

THE LATE YUAN SHIH-K'AI

*By Gilbert Reid, D.D., Director-in-Chief of the
International Institute of China, Shanghai*

If a clergyman is called upon to perform a funeral service, it is generally regarded as not being in good form to seize the occasion for berating the deceased. Polite society in the West invariably speaks of a man's good points, when Destiny has once ended his earthly activities. Polite Westerners are eager enough to disparage a man while he is living, but are chivalrous enough to condone one's mistakes and exalt one's virtues, when he has passed to the Beyond, out of all hearing. There is a vice that craves nourishment in scandal and misrepresentation, and there is a charity, born from above, which is prompt to cover a multitude of sins. No higher courtesy and larger charity have ever been illustrated by a nation's leaders, than in the British Parliament, when on the decrease of a member of the government or a member of the House, the leader of the opposition arises from his seat to pay a tribute—a Gladstone mourning an Earl of Beaconsfield.

Every public man is apt to be misunderstood and misjudged, certainly from those who are opponents. Correct judgment, a fair-minded and charitable criticism of any strong man, who has enemies as well as friends, must await the passage of the years, and sometimes it comes not at all.

The late President of China, Yuan Shih-k'ai, has established a reputation among all nations. Like Li Hung-chang, he is one Chinese who has become a familiar name and a real personality to all in the world whose thoughts turn to China. And yet his death is a sad one. On his last days the shadows rested. He knew that he had not reached the mountain-top of a nation's affection. He was conscious that he had foes, who misread his every deed, and though he had the courage to meet the strife,

he could not escape the depression which the irrevocable placed before him. One thing he did not know, and it is to be hoped he does not know it now, and that is how few are the words of appreciation, which his own countrymen have chivalrously uttered, now that he has gone, and can grant them no more favors nor determine their future prospects.

For several years I have been drawn to other religious faiths, merely through the process of speaking of their good points alone. I fancy most of us would soon feel the thrill of admiration for Yuan Shih-k'ai, if we could only take time to follow the same process. I am pleased to offer a mere iota of eulogium, all the more pleased to do so, now that I have nothing to ask or he to give.

Before remarking on his public career, his motives, and his character, it is a pleasant duty to record his friendly acts to the International Institute and to me personally. With an acquaintance begun over twenty years ago, there have been many marks of his personal favor. At the Centenary Missionary Conference, he, while acting as Viceroy of the metropolitan province, designated a special deputy to speak at a reception which the Institute gave to the missionaries and guests from afar. During the closing days of the Manchu House, when I visited Peking to advise the princes to consent to abdication, Premier Yuan assured me of his appreciation of my mediating efforts. When in 1914 I was in Peking to secure presidential approval of an international museum, it was President Yuan whose known countenance of my plans made them a success, resulting in a rescript granting taels 35,000 (about \$20,000). He also accorded me an audience. At the twentieth anniversary of the International Institute, the President appointed a delegate to represent him to express his good wishes. Most of the documents and memorials which I have prepared on public questions have been submitted to him, and more than once has he let me know that he appreciated my independent, but sympathetic criticisms.

His first responsible position was as Chinese resident

at Seoul. He performed his part well in standing up for the rights of China in Korea, as opposed to the new claims and all the pretexts of Japan, which ended in war. Nearly all the foreign residents in China, looking at the issue from an impartial standpoint, regarded Japan's entrance into war as without reason. As the result proved disastrous to China, so Japan's dislike of Yuan Shih-k'ai, born in that war, has been a heavy weight to him all these years.

The next stage in the events of his life was during his return to China after the negotiations for peace. It was then that I first met him. The circumstances were interesting. It was the summer of 1895. For the second time I gave a dinner to the younger men in official circles in Peking, with a view of organizing a movement for reform. The Chinese guests were invited to meet Rev. Dr. Timothy Richard, whose mind also dwelt on reform. Among them was Yuan Shih-k'ai. The questions asked Dr. Richard by young Mr. Yuan showed him the most keen and practical of all those who were present. An immediate result of these gatherings was the formation of the Reform Club of Peking, to whose support Mr. Yuan had won the strong viceroys, Chang Chih-tung and Liu K'un-yi. Yuan Shih-k'ai, in days of great conservatism, was a reformer.

The third stage was when through the mediation of Jung Luh he was designated to raise up a model army, according to Western methods. The drilling-centre was at Shao-chan. Yuan Shih-k'ai achieved more than had been expected.

The fourth stage was in 1898, when the Emperor Kuanghsü rushed through his reforms. We do not know the exact part played by Yuan Shih-k'ai in bringing the Empress Dowager back to power, and in making the young Emperor a prisoner. It would be generous for us to conclude that he thought the Emperor, while sincere, was acting rashly, and that his threatened restraint of the Empress Dowager, while helpful to himself, would be disastrous to the country. If Yuan was the betrayer which his enemies declare, how is it that Liang Chi-chi'ao ever consented to hold office under him?

The fifth stage was when, in 1899, as the Boxer movement arose like a flood in Shantung, Yuan Shih-k'ai was appointed Governor of that province. He succeeded in protecting the missions and missionaries, in holding in check the Boxers, and in resisting the orders of the Throne to join in exterminating or expelling all foreigners.

The sixth stage was when the Court, which had fled to Hsi-an fu, was emboldened to return under promised protection of Jung Luh and Yuan Shih-k'ai. Henceforth Yuan Shih-k'ai was the strong man of the north as Liu K'un-yi and Chang Chih-tung had been the strong men along the Yangtze.

The seventh stage was when he became Viceroy of Chih-li province, and started schemes for reform, as a model to other provinces. He was able to induce the Empress Dowager to adopt many of the same reforms, which in a more precipitate manner had been undertaken by the Emperor.

The eighth stage was as Minister of State in Peking until the death of the Empress Dowager and Emperor, and his retirement under orders from the Emperor's brother, the Prince Regent, Prince Ch'un. During these years he and Chang Chih-tung stood at the head of the reform movement and of the demands for constitutionalism.

The ninth stage was during the period of retirement. So far as we know, he avoided all plots against the government, and retained a sincere interest in the nation's welfare.

The tenth stage was when in the revolution of 1911 he heeded the entreaties of the Imperial Government, Chinese and Manchu alike, and assumed the autocratic control of the Empire, while in name he was only Premier. It is only fair to believe that he sincerely believed in the retention of the Boy-Emperor, and was willing to act the part of Premier, if so desired. His generous treatment of the Imperial family and the Manchu people leads one to this generous judgment.

The eleventh stage is the last one, since the Ch'ing House abdicated, and a republic was inaugurated, with Yuan Shih-k'ai as President. These four years and more have been full of strenuous, unflagging, and courageous

endeavor to strengthen the foundations of the State, to usher in prosperity, to execute reforms, thought of through many years, and to ward off dangerous encroachments from without. The check he placed on Parliament, whose members too often seemed indifferent to the highest public interests or to their own good name, his suppression of the second revolution, and the increased concentration of power in the Central Government under his own leadership, were all acts characteristic of a strong mind working for the country's good as well as of one selfishly ambitious and untrue to the nation. Had he not been President, the twenty-one demands of Japan, to say nothing of Japan's military transgressions in Shantung, would certainly have brought on war, with the greater downfall of the State. His self-restraint, his freedom from passion, his patience and good-nature, his circumspection and far-sightedness, saved the nation. If, too, there had been provincialism rather than centralization, the State would have crumbled under the hammerings from without.

President Yuan suffered the most from the monarchical movement. One or two things are clear. At the time, only a few months ago, the pendulum had swung from a loose kind of democracy to some kind of monarchism. As a matter of fact, a form of state is not vital to national existence. As we read the events, even this near, the President thought it wise, characteristic of free institutions, to have the question of form of State thrashed out once for all. His first suggestion was that he stand aside, while the people, or the mouth-pieces of the people, expressed their preferences. In going thus far, I for one am not inclined to condemn. What happened afterwards, all the secret telegrams and hidden pressure, did not happen, I am ready to believe, with his connivance or knowledge. In the misdeeds of his friends, who cast liberty to the winds, and grasped at glory, he has been made to suffer, while they go unscathed.

President Yuan was a man of strong determination, unflinching courage, unusual practicality, wide experience, developed adaptability, unbounded cheerfulness and buoy-

ancy, and one who sought the welfare of his country. We regret that his last days were not the brightest. We trust that the time will come, when his meritorious services will be appraised at their true worth, and in a generous, dispassionate spirit.

We look for peace in the land, and pray for wisdom to the new President, but we are glad to stop for a moment to place a wreath of honor and affection before the tablet to his memory.