

FRANCE'S NEW PRESIDENT

Paul Deschanel's Shadowy Office Better Matched to His Personality Than to the Rugged Figure of Clemenceau

By WALTER LITTLEFIELD.

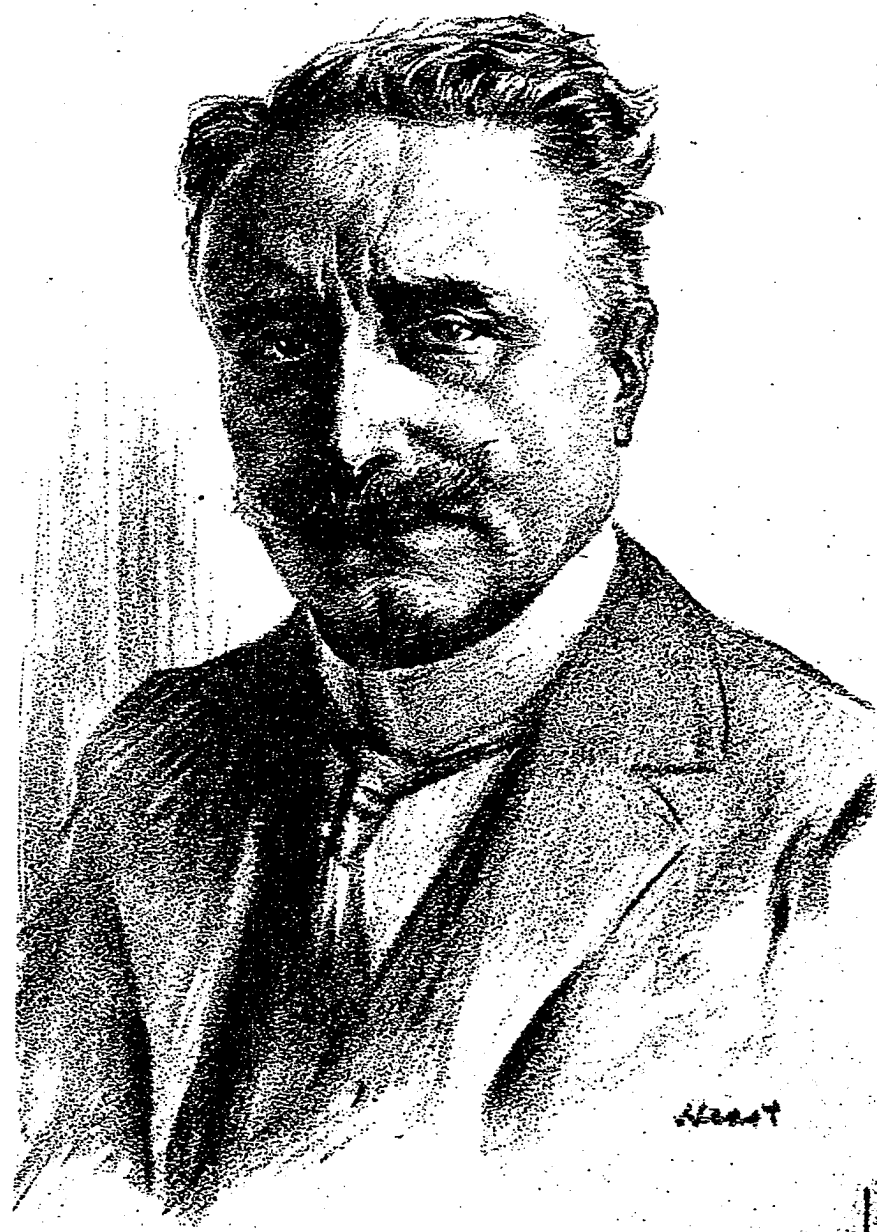
POSSIBLY it is only in Latin America that the strongest, most popular man has a fair chance to become President of a republic. Elsewhere politicians are afraid of him, and are able to obstruct with a complex electoral machinery what seems to be a natural destiny, the crowning distinction of long public service faithfully performed. Sometimes, to be sure, the politicians are overwhelmed and the man gets there in spite of them. It is not often, for unselfish public service is pretty certain to create selfish political enemies, and these enemies are skillful in defeating the popular will. It is their profession.

In France everybody thought that the politicians were to be overwhelmed by the desire of the people, and that Clemenceau, the great organizer of victory, would continue his work as the great organizer of peace. But everybody was mistaken. The politicians over there ignored the great man, and made a merely clever and accomplished man President of the republic.

Not that this great man particularly cared. His whole attitude has shown that. His utterances revealed his anticipation of the end before the end came. This destroyer of Cabinets, who was also the savior of nations, had never received a vote for the Presidency. He had never asked for any. He did not ask for them when all France was demanding them for him. He consented to remain passive, however, and let his friends try to carry out the mandate of the people. He consented to remain passive and let them make the effort. So they went to the caucus at Versailles on Jan. 16, and gave him 389 votes. The opponent, the man selected by the politicians, received 408.

In ordinary times this would have meant little. Few successful candidates have been nominated by a Versailles caucus. Loubet, in 1899, was an exception, but he was the President of expediency, nominated one day after the death of President Faure and elected the next. The thing had to be done quickly, for in France there is no Vice President. It had been the same in 1894, when President Casimir-Perier had hurriedly stepped into the shoes of the murdered Sadi Carnot. On the other hand, Faure, another President of expediency, elected on the resignation of Casimir-Perier in 1895, was beaten by Brisson in the caucus and Fallières, who was elected in 1906, was hardly mentioned in caucus. The favorite there was M. Doumer, with a majority Radical and advanced Socialist backing. When President Poincaré was elected, in 1913, he had been beaten in the caucus the day before by M. Pams.

In ordinary times the caucus has usually merely served the purpose of bringing



Paul Deschanel.

out the radical vote—of forcing the extremists among Senators and Deputies to show their hand. More than two-thirds of the number intending to vote on the following day have rarely been present. But now to the two exceptional instances must be added a third. For out of the total of 889 who voted at the election on the 17th, 821 voted at the caucus on the 16th, and as we know the nominee of the first day, with 408 votes, became the elected of the second with 734, while his opponent, who had received 389 votes at the caucus, got a paltry 56 at the election.

It was all a great triumph for Paul Deschanel and for the adroit organizer

of his supporters, former Premier Briand. It was a grievous disappointment to the people of France—possibly to the world. But was it a disappointment to the great man, to the organizer of victory, Georges Clemenceau? Who can say?

Between the caucus and the election he had practically said to his friends of the Ministry, "I told you so," and had advised them to bring about the re-election of President Poincaré. But the latter declined, and so President Grévy, re-elected in 1886, still has the unique distinction of being the only re-elected President of the Third Republic.

It seems absurd to suppose that the

man who had so successfully organized the great victory for France, for the Allies, could not do so small a thing as to organize a little one for himself. There is nothing to show that he even lifted a finger to do so. Perhaps the truth is that he did not care to be President. He passively placed himself in the hands of his friends. That is all. Possibly he would have liked to please them, to please the French people, by accepting the honor had the politicians allowed him to do so. But he made no effort. Why?

The answer may be found by contrasting the man with the office—the active, dominating statesman, with the servant of Ministers, with the itinerant orator at public festivals. And there may have been something in the words he said to a friend, who, just after the November elections, where the Socialists had been routed, approached him on the subject of the Presidency:

"And what would happen if I were President and had to accept another Clemenceau as Premier?"

It was different with Deschanel. He wanted to be President. Twice previously he had permitted his name to be used; once in 1899, when he received 10 votes, and once in 1913, when he received 18. On those occasions he did not have the "organization" behind him. M. Briand was not there as the manager of his political fortunes. Clemenceau as President with another Clemenceau as Premier would be impossible to conceive. But Deschanel as President with Briand as Premier would be a logical sequel to the Versailles election. Briand may or may not have stolen a march on Clemenceau at Versailles—it is all a matter of opinion, particularly the opinion of Clemenceau. He did, however, steal a march on him in a speech he made on Nov. 3, at Nantes, when he said:

"The President should be elected by popular vote, instead of being selected indirectly, as at present, by a vote of the two houses of Parliament. It is imperative that the President of France should assume a more efficacious and a wider field of authority."

Now Clemenceau since the war had been at work on a project of law for making the office of the Chief Executive more authoritative, more independent of the Cabinet, less subservient to the Premier. He thought more of that project of law than he did of the Presidency. It was a veritable coup de Jarnac for Briand to anticipate him. It may have been something more when viewed in the light of a possible Deschanel-Briand combination that may extend beyond the precincts at Versailles and find full expression at the Elysée.

Meanwhile, as the great man enjoys

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his well-earned rest from public affairs, many good things and some bad ones are certain to be said about him. Typical of each may be considered what Maurice Barrès wrote in the *Echo de Paris*, what *Humanité* said editorially.

Barrès wrote:

"The Parliamentarians did not call him. They refused to put him in the Elysée, but no one can dislodge him from his place in history, where he is installed in the midst of his *poilus*. However, there was no need for the Assembly to hand him this certificate of second prize. Great citizen, you have the eternal gratitude of France—you have crushed the manoeuvres of treason and miraculously gathered the strength of the nation to win the victory."

And this from the *Socialist Humanité*: "It was the duty of the Socialists to make a maximum effort against the President of the council, and they did. * * * In the place of Clemenceau it is Deschanel who goes to the Elysée. It is useless to say that we expect nothing from the new President of the Republic. We worked to bar the path of a man of evil and we succeeded."

After being reduced to a handful by this "man of evil" at the November elections are the surviving Socialist Deputies now to claim that they succeeded in keeping him from the Presidency? And if they aided, by request, the efforts of Deschanel, Briand & Co., what will be the *quid pro quo* to be demanded? Would they vote more authority for the President of France, which Briand declared at Nantes he ought to have? Hardly.

Now, about this authority possessed by the Chief Executive of France there is much diverse opinion. Many experts of law say that its nature is potential and only requires a daring man to discover and make it active. On the other hand, the Presidency has certainly proved to be the graveyard of many political careers—a sort of ceremonial interment. And as for authority, for independent action, let us see what President Casimir-Ferrier wrote to *Le Temps* when that paper had bid him "do something":

"The President can do nothing himself; he can validly place his signature beside that of another if he is asked to do so, but excepting his resignation all that he can sign alone only amounts to an autograph in a collection. * * * Among all the powers which appear to be attributed to him there is only one the President of the Republic is able freely and personally to exercise; this is to preside at national ceremonies."

In the memory of the Second Republic, of "Napoléon le Petit," of the coup d'état which practically turned a President into an Emperor, fresh in their minds the makers of the Third Republic just disdained even the title of President and then gave the title without the usual functions of office.

The functions of the President of the United States are carefully laid down in the Constitution, whose makers left nothing to evolution. On the other hand, the French Constitution is partly a matter of evolution, partly of devolution. What is constructed one day is very often torn down the next. In the early days of the republic Presidents discovered that they had actually something to say about the administration of colonial affairs. It was a heritage from the Second Republic. The Senate found it out and stopped it. Another prerogative retained was the right of the President to command armies in the field. Still another was that of negotiating and ratifying treaties. Both are now merely potential. The National Assembly attempted to take the first from Marshal MacMahon, when President in 1875, and the Minister of War told the Assembly:

"I am authorized to declare to the Assembly that if it adopts such a provision as will forbid Marshal MacMahon to draw his sword to defend his country he will not hesitate twenty-four hours to

give up his title as President of the Republic."

In 1878 the same President negotiated and ratified the treaty which established the autonomous principality of Bulgaria; at Cronstadt, in 1891, President Carnot alone negotiated and ratified a treaty of alliance with the Czar of Russia.

But in the late war President Poincaré, far from leading the French armies in the field, did not even attempt to reorganize the Superior Council of War, as Carnot had done in 1888. And as for the Treaty of Versailles, he had no part in its negotiation, no part in its ratification. He merely promulgated it by decree when he was told that the ratification was complete.

What would have happened had President Poincaré acted as MacMahon was ready to act, as Carnot actually did act? Nobody knows. Poincaré was wise and refrained.

It was probably not the intention of Clemenceau to seek amid dead-letter law excuses for giving the President more authority, or the semblance of it. It is probably not the intention of Briand to do so. But surely something might be done to make the President of France a little more conspicuous in great affairs of State.

"What might be desired," wrote a constitutional lawyer, "is a higher sense of the independence and power of the Presidential office among those who have happened to fill the Chief Magistracy. The President of the French Republic commands a potential force powerful and efficacious for good or evil such as few men possess, and far beyond anything intrusted to the President of the United States."

This was written in July, 1916. At that time the same writer added something else which is as true today as it was then:

"Let the man show himself worthy of the office. This Raymond Poincaré has done by exercising its high functions fearlessly and yet with just moderation and free from the dominating influences of others, thus winning the admiration and loyalty of all classes of citizens of the great and valiant nation of which he is the honored Executive."

Now if Paul Deschanel is to tread carefully in the footsteps of his excellent predecessors of the Third Republic he has received the best possible schooling during his long career as President of the Chamber. He is promoted from presiding officer of a legislature to presiding officer of a nation. Aside from that and still with due attention paid to the traditions of the Presidency, as far as political affairs are concerned, there are great possibilities for Paul Deschanel.

Parisians, possibly Frenchmen generally, would like to see something of a court maintained at the Palais d'Elysée. Old Félix Faure, until his untimely death, managed to keep one up with lavish entertainments and ceremonial display. But Emile Loubet and Armand Fallières made no attempt to emulate him. Raymond Poincaré and his handsome Italian wife (née Benucci) had made great preparations for social entertainment, when the war came and occupied them otherwise.

The removal of the Deschanels to the palace will mean the removal of one of the most exclusive salons to a new setting—a salon which has long gathered its guests from the best known in art and letters, politics, and the theatre. Mme. Deschanel, whom the President-elect married in 1905, was Germaine Brice, daughter of the multi-millionaire, René Brice, sometime Deputy from Ille-et-Vilaine, and the granddaughter of the late Camille Doucet, perpetual Secretary of the French Academy. At the time of her marriage Mme. Deschanel was acclaimed by the press of Paris as one of the most charming and talented women in France—linguist, artist, musician.

As for M. Deschanel there is and always has been a good deal of the aristocrat about him—using the word in its Greek sense. For years he was known as the best-dressed Deputy in the Chamber, and, unlike his rival there, Count Boni de Castellane, much of the elegance of his dress was thrown into it by the wearer. An English friend once said of him:

"He would have been in Athens with Alexander and Aristotle as against the disciples of Demosthenes. But I do not think he realizes what a vast distance

lay between Athens and Corinth, though they were but thirty miles or so apart. A Corinthian republic, perhaps, would suit him better than an Athenian. Deschanel has those social gifts and talents for which some women are remarkable. No woman could have more tact, charm, quick repartee, or a keener feeling for what is elegant, distinguished, refined. He dances to perfection, has an elegant figure, and a face that would be of feminine beauty were the forehead not so virile. The well-cut profile is one for Sevres, alabaster, or cameo. It looks delicate, but if you examine it you will find it strong. He was nursed on Greek and Latin, but took most kindly to Greek. I suspect him of a weakness for Alcibiades, Pericles, Aspasia, and the society that gathered around them. Nobody talks of love at an epicurean banquet with more Anacreontic feeling than Monsieur le President de la Chambre!"

Deschanel is also the author of many books, the orator of many speeches which have also, many of them, been published in books. Both his writing and oratory are finished almost to classical correctness. He has also been a contributor to papers like *Le Temps* and *Le Journal des Débats*, and to periodicals like *La Revue de Paris*, *La Revue Bleue*, and *La Revue Politique et Parlementaire*. Among his books are "Pen Sketches of Women," which was crowned by the French Academy; "French Interests in the Pacific Ocean," crowned by the Commercial Geographical Society; "Orators and Statesmen," "The New Republic," "The Social Question," "Literary Sketches," and a dozen others.

Although his real services in the war are probably hidden amid the archives of the secret sessions of the Chamber, and his war oratory quite forgotten amid the great activities at the front, much of his ante-bellum oratory is upon record and remembered. Particularly so are his speeches against the Left in the nineties—at Marseilles on Oct. 26, 1896; at Carmaux, Dec. 27, 1896, and at Roubaix, April 10, 1897. These were considered at the time by those who heard them triumphs of clear and elegant exposition of the political and social aims of the Progressist Party.

He had first become affiliated with that party in October, 1885, when elected to the Chamber from Eure-et-Loire. In January, 1896, he was elected Vice President of the Chamber, and two years later President. Then began a series of periodical rejections and elections as presiding officer until 1912, since when he has constantly filled the post.

Meanwhile, he had been elected to the French Academy in 1899 and five years later had helped to bring order out of the chaos into which the Dreyfus case had thrown the political as well as the social life of France. He advocated the separation of Church and State.

But what was the origin of Paul Eugène Louis Deschanel? He was born in poverty, the son of an exile. That event took place at Brussels in 1856, where his father and mother had resided since 1851, when the former had been ordered to leave France by "Napoléon le Petit." Victor Hugo happened to be in Brussels at the time of Paul's birth and congratulated the parents. In 1859 the three were allowed to return to France, where the father, Emile Deschanel, Senator and professor at the Collège de France, resumed his political and academic work, and incidentally his flings at the Emperor. He died in 1894.

Young Paul was educated at the Collège Sainte-Barbe and the Lycée Condorcet. He studied law, and began his career as secretary to Deshayes de Marcère in 1876 and to Jules Simon in the following year.

Twenty-six years ago he fought a duel with Clemenceau and was wounded by him. His long waiting for revenge will certainly be expiated upon by the imaginative.