

"MY LADY OF THE CHINESE COURT-  
YARD"

It is like inhaling a long-deferred breath of clean fresh air to turn from the above book to the dainty, delicate artistry of a series of letters purporting to come from the wife of a high official of the Flowery Kingdom, *My Lady of the Chinese Courtyard*, by Elizabeth Cooper. By no outward sign is the fact indicated that these letters are fictitious. Perhaps in the ultimate sense of the word they are not really fiction. Through long years of residence in China, and exceptional opportunities for penetration into Chinese courtyards, — in other words, glimpses behind the veil of Chinese domestic life, the author has saturated herself with the point of view of the high-caste Chinese woman; and these letters mirror it back to us with a fidelity forever beyond the reach of even a moving-picture camera. The volume is divided into two parts, presenting two contrasting pictures and separated by nearly a quarter of a century. In the first part little Kwei-Li is a bride of only a few weeks. She is still rebelling against the novel restraints of her new life; she resents the despotic rule of her conservative old mother-in-law; she writhes under the daily infliction of long precepts quoted from Confucius. To crown all, her husband, in the very height of their first wedded happiness, is called upon as attaché to the Imperial Court to accompany certain Chinese dignitaries on a diplomatic voyage around the world. So little, lonely, heart-broken Kwei-Li pours out her very soul in this series of letters, wonderful in their descriptive power, compelling in their tenderness and pathos, illuminating in the light they shed upon a side of intimate Chinese life which to the Occident has been a closed book. The first half of the volume is tragic. Little Kwei-Li bears a son; she is radiant with her new-found joy, and almost simultaneously with the arrival of a letter announcing the husband's early return, Kwei-Li's son is taken from her. The bereaved little

mother hovers on the brink of insanity; and the incident which saves her, while it might appeal to a certain type of sentimental bigots, would have been a sad artistic blunder if it constituted a closing chapter. Chance throws in her way a shabby, dog-eared Chinese version of the Gospel of St. John, and in reading those marvellous and inimitable pages, the promise of them sinks into her stricken heart and she finds comfort.

But Kwei-Li is essentially and incurably an Oriental, a daughter of the Moon, a descendant of Mandarins. No Western religion, no imported doctrines of the new freedom for women, can ever sink their roots deeply into her nature.

In middle age we meet her again, the same Kwei-Li and yet curiously changed. In youth she was a radical according to Chinese standards; but radicalism in China outstripped her in the race with years; and in middle age we find her almost a counterpart of her husband's mother, scandalised at the changes she sees going on about her and firm in her conviction that the happiness of the Chinese wife depends upon the "safe shelter of the Chinese courtyard." This book may be safely commended to all readers capable of appreciating a most unusually sympathetic and penetrating interpretation of an alien race.