

THE YELLOW CORD OF CHINA AND ITS MEANING

Imperial Death Warrant Of the Celestial Empire Reported to Have Been Sent to Yuan Shih K'ai. What Must Be Done by Those Who Receive It.

PUBLICATION of news dispatches from Peking that the Regent, Prince Ch'un has sent an imperial messenger bearing the yellow cord to Yuan Shih K'ai will excite world-wide interest for several reasons, writes Thomas F. Millard in the Philadelphia Ledger. There is unusual solicitude for this eminent Chinese statesman; international considerations of importance are believed to be involved with his fate, and the rumor illustrates the survival of one of those curious customs which Westerners habitually associate with the so-called mysterious east.

As its alleged use in this connection intimates, the yellow cord takes place with the yellow jacket, the peacock feather, the ruby button, and other ancient symbols of the Celestial Empire to which extraordinary significance is attached, and which are popularly supposed to be confined to China. The west hears from time to time of how higher Chinese officials have been endowed with or deprived of such honors, and its estimation of the importance of these events depends upon whether a practical or comic opera view of Chinese politics is taken. To many westerners these political symbols assume a romantic and mysterious aspect, to others they savor of the preposterous. Both of these estimations are incorrect; for when scrutinized they are, like most oriental customs, found to be almost exactly parallel, in their practical effects, to contemporaneous Western customs.

Matter of Etiquette.

The yellow cord is a symbol attached to superior dignity. It has, like many old-time ceremonials of court etiquette in Europe, become much modified in modern times. Its legendary functions confine its operation to members of the imperial family and to officials of vice-regal grade, and its exercise always has been a prerogative of the throne; thus to receive a yellow cord was, in a sense, a sort of melancholy distinction, and was presumed to open a way for honorable exit from this life to persons who had unforgivably offended the emperor, and whose elevated rank or considerations of state placed them above ordinary legal processes.

The old method was attended by considerable ceremony. The symbolic death warrant was conveyed by a special messenger of high rank, who was accompanied by an imposing escort, and who upon arriving at his destination was received by the unfortunate official with ambassadorial honors,

and in giving a series of farewell entertainments to his relatives and friends. Although a time limit was set within which the offender was expected to depart this life, it was not considered good form to defer until the last day; neither was it proper to display undue haste.

Honorable End to Life.

Theoretically, the yellow cord was supposed to provide a way for the offender to take his own life by strangulation; but usually a different means, like one of the subtle and deadly poisons long known to orientals, was actually used. After death the body of the man thus "honored" would be buried with full official honors. If one failed to die within the specified time he was stripped of all honors and his immediate family degraded, and he then would die by the hand of the executioner.

This was the function of the yellow cord in ancient times, as I have heard it described by Chinese friends of mine; but not for very many years has it actually been employed. In fact the function is now obsolete, and while its theoretical symbolism survives, it is doubtful if it ever again will be carried out, or that Chinese seriously expect it to be.

However, it has nominally been brought into requisition in quite recent times. It was reported to have been sent to Li Hung Chang after the disastrous debacle of the Chinese army in the last war with Japan, when the venerable statesman was also temporarily stripped of all his high honors. But whether the cord was sent to Li or not, he merely retired to his native province, where he was supposed to purify himself by communing at the tombs of his ancestors; and in a short time the difficulties of the Peking government compelled it to recall him, and to intrust to his experienced hand the negotiation of the treaty of peace between Japan and China, which was signed at Shimonoseki.

Li's Return to Power.

After his success, by inducing the intervention of France and Russia, in preserving the territorial integrity of the empire, Li was restored to full honors, which he retained until his death. The last previous instance which I can recall of the presumed use of the yellow cord was in 1901, following the "Boxer" uprising, when, upon the insistence of foreign powers that some high Chinese officials be punished for alleged complicity in attacks upon the foreign legations at Peking, Prince Tuan and others were supposed to have received it; but all of them

person who is being punished will make a great outcry when in reality he hardly feels the blows. Yet he dare not omit the groan, which is the outward testimony of his suffering under punishment. Should the culprit fail to bellow loudly it is considered a reflection upon the court, and the magistrate may order the number of blows to be doubled, and to be laid on in earnest. So if any Chinese official should be sure that every one in China will make a pretense of taking the matter quite seriously, when, in fact, it is nothing more than a severe imperial reprimand.

Yuan a True Patriot.

Yuan is inimical to the Manchu faction, as is any Chinese who displays extraordinary ability; he also is disliked by the remnant of the anti-progressive cabal which sees in reform the end of its influence; and, furthermore, he is hated by an extreme faction of reformers which considers him too conservative. None of these influences alone could have accomplished Yuan's dismissal, but all of them together, added to the supposed desire of the regent to retaliate for what he considers the humiliation of his brother, the former emperor, and aided by some casual international complications, made it possible.

The sensation which Yuan's dismissal caused is still fresh in mind; as are the pessimistic forebodings which it excited. Some thought that it would precipitate the long-expected internal

strife over a critical period in its history.

At this juncture Japanese diplomacy became active and the Washington government was somehow induced to accept Japan's theory of the situation. The sending of only half the fleet to China, which was a distinct slap, and the refusal of the Washington administration to give any definite assurances to Tang Shao-yi followed. Tang Shao-yi, I understand, tried to get the Washington government publicly to interchange notes with China somewhat after the manner of the Root-Takahira communique, but this proposal was declined, while the state department ostentatiously concluded a so-called ambiguous agreement with Japan involving the fate of China, while refusing openly to give similar assurances directly to China herself.

Efforts to Save Yuan.

When England and the United States awoke to the fact that Yuan had been "thrown" they began a belated scramble to save him. The American and British ministers at Peking, after failing to secure united action of the entire diplomatic corps, and after communicating with their governments, took joint action and made representations to the regent by inquiring if Yuan's dismissal might be construed to mean that China intends to alter her foreign policy. This intervention was well meant, but coming at the time it was rather unfortunate, and had the effect of preventing any



Imperial Messenger Bearing the Yellow Cord.

cataclysm, and that Yuan would place himself at the head of the modern army, which he created, and seize Peking. It is possible, had he been so disposed, that Yuan might have accomplished such a coup d'etat. But his conduct under the circumstances is a complete refutation of adverse conceptions of his ambitions and character. He chose the patriotic course, and proved his devotion to his country by quietly accepting his dismissal and retiring to his native province, where he has since lived.

For the last few years he has directed the foreign policy of the nation, and none knows better than he the designs focused upon China and the influences which seek her dismemberment. There is slight reason to doubt that the first sign of internal disorder would have been the signal for occupation of the country, and possibly the capital, by foreign troops, the excuse being that it was necessary to protect foreign interests and inhabitants. In fact it is well known that two nations which now are aggressing upon China's territory had forces of occupation mobilized ready promptly to seize any excuse which offered.

America to Be Considered.

Curiously enough, it is probable that the attitude of the Washington administration toward certain matters then under consideration contributed to Yuan's downfall. A special embassy, headed by Tang Shao-yi, had been sent to Washington, ostensibly to thank the United States for renouncing the unpaid part of its share of the "Boxer" indemnity, but really to present China's side of the Manchurian question, and to endeavor to enlist America's support in resisting Russian and Japanese encroachments upon China's sovereignty. The Peking government was very uneasy about Japan's policy (and still is) and was seeking a closer understanding with the United States, and Yuan had led the Peking government to believe that such an entente could be arranged and that it would assure the integrity of the empire. Yuan, therefore, was personally responsible for the special embassy, and the pro-American thesis of Chinese diplomacy as a means to

immediate amelioration of Yuan's disgrace by creating a situation which would make it appear that any clemency was due to foreign pressure. The ineptitude of England and the United States in this matter must have caused many quiet smiles in diplomatic circles in the far east, and especially the neat way in which Japan again scored at the expense of her ally; not the first time, by any means, since the promulgation of the new alliance.

And so, despite the efforts of England and the United States to save him, Yuan went into retirement; and speculation about the political situation in China since then has chiefly concerned itself with the question of how long the Peking government can continue to manage without his advice. That he eventually will be recalled is an impression which has been steadily growing during the last three months; consequently the rumor that he has received the yellow cord must be received with incredulity. That such a sentence will be carried out is inconceivable. If there should be the slightest chance that the Peking government, at the instigation of Yuan's enemies, should prevail upon the regent to adopt severe measures toward the retired statesman, the humanitarian sentiment of civilization would rise in his defense.

Concerning the reported dispatch of the yellow cord to Yuan, I may quote an expression of his own made to me when I saw him, and when he discussed the situation of China and her relation to the world with unusual frankness and acumen.

"In her effort at reform," he said, "China must break through and dissipate many old traditions and customs which now hamper modern progress. But if the west really is sympathetic to our ambitions in attempting to appreciate conditions here it will find it necessary to abandon some of its superstitions about China."

Of western superstitions about China I can think of no better example than the state of mind which takes very seriously the report that the yellow cord has been sent to Yuan, and that this prefigures his early death.

The Psychosis of a Hamper

By LOUISE AYRES GARNETT

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Mrs. Blander, accompanied by a pretty younger woman, entered the willow-ware room of a department store. An usher, learning her wishes, summoned with a benign forefinger a little man who announced stolidly in every line of his well-nourished body.

"Mr. Booder, this lady would like to look at Hampers. Understand, Mr. Booder, hampers, and do your best in the matter."

"What style would you like, ma'am?" inquired Mr. Booder, solicitously.

"Surely," exclaimed Mrs. Blander, "you cannot expect me to describe it to you? I have but a nebulous picture in my mind, and rely on visualization. You will have to show me your complete assortment, as I wish to make use of an important function, the power of selection. You see, Clarissa, I endeavor to psychologize each situation, thus developing nascent qualities or stimulating matured ones. In other words"—indicating Mr. Booder with a serious look—"I try to find the wings of every occasion."

Mr. Booder was astonished.

"Do I understand you, ma'am to say that you'd just like to look at—"

"Hampers, hampers," interrupted Mrs. Blander, firmly. "I fear their purchase is entered into too impulsively. You have before you the opportunity of ennobling this neglected field, for you may inform yourself not only as to their physical certainties, but their higher significance as well, thereby acquiring the right to take each customer by the hand and lead her gently but compellingly."

Mr. Booder flushed modestly and thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

"If only you could tell me," he said, feelingly, "if you'd like a large one or a small one or a mejum-sized one or—"

Mrs. Blander fixed him with an outraged eye.

"Size?" she inquired. "You ask me what size? That, sir, is a minor issue. It may be as large as a bed of the

Napoleonic era, and so its lines be-

speak art, I will receive it, allowing its unfiled interior to testify to my spiritual consistency. Or, if you show me nothing that will satisfy the demands of beauty save small ones, I will purchase several, placing them here and there, like Grecian urns. And if, perchance, you have one of precisely the proper circumference and height, with Beauty shaping its outlines, then would I say it was Art's reward for a disciple's adherence to its laws."

Mrs. Blander was lost in thought. Mr. Booder seemed to be experiencing vertigo. Then he pulled himself together.

"Now, that's not a bad idea, ma'am, about having several of 'em. You could have one for handkerchiefs, one for towels, another for sheets, and another for—"

Mrs. Blander raised a tremulous hand.

"Spare me this ignoble differentiation. There is no need to dwell upon their functions, for we all know that as mere utilitarian objects they are degrading."

Poor Mr. Booder coughed guiltily because of his identification with the hamper department. He was clutched by a feeling of helpless criminality.

"Furthermore," continued Mrs. Blander, "according to higher interpretation, you misuse the word 'idea.' But, to revert to my proposed purchase, I have resolved to eliminate from the transaction all the sordid, as anything for use in the home, that shrine of the heart, must have a spiritual meaning."

Mrs. Blander glanced triumphantly from Clarissa to Mr. Booder, and though she rightly read the face of one to mean awe, she mistook the struggle of the other to indicate an awakening soul. With a thrill of joy she seated herself and cordially motioned to her auditors to do the same. Clarissa, of course, obeyed, but Mr. Booder dug his heels firmly in the floor and faced her standing.

Mr. Booder was inclined to sulk, but, habit being strong upon him, marshalled one symbol after another before his soulful customer, who rejected them solemnly, almost sorrow-

fully, as though mourning the existence of so much of the unbeautiful. Finally he rolled into place a hamper so huge that it looked capable of accommodating the horse of Troy.

The instant Mrs. Blander saw it she exclaimed, gracefully: "That is an exponent of a most charming type! Pray rest from your labors, while I meditate upon it. See, Clarissa, how noble are its proportions, how chaste its design, how Doric its atmosphere! Do you know what it suggests to me, dear?"

Clarissa couldn't guess, so Mrs. Blander cried, joyously: "The Parthenon, Clarissa. It really does. It's strange how these suggestions come to me, transcendent illuminations that open wide the windows of my being, and register ineffaceable impressions. That's just the way I felt when I saw this splendid hamper. 'Parthenon!' something seemed to whisper; and Parthenon it will always mean to me. So austere, yet so satisfyingly beautiful! How does it appeal to you?"

"Of course, dear," modestly responded Clarissa, "I'm not clever like you, and never have occult intimations, so, to tell the truth, it merely seems to me the biggest and baldest hamper I ever saw. You'll forgive me, Apollonia?" she concluded, humbly.

"I'm disappointed in you," Mrs. Blander replied, palpably ruffled. "It's humiliating to know that my companionship has done so little for you, and that this hamper is to you nothing but a hamper. I hope you"—turning to Mr. Booder—"can see in it something beyond the material."

Mr. Booder advanced to the side of the wicker elephant and peered within.

"I can't, ma'am," he confessed, shamefacedly; "there ain't anything in it I can see, not even materials."

He continued gazing dejectedly into the bowels of the hamper.

If aestheticism can snort, that low word would best describe the sound of disgust with which Mrs. Blander favored Mr. Booder.

"Are men but clods?" she cried. "Does intuition play no part with you? Intuit, sir, intuit!"

Such was the commanding presence of strong-minded Mrs. Blander and the obedient servility of weak-minded Mr. Booder, that in the twinkling of an eye, and before Mr. Booder himself knew what he was doing, he had leaped over the side of the hamper, and was meekly gazing out at his resolute customer.

Clarissa showed herself not altogether devoid of humor and sniggered painfully; but Mrs. Blander was sensitive and silenced her by a glance.

"What do you mean," she inquired, "behaving in this fashion? Come out at once and explain your conduct."

Mr. Booder clambered out of the Parthenon and answered, defiantly: "You told me to do it."

"I did nothing of the kind," contradicted Mrs. Blander in her most positive manner.

"I'll leave it to the young lady if you didn't," he recklessly retorted. "You called out: 'Intuit, sir, intuit,' and if that ain't plain English I'd like to know the reason why."

Once again Clarissa jarred upon Mrs. Blander's nerves, and with a sweeping gesture the latter waved away the hamper.

"Ain't you going to take it, after all?" asked disappointed Mr. Booder, loath to recommence his labors.

"Never!" cried Mrs. Blander. "Not after it has been desecrated by ridicule and inhabited by ignorance."

Mr. Booder quailed before her eye and embarrassedly trundled away the classic pile.

It was not until all of the stock had been paraded before her that Mrs. Blander decided upon a medium-sized hamper that bulged in the middle, had outspreading handles and a magenta band near the top.

"The magenta border is a blow to me," she explained to Mr. Booder, "as the room in which it is to be placed is in ethereal blue, and I fear a subtle antagonism between the two."

"The price of this—" began Mr. Booder, pencil in hand, glad to be on the ground he comprehended.

But not so. Mrs. Blander raised a supplicating hand as she said: "Do not name the price, I beg of you. I make it a point never to sully an object at the time of purchase by identifying it with the cost. If, when it is delivered, I find it beyond what I can afford, I simply return it. In this way I contribute my mite toward spiritualizing trade. Now let us go, Clarissa, and as we go let us cast frequent glances at the new symbol, for I wish to carry away a distinct picture, unconfused with envolving objects."

So Mrs. Blander glided from the room, part of the time backward, looking out of half-closed lids at the receding lines of the hamper and its magenta border.

"She forgot to give me her address," malignly chuckled Mr. Booder, beginning to recover his spirits.

Fame.

"Pa, what is fame?"

"Fame, my boy, is an inducement that employers always hold out to a man when they want him to work for small wages."



Chinese Emperor's Funeral Procession.

much as heralds in Europe in the middle ages. The function frequently was accompanied by a banquet at which the recipient of the fatal cord was host, and when it was considered a violation of etiquette for any one present to refer to or appear to understand the tragic nature of the mission.

These preliminaries over, the messenger would deliver the cord; it would be received without any display of emotion, (indeed, it was considered good form to feign pleasure), and the messenger would depart. During the interval from the receipt of the symbol until the day when it must be acted upon the recipient would be permitted apparent liberty, although actually kept under strict surveillance, and this period usually would be devoted to putting his affairs in order

so far as I know are still living in retirement and disgrace, although there is no reason to suppose that their situation, except for loss of "face," is very uncomfortable.

As illustrating this somewhat peculiar idea of the Chinese, I recall the daily scene in a Chinese police court, where misdemeanants are tried and punished, usually by so many strokes of a bamboo stick administered immediately after passing of sentence, in the presence of the magistrate. Guilty misdemeanants, anticipating conviction, generously wad their clothing with cotton, so that the strokes of the cudgel will inflict no serious bruises; and, furthermore, sometimes, by bribing the bailiff, will induce him to lay on the blows very lightly, although with apparent vigor. These little evasions are perfectly well understood, yet the