremony.

Each splendidly garbed Prince and Noble knelt and made the prostration prescribed by the Book of Rites, and each presented His Majesty with a jade emblem, called by the Chinese "ruyie,"<sup>1</sup> erroneously supposed to be a scepter by most foreigners; but the "ruyie" is simply an emblem of Good Luck, and may be presented on festive occasions to any one whom the givers wish to honor, and is not an emblem of Imperial authority. The Emperor held each of these "ruyie" in his hands for a few seconds after their presentation, bowed profoundly to the kneeling Prince, and then handed the emblem to an attendant eunuch, who placed it on a Dragon table at the left of the Emperor. When the Princes and Nobles had congratulated His Majesty and left the Throne-room, the young Empress and secondary wife, followed by the Princesses and Ladies, went in to make their official congratulations. The greeting in Her Majesty's

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Throne-room in the morning had been but a friendly salutation, without any official signification. The young Empress knelt and made her bow first and presented—as did each of the Ladies—a “ruyie.” She made the same official salutation as did the others, but her “ruyie” was of a much richer style than those presented by the other Ladies.

After the ceremony of formal congratulations was over, Her Majesty, the Emperor, and Empress, followed by the Ladies and attendants, went in state to the Theater, with the same ceremonial and pomp with which they had gone into the Hall of Ceremonies. The Empress Dowager, who was always the most gorgeously attired person at Court, was, on His Majesty's Birthday, dressed with an extreme simplicity that amounted almost to plainness, and she wore no jewels. This plainness of attire was not an accident, but had been arranged with her usual forethought. She wished the Emperor and Empress to be the central figures of this day's festivities, and did not wish to vie with the Empress even in her attire.

The Princes and Nobles, who had come to the Palace for the official congratulations, were invited to the theatrical performance. They occupied the boxes that ran at right angles to the Imperial loge, which I have already described as forming the other two sides of the court of the Theater. A huge screen of painted silk, twelve feet high, was stretched from the last of the boxes occupied by the Princes to the stage—allowing the latter to be perfectly seen by the occupants of the boxes, but cutting off their view of the Imperial loge, whence Their Majesties, the Empress,

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and Ladies viewed the play. These invited guests are thus neither seen by the Imperial party, nor can they see the latter.

When Their Majesties and the Empress were seated in their loge, the principal actors came to the front of the stage, knelt, and "kow-towed" to the Imperial box. Then the play began. There was first a noisy burst of weird music, then the chief actor recited a laudatory, congratulatory poem in honor of the Birthday of the Emperor, wishing His Majesty "ten thousand years" of happiness and all the blessings possible. The poem was intoned like a chant by the actor, dressed in the gorgeous historic costume of an Imperial Herald of the time of Kublai Kahn. This poem was most impressive. One of the verses ran thus:

"The vast merits of His Imperial Majesty's August Ancestors have been handed down to Him from generation to generation.

"To the wisdom of His whole Dynasty we owe it, that we have lived in happiness,

"Ever ready to comply with the lofty teaching of our Rulers, leading us unto Good. . . ."

The poem went on to recite His Majesty's merits as a son, his respect for his August Mother, his filial piety, and ended with a wish that Great China might flourish and prosper—grow strong outwardly and inwardly, through the blessings of his reign and his desire for Progress.

After this poem had been intoned by the chief actor, with the whole company of players grouped around on the lower, as well as on the two superposed



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stages, all in splendid historic costumes, there was another noisy clash of weird music and the play itself began. The Chinese theater, which goes on from morning to night with a series of plays, generally begins with a short one, a curtain-raiser of a quarter to half an hour's length. To-day it began at once, after the poem was intoned, with a great historic drama. The exploits and high deeds of former Emperors were shown, and the actors were magnificently costumed in superb historic gowns which had been handed down from antiquity and were absolutely authentic.

At half-past eleven, with the Theater still in full swing, the eunuchs brought out tables of sweetmeats on the verandah of the Imperial loge, and set them before the young Empress and the Princesses and Ladies, and we were served to refreshments. Snacks and fruits in China are served between the regular meals. The sweetmeats to-day were "birthday food," and were all inscribed with some character meaning "Longevity," "Good Luck," "Happiness," "Peace," etc. There were pyramids of the delicious crystallized fruits which the Chinese excel in making; macédoines of queer fruits, nut pastes, almond creams, and all the fresh fruits in season. With this preliminary repast were served, also, some delicious Chinese wines.

Soon after the repast of sweetmeats was finished, we were served in the court of the Theater this time to the regular meal. It was an immense table to which we sat down on the Emperor's Birthday. There were so many Princesses, Duchesses, and Ladies of high degree from a distance, that our usual number

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was more than quadrupled. The repast was a joyous one. The Chinese are very witty and gay, and though I could not understand all the scintillations of wit, their gaiety was contagious! Each gave me special delicacies that she liked, to try, and each seemed to vie with the other in endeavoring to make the "stranger" feel at ease. Some of the Ladies drank champagne in my honor, and held up their glasses toward me as they had seen the foreigners do. When the elders had finished eating, the young people sat down. These were the children of the Princesses and Nobles who had been invited to join their parents for these festivities at the Palace. No girl or boy under sixteen is allowed to sit down with their elders to a ceremonious dinner at the Palace.

Soon after we had finished our gay luncheon in the court of the Theater the Ladies retired within their loge, next to that of Their Majesties, and the screen which hid the visiting Princes and Nobles from the Imperial party was removed by the attendant eunuchs. When it was taken away, there sat, Turkish fashion, the great Princes and high Nobles in their splendid Court dress. Those of the highest ranks occupied the boxes nearest the Imperial party. The Princesses pointed out to me, from their box, their brothers and kinsmen and others whom they recognized; but we saw without being seen, and were only looking from behind the scenes.

The eunuchs then handed around refreshments to the Princes and gentlemen, sweetmeats and fruits, such as we had partaken of before our luncheon. Then there were some huge steaming silver caldrons

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brought into the court, and from these caldrons the eunuchs ladled into bowls some sort of white drink. As we had had nothing of this kind at our repast, I was curious to know what it might be. I knew it could not be wine, for that is served only in tiny cups, and this was served in the ordinary-sized eating-bowls. I was much surprised to learn that this drink was simply hot milk, flavored with almonds, and slightly sweetened, a drink of which the Manchus are very fond, and which is a special mark of Imperial favor, given only on great occasions. The gentlemen raised their bowls to their lips with both hands and drank it off with great ceremony, as if it were a sacred beverage, and seemed, in drinking it thus, to pledge the Emperor's Health and Happiness.

After the Princes had partaken of these refreshments, and while some eunuchs were removing the caldrons and dishes, another army of eunuchs came in, in pairs, each pair carrying between them trays of Imperial yellow, decorated with the red characters for Longevity. These trays contained presents from the Emperor to each of the invited guests, for His Majesty gives as well as receives presents on his Birthday! There was no difference made in the presents given, each tray being the exact counterpart of every other. Each contained a pair of porcelain vases from the Imperial Potteries, a bronze Incense-burner, a scroll with a quotation from the classics or an aphorism of Confucius written thereon. The scrolls were inclosed in silken covers, tied with the Imperial colors. There was also a jade "ruyie" in each tray, such as had been handed the Emperor at the morning cere-

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mony, and an Archer's ring. After the contents of the trays had been delivered to each gentleman present, and the empty trays borne away by the Palace eunuchs, the dividing screen was again placed between the visiting Princes and Their Majesties, and the young Empress and Ladies went out of their loge to the verandah once more, and the theatrical performance again went on. In fact, it had been going on throughout our luncheon and the subsequent entertainment of the Princes, but we had paid no attention to it.

At four o'clock there was the grand "finale." The three superposed stages were occupied by all the gorgeously attired actors, and another Hymn of praise to the Emperor was intoned. He was extolled as the Son of Heaven and representative on earth of Buddha, and other extravagant wishes for "ten thousand years" of happiness were made. When this Hymn was finished, the floats, which we had seen the day before behind the scenes, came out in procession. These floats represented mythical animals, Buddhas, fairies, and personifications of the higher attributes. There were gigantic fruits which opened, disclosing figures representing eternal beauty, perfect happiness, and serene old age. Prominent among the gigantic fruits was the peach, the emblem of Longevity. Last of all, in this curious procession, came the Imperial Dragon, of huge proportions. Its contortions, as it struggled for the Flaming Pearl, emblematic of the unattainable, were most curious. All these figures made their obeisances to Their Majesties and the Empress. They were accompanied by splendidly clothed

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warriors, heralds, princes, and many gorgeously attired attendants, bearing banners and escutcheons. After the procession had made the tour several times, the dragon stopped with his huge head in the middle of the stage, made an obeisance to His Majesty, then raised it with a mighty roar and spouted forth—a copious shower of fresh spring water, which sprinkled the whole flower-filled court! The Empress and Princesses were all in the secret and knew what was coming, but they kept it from me, and much enjoyed my start of surprise as some of the spray fell upon me, as I had advanced to the very edge of the verandah in order to miss nothing.

When all was finished, the screen was again removed and the great glass doors of the Imperial loge were thrown open, so that Her Majesty and the Emperor could be seen. The visiting Princes and Nobles came forward from their places and knelt in a body, though still observing the laws of precedence as to their ranks. They knelt three times, and bowed their heads to the ground nine times to thank Their Majesties for the entertainment they had received. To receive these prostrations from the Princes, the Emperor and Empress Dowager assumed their Buddha-like poses and acknowledged the genuflexions by a formal inclination of their heads. When the Princes had retired, the actors, clothed in their usual garments, came to the front of the stage and knelt and “kow-towed,” but Their Majesties did not return this salutation.

When the Princes and players had left and the Imperial party was alone, cushions were brought into

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the middle of the court, the Emperor and Empress and secondary wife knelt thereon, while their "Great Ancestress," the Empress Dowager, preceded by acolytes, swinging golden incense-burners which gave forth azure clouds of perfumed smoke, came down the steps to the weird accompaniment of the flutes and cymbals playing the "Imperial Hymn." The Emperor and Empress knelt to do Her Majesty homage, as the greatest living member of their Ancestors. When she reached them, they arose and followed her, and the three moved along in stately procession to the slow beating of the cymbals, followed by the Princesses and Ladies and all the attendant eunuchs. The subtle perfume of the incense, the stately rhythm, the splendid costumes, the flashing jewels and brilliant colors, made a magnificent picture never to be forgotten. The Imperial procession moved through several sunlit courts until it finally came to the entrance of the Sacred Hall, containing the Ancestral tablets; here the Empress Dowager stopped at the threshold until His Majesty and the young Empress had passed within, to complete the ceremonies of the day by worshipping and kneeling together before the tablets of their Ancestors. The music ceased. The ceremony was finished. His Majesty the Emperor Kwang-Hsu had accomplished another year.

<sup>1</sup> Generally written "jul," but pronounced as I have written it.