

CHAPTER TWELVE

HIS FALLEN MAJESTY (JUNE 6, 1916)

THE night is windless and tepid, with the crescent of a new moon so unreally thin it seems only a crack in the dusky dome of heaven.

The city does not sleep, it waits in uncertainty. Police patrols go along the streets, detachments of dismounted cavalry are discreetly placed where they attract least attention, and a strong watch is set in all the government buildings over which the five-colored flag hangs at half-mast.

The foreign quarter with the legations is, at the suggestion of the Japanese commander, declared to be in a state of siege. The Austrians have built barricades of sandbags, which have since been removed. The English minister has given his instructions, "business as usual", while his French colleague has ordered the women and children of the French colonies into the Legation Quarter.

In my little courtyard the servants are busy strengthening the gate in case the soldiers should get out of control, and the house at the back is occupied by an anxious Chinese couple, who, leaving two small children sleeping in their own house, have come here to be under the shelter of the blue and yellow flag.

Well-to-do Chinese families by the hundred have gone off by railroad to Tientsin during the day, and those who remain are cautiously preparing for whatever may come. What the poor people feel and think

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is harder to guess, but the atmosphere is very tense since the hated moratorium has made the government banknotes invalid and in consequence the supply of necessities of life has almost run out.

The increasing tenseness of the last months and weeks has now led to an explosion through an occurrence, the news of which is being spread to the farthest corner of China. The central person in the crisis which is now shaking the realm has reached what is perhaps the only reasonable solution of an untenable situation. Yuan Shih Kai, dictator, president-emperor, about whom popular opinion has raged with ever-augmenting fury, broken down by the terrific physical and mental strain which laid him on a sick bed a couple of weeks ago, died to-day at half-past ten o'clock.

It is a momentous career for the fate of China which has thus reached its end.

Born in 1859 of a middle-class family in the province of Honan, Yuan passed through military training to the rank of officer, till in 1882 he entered public life as commander of a body of troops sent to Seoul, the capital of Korea, to look after the interests of China. This command marked the beginning of a changeful and embittered fight, both open and secret, between the influence of China and Japan in Korea. From 1885 on Yuan Shih Kai, as imperial minister in Seoul, took the central position on the Chinese side of the struggle, which continued till 1894 when Korea was lost to China through the Japanese appeal to arms. Yuan's enemies are eager

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to ascribe to him a large share of responsibility for this misfortune, and unquestionably it took him several years before, in 1896, he was restored to favor as reorganizer of the troops at Tientsin.

Two years later Yuan first played the rôle of balance weight which on a future occasion was to raise him to the highest office of the realm. The emperor Kuang Hsu, who was friendly to reform, wished to free himself decisively from the influence of the ever-powerful empress dowager and for that purpose ordered Yuan to march with his troops to Peking. But Yuan communicated the emperor's purpose to the party of the empress dowager and thereby gave rise to a counterblow which made Kuang Hsu a prisoner for life in the island palace at Peking. The unfortunate emperor never had a chance to vent his hate against the, from his standpoint, disastrous treachery of his subordinate, but after the death of both Kuang Hsu and the empress dowager, Yuan was dismissed to his home in disgrace by the prince regent, the brother of the late emperor.

After this dismissal he was recalled in October, 1911, by the Manchu court, which was threatened by revolution, and he made his entrance into Peking with a display of military pomp which marked him as master of the situation. He now used with striking success the tactics of balance in which he was a past master, and when the Manchu power collapsed and the new situation began to clear, he was at the helm of the republic. It was in the midst of great internal difficulties that he took the lead of the new

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era, but on the other hand he met with warm sympathy and high expectations, not least on the part of the foreign powers, who in the spring of 1913 placed a reorganization loan of twenty-five million pounds sterling at his disposal.

Beginning with a disintegrating realm, a collection of self-governing provinces most unwilling to subject themselves to a central government, Yuan Shih Kai quickly succeeded in getting the power into his hands, after a premature attempt at parliamentarism had been rather summarily crushed. The patriarchal autocracy which the strong man of China exercised in the days of his prosperity may in many respects be likened to Gustaf Vasa's method of governing, with its minute penetration into all the details of administration, in which the ministers functioned as mere instruments of the president.¹ With titan strength Yuan Shih Kai shouldered the mighty burden, and the results now in evidence at the time of his decease are unquestionably significant, even if it must be granted that most of the great demands for reform are still unsatisfied and that the transformation thus far has not been wholly for the better, in

¹ An amusing little example of Yuan Shih Kai's personal supervision in even the smallest affairs may here be given.

In March, 1916, when the question came up as to my withdrawal as head of the Swedish Geological Research and my permanent installation in the Chinese service, there was some difficulty at the last moment in getting the contract signed. After various "ifs" and "buts" I was informed that the Chinese text of the contract had been referred by the Minister of Agriculture to Yuan for his approval. The emperor, as he was then entitled, had put a scrawl at one place in the margin and the minister found it hard to determine what this annotation signified.

Meanwhile Yuan had other troubles to deal with, as will soon be shown, and my contract was signed without further annoyance to the great man.

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that much of worth in the old has been swept away and some features of the new are not of the best quality.

During the years 1914-1915 it seemed as if, in spite of external difficulties, Yuan Shih Kai had led his realm toward better times. When the war broke out in Europe, August, 1914, there was no lack of gloomy prophets in Peking, who predicted that China, lacking the financial support of the foreign powers, would soon collapse in economic misery. These prophecies were wholly unfulfilled. The Chinese Government in every respect made good its economic obligations and in general won approval for the tact with which the country's neutrality was sustained, in spite of ugly-looking complications and the lack of effective military munitions.

In January, 1915, the Japanese Government demanded in extremely curt fashion the unconditional assent to a great number of concessions which would have practically made China into a dependency of Japan. This idea of using the isolated and defenceless position of China during the European war to make a sudden and profitable *coup* was unsuccessful, thanks to the pertinacious skill of the Chinese policy. China made the Japanese certain valuable concessions but escaped the threatened crisis with her integrity preserved. Yuan Shih Kai, who had been all the while the robust central figure of the passive resistance, now enjoyed a popularity and a national following such as never before.

The events which came afterwards and which led

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the way to Yuan's tragic end are too near in time to judge fairly, even in the opinion of the Chinese. Under these circumstances a foreigner must content himself with relating the course of events and presenting certain surmises as to the, as yet, partly obscure causes behind them.

There is, for instance, an open question as to how far the monarchistic movement can be traced back to any secret initiative on the part of Yuan, or whether he only proceeded more or less willingly with the proposal made him by the monarchists.¹ It is a fact that as early as late summer of the previous year a movement was in full swing over the whole of China with the purpose of restoring the empire, with Yuan as the founder of a new, wholly Chinese dynasty. The sporadic efforts of constitutionalists to stamp this propaganda as revolutionary were repressed, and there was a more and more open use of governmental organs in the service of monarchism. After a skillfully staged plebiscite had unanimously declared for the return of the empire, the throne was offered to Yuan Shih Kai, who after first declining submitted on the second occasion to "the will of the people." It is, as previously noted,

¹ A story is told of initiation of the monarchistic movement which has in it something of tragic greatness. Yuan is said to have been informed by a soothsayer that the year 1916 would be very momentous for him, involving peril to his life. The monarchists who surrounded him made this prophecy a pretext to remove his doubt as to the debated question of his elevation to the throne. They said to Yuan that he as president was a common mortal who might be the victim of a prophecy, but if he became emperor, he would stand high above fate and be able calmly to ignore soothsayers.

The prophecy thus became the occasion of his fall and death in 1916.

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impossible to give any decisive opinion on the motive of Yuan's conduct, but it seems likely that, along with his personal ambition, he was led by truly patriotic considerations, primarily the desire to assure his succession and get away from the disastrous contests involved in presidential elections. It is fairly certain that Yuan, isolated in his palace, was so blinded as really to believe in the "will of the people" manipulated by the monarchists.

On December 10, 1915, the spectacularly arranged voting took place in Peking, when the Manchu prince of the blood Pu-lun enthusiastically called upon all to rally around the new emperor. But even at the time of this effective display the wings of the political stage had begun to loosen at the hinges.

The Chief of the Bureau of Economic Cartography, General Tsai Ao, one of the most energetic of the younger officials, had vanished from Peking¹ under

¹ Tsai Ao had shown himself such an able general that Yuan feared him and therefore invited him to Peking in order the better to control his actions.

Tsai Ao allowed himself to be enticed by the glittering representations which Yuan made to him, but in Peking he found himself almost a prisoner with very limited power of action. As the monarchistic movement progressed, the control over Tsai grew more strict, and at last he was followed night and day by two political agents, who had orders to take extreme measures if he should attempt to escape.

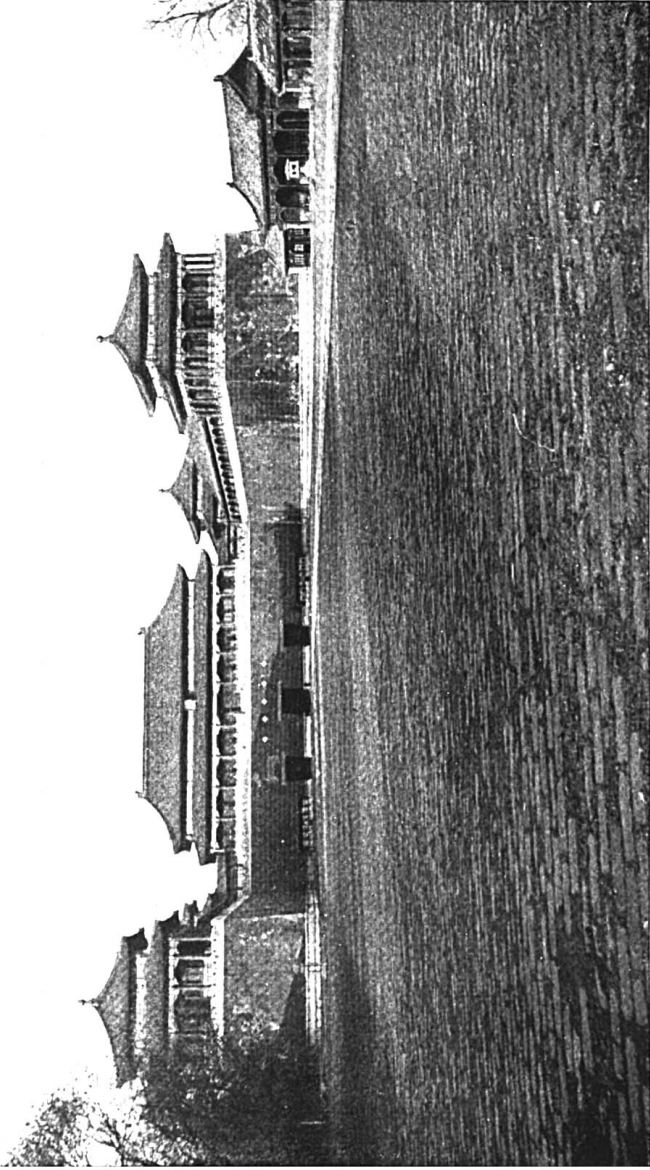
Tsai now outwitted Yuan and his agents. One day he had a great set-to with his wife and, apparently in great anger, sent her and the children to Tientsin, where in the foreign concession they were in comparative security. Tsai's next step was with his two compulsory followers to begin frequenting low resorts, in particular striking up an acquaintance with a little courtesan named Hsiao Feng Hsien. After long preliminaries the girl one evening invited Tsai into her bedroom, while the detectives slept in the young lady's hall without suspecting that Tsai had vanished by a back way and was already in safety on a Japanese steamer at Tientsin. ¶

Several years later, when Tsai had died and his memory was celebrated at Central Park in Peking with a great popular feast, Hsiao Feng Hsien was hailed as a heroine for assisting the revered national hero to escape Yuan's agents.

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romantic circumstances, to appear again in the province of Yunnan far down in the southwest, where he had previously been governor and had therefore far-reaching ties. In combination with the leading men of the province he now declared Yunnan independent and proclaimed a general rising against Yuan Shih Kai, who had betrayed the constitution of the republic. The central government hastened to assemble troops against Yunnan, and it seemed at the start as though the rising might be suppressed without much difficulty. But in the middle of January the neighboring province of Kueichou followed the example of Yunnan and the two insurrectionary provinces won notable successes with numerically inferior forces.

When then, in the middle of March, Kuangsi joined the "disturbed" provinces and signs of unrest showed themselves in other quarters, the ruling clique in Peking gave way, and Yuan Shih Kai abdicated, March 21, from the dignity of emperor and reassumed the title of president. This gesture was thought at the start to be a relief to the situation, but the insurgent provinces stood firm in their demand for Yuan's departure. An attempt to appease the south by the formation of a responsible ministry proved to be ineffectual. Kuangtung, Chekiang and Szechuan, one after the other, declared themselves unsatisfied; signs of unrest appeared also in the northern provinces; and the government troops in Szechuan, through the clever strategy of Tsai Ao, got into a very critical situation.



WU MEN, THE CHIEF INNER GATE OF THE FORBIDDEN CITY

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Simultaneously the state finances, thanks to the many military enterprises, had got into a more than awkward predicament. Contributions from the provinces were not forthcoming, while on the other side the allied powers under the leadership of Japan took over the salt tax, which was under the control of the foreign banks. The state banks, Bank of China and Bank of Communications, in order to keep up the military operations, had to go to their reserves to such an extent that at last the situation grew untenable, and thereupon the redemption of bank-notes by these two banks was suspended May 12 through a "moratorium."

Yuan Shih Kai's position was now in truth deplorable. It was fairly evident that he could not hold out much longer amid the fragments of his former power, but on the other side it would have been hazardous for him to have gone out as a private citizen from the palace, which was strongly protected by his bodyguard. Finally the excessive strain and mortification broke down his robust health and during the final weeks he had been pretty well *hors du combat*. Death, which to-day put an end to his remarkable career, was, it may be, only a merciful liberator from a more bitter fate.

It may, as said, be months, perhaps years, before it is possible to make a moderately just summary of the present crisis. The contending troops accuse one another of egoistic motives, but in both cases these aspersions must be largely unjust. It is very probable that Yuan Shih Kai, along with his lust for

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distinction and his ambition for his family, believed he was performing a patriotic duty when, misled by the representations of the monarchists, he accepted the imperial dignity. It is also probable that the leading revolutionists, with commendable determination, staked their all to hinder a movement which, according to their opinion, threatened to hinder all true reform for many years to come. The comments brought against Yuan Shih Kai as founder of a new dynasty are of considerable weight. It is said that he who did away with the Manchu dynasty was nevertheless so inured through all his training and career to the mandarin world and the Manchu methods of government that, when he came into power, he was guilty of the same palace despotism to which the Revolution of 1911 was the violent reaction. Far from being the first subject of the State in a republic, he inclined more and more to treat the country as a great family domain. A suspicious fact against him was that at the time of the monarchistic movement many of his friends and of the land's best men left the government service or in other ways signified their disapproval. Noteworthy in this connection was the politely expressed but none the less bitter criticism which he received from his old friend the former Minister of Agriculture, Chang Chien, one of China's most respected authorities of the old school.

With his faults and virtues Yuan Shih Kai was still an outstanding personality. The little man with the strong soul showed his character even

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in such obvious things as his fabulous power for work, his enormous appetite and finally now the fact that twelve widows and thirty-five children stand sorrowing at his bier.

It is a restless wake that Peking holds to-night. The morrow will be given over to the quarrels of petty kings.

All the friends of the patiently contented and industrious Chinese people, who now suffer all the horrors of civil war, must wish that a new leader will soon step forward, one to guard the land more faithfully and successfully than the dead chief, whose tragic fate it was that at the very summit of his contentious but mighty life-work he was tempted and fell.