The British ambassador, who was presented by the president of the Board of Rites, was most graciously received, although he did not pay that homage to which the great autocrat was accustomed, but merely bent one knee in presenting his credentials. Some compliments were exchanged, and several presents also; for the etiquette of the court of China requires that every envoy who approaches the throne shall be provided with a suitable offering, for which he usually receives a gift in return; but it should be observed, that the former is accepted as a humble tribute due from an inferior, while the latter is conferred as a mark of extreme condescension. When the ceremonies were ended, a sumptuous breakfast was served up in the tent in the Chinese fashion; and while all present partook of the repast, a band of music played on the lawn, where tumblers and rope-dancers exhibited various feats of agility, and a play was performed on a raised stage.

It is somewhat singular, that a people so fond of theatricals as the Chinese are and have been for many ages should have no regular theatres, nor any actors of celebrity; but in this, as in all other respects, their taste and genius are stationary. They have no scenery, but very fine dresses; and as no women are allowed to appear on the stage, the female characters are always performed by boys.

At Zhehol, the ladies of the court had a theatre for their own especial amusement, where plays were acted every day, and were sometimes attended by the Emperor and his ministers, but more frequently by the ladies only, who, having but little occupation, naturally fly to any frivolous pursuit that may help to beguile the time. One of their greatest enjoyments was to form parties of pleasure on the canal, for which purpose there were yachts always in readiness, fitted up in the most elegant manner, but so contrived that the fair occupants were entirely screened from observation.

There was no Empress at the period, for the princess who had enjoyed that dignity was dead, and Kien-long had not thought proper to raise another to the throne. The laws of China admit of only one lawful wife; but the Tartar sovereigns do not restrict themselves to this rule, although they generally give to one a rank above the rest, and she alone is called Empress, while the others have the title of queen. There were eight queens at this time, two of the first and six of the second rank; and these had each a certain number of ladies in her train, making altogether upwards of one hundred females belonging to the court. As long as the Emperor lives they probably lead pleasant lives, but their subsequent lot is not very enviable; as they are then removed to a building near the palace which may be termed a nunnery, since they are obliged by the customs of the country, to pass the remainder of their lives within its walls, in utter seclusion.

The English visitors staid a week at Zhehol, and were present at the anniversary of the Emperor’s birthday, which is a holiday throughout the empire. The ceremonies of the court consisted principally in the grand Birthday Ode, sung in chorus by voices innumerable, accompanied by deep-toned bells and solemn music. The Emperor was present, but not visible, being seated behind a screen in a large hall, where all the courtiers were assembled in their state-dresses to pay the customary homage, which was done by falling prostrate at the conclusion of every stanza of the Ode, which has been thus translated, “Bow down your heads, all ye dwellers on the earth; bow down your heads before the great Kien-long!” an exhortation that was literally obeyed.

The two or three days that succeed the birthday are entirely devoted to festivities, in which all classes participate; the rich in visiting or receiving their friends with feasting, the poor in such enjoyments as their station enables them to obtain.