

THE STRONG MAN OF GREECE

M. ELEUTHERIOS VENIZELOS

In the present tangle of Balkan politics there is one name that stands out far above all others. M. Venizelos has been ranked as one of the leading statesmen of the time, and rightly so, as he towers head and shoulders above any of his colleagues in Eastern Europe, and for loftiness of purpose and purity of ideals he stands as high as any man in Europe. The position he occupies now is all the more remarkable when compared with that he occupied at the outset of his career, and the almost insuperable difficulties he had to overcome are considered. Insuperable they would have been to most men, but in him dwelt the indomitable spirit of patriotism which drove him ahead, and enabled him to triumph over all obstacles.

Small beginnings, ye are great and strong. Based on a faithful heart and weariless brain. Ye build the future fair, ye conquer wrong. Ye earn the crown, and wear it not in vain.

So wrote Lowell, and the lines describe the career of M. Venizelos. His "faithful heart and weariless brain" freed Crete and created a Greece worthy of its ancient name. M. Venizelos was born fifty-one years ago in Cythera, one of the Ionian Islands. At the time of his birth Crete was engaged in one of her most desperate attempts to throw off the Turkish rule, which ended in failure, accompanied by terrible massacres. M. Venizelos's father was a Cretan and christened his son 'Eleutherios,' signifying liberty, freedom, as expressing the hopes of all the Cretans at that time. Whether his name has been an inspiration to him or not he has certainly lived up to it. Of his early life little is known. He studied law in Athens and Switzerland, and had settled down as a practising lawyer in Crete when, at the age of twenty-five, the iniquity of the Turkish rule roused him, and from then onwards he employed his time in agitating both actively and passively against that rule. He was out as an insurrectionist on many occasions, but he came through untouched in spite of, or more probably on account of, his absolute recklessness of his own life. His efforts were to some extent successful, and Crete was wiven control of her own affairs though not without

the intervention of the Powers. Venizelos took the position of Minister of Finance in the local government, but in that capacity he soon came into collision with Prince George of Greece, the High Commissioner, with whose ideals and methods of governance he had no sympathy. He was an advocate of Cretan autonomy as opposed to annexation to Greece, realizing that the latter course would be opposed by all the Powers of Europe, and would only bring about a conflict with Turkey, while autonomy was within the bounds of possibility. When the antagonism between Prince George and himself became acute he again took to the hills and organized the party of revolt to such good purpose that Prince George, in spite of the support of the Concert of Europe, was compelled to leave the island. Venizelos then returned to guide the destinies of Crete, which he controlled with a firm and steady hand, and in doing so had to combat the intrigues of the Powers of Europe. It was then that he really had his first introduction to the politics of Europe, and he soon showed that he was an adept.

In 1909 Greece was in a perilous state and on the brink of revolution. She had not yet recovered from the fiasco of 1897. Her administration, her army, her navy, were all sunk deep in corruption. Her Royal family was exceedingly unpopular, but there were signs that the time of regeneration was at hand. The Military League had come into existence, and was all-powerful in the country. They demanded reforms, but were at the same time distinctly anti-Royalist. Having no distinguished leader they invited Venizelos to come over from Crete to assist them. Partly because of what he had achieved there, and also since he had ejected Prince George, they considered that he would be able to get rid of King George from Greece. Venizelos accepted the invitation, and entered the Greek Parliament. The task before him was enormous, but he set to work boldly, and soon obtained the support of the people. Once that was secured he never again lost it, though he often carried out measures which were dead against the wishes of his supporters. He refused to overthrow the Royal house, realizing that it was a real asset to the future greatness of Greece, and that she had a much greater chance of success as a kingdom than as a republic, in spite of the fact that in

a republic he would undoubtedly have been first President. He, however, restored the Royal house to favour and placed it on a firm foundation, which has since been made absolute by the achievements of the present King in the Balkan wars, so that he is now the idol of his people.

Venizelos then proceeded to a thorough reform of the internal condition of Greece, and succeeded beyond all the bounds of hope. At the same time he was brought into further contact with European politics, but his Cretan experiences stood him in good stead, and he was able to a large extent to frustrate the attempts on the part of various Powers to keep the Balkans in a state of ferment.

In order to further strengthen the Balkans against European intrigues he participated in the plan of forming a Balkan League. He was quite willing that Turkey should enter this League, but soon found he could make no progress in that direction. He then approached Bulgaria, and finally succeeded with her, but only on account of his extreme broadmindedness in entering into the agreement without any guarantees as to the division or any territory that might be taken from Turkey without which nothing could have been achieved with Bulgaria. It became plain at once that though the idea of the Balkan League was primarily to ensure the solidity of the Balkans, yet without Turkey the first thing the League would do would be to combine against that country. Once Bulgaria was persuaded the rest was easy, and the first Balkan war was the result. The excellent performances of the Greek Army in that and the second war were due chiefly to the reforms that Venizelos had introduced, substituting French for German instructors. The second Balkan war followed the first, and the Treaty of Bucharest fully justified Venizelos's methods, and confirmed him in the esteem of his people. His conduct of the negotiations both in London and Bucharest finally established him in the eyes of Europe as one of her lead-

ing statesmen. A truly astounding career, his success in European politics is all the more remarkable that he had never been out of the Balkans until after the first Balkan war. His attendance at the Conference of London afforded his first opportunity of visiting France and England. French he learnt in the course of his law studies; of other languages besides Greek he had no acquaintance; but he employed his spare time, while out as an insurrectionary, in teaching himself English and German, in spite of the fact that he had no one with whom he could speak those languages.

What is the secret which has enabled this quite obscure man to obtain this pre-eminent position? M. Take Jonescu, the leading Roumanian statesman, once asked him this question. "I have always told my citizens the truth, and the whole truth, and I have always been ready at any moment to relinquish my power without the slightest regret," was his reply. These characteristics mark him off at once from the ordinary run of statesmen, and there is nothing in his career which does not completely confirm his statement. He is inspired by one idea, to bring all the Greeks under Greek rule, thus giving Greece her true place in the world. He possesses an extreme broadness of outlook, which enables him to look far ahead, and see each crisis as it appears in its proper perspective. He is filled with the true burning spirit of the patriot, and his wonderful personal magnetism has enabled him to inspire his people with his own feelings, and to sway them to do what he wishes. He has given many notable examples of this power.

At the very outset of his career in Greece in 1909 the popular demand was that the General Assembly should become permanent, but he, feeling that that would be too strong an attack on the dynasty, whose existence was really vital to Greece in the long run, insisted that the Assembly should be only revisionary. This resolute attitude came as a great surprise to the Athenian crowd, who were accustomed to politicians who followed the popular demand rather than opposed it. But Venizelos succeeded in carrying them with him, at the same time firmly establishing himself in their esteem, a position which he has never since lost. Again, the himself a Cretan, he refused to allow the Cretan deputies to enter the Greek Parliament, in the face of public opinion, since he knew such a course would inevitably lead to war with Turkey, for which the time had not yet come.

Another great achievement was the change he wrought in Greek opinion, which enabled him to bring about the alliance with Bulgaria, and thus make the Balkan League a possibility. After the Balkan war he again successfully opposed public opinion when he refused to countenance the revolt in Epirus against inclusion in Albania, knowing that such a proceeding would bring down the displeasure of Europe upon Greece and might involve the loss of all she had gained in the two wars. There have been men who could thus withstand almost unanimous popular opinion, and persuade the people to act against their will, but in each case he has been fully justified in his action. It is not surprising that he is now idolized as the true founder of Modern Greece, and the people have at every election signified their belief in him by returning him with overwhelming majorities, though it is as difficult to retain the popular opinion in modern as it was in ancient Greece.

Venizelos is a mixture of kindness and ruthlessness. Animated by his one great principle, the salvation of Greece, he overrides and crushes those who oppose him in the most reckless fashion—in fact, he absolutely ignores their existence—but, once they are beaten and can do no more harm to the State, he does not pursue them further with his enmity, but is full of a conciliatory spirit. One great and almost fatal characteristic he possesses which is almost inevitable to a spirit such as his: he deals with his opponents as though they were animated with the same altruistic spirit as himself, and this has often proved almost fatal to his success. He is almost too chivalrous to his opponents when they are down. At the time when Austria annexed Bosnia the Cretans would have declared their enmity to Greece if it had not been for the opposition of Venizelos,

who considered that it was taking a mean advantage of the Turks to exploit their misfortunes. He has naturally made himself many enemies, though not so many as might be expected, chief amongst which is the Royal family, who, in spite of the fact that they owe their position to him, have never fully forgiven him for driving Prince George out of Crete.

There is no doubt that this personal ill-will has much to do with the attitude Greece has taken up in the present crisis. M. Venizelos has been from the first insistent that Greece should join the Allies. He has never before the vision of all the Greeks united under Greek rule, and he knew that only by joining the Allies would the incorporation of a large part of Greek Asia Minor into Greece become possible. He was willing to make large concessions to Bulgaria, and, as in the case of his former agreement with Bulgaria, to join in without any guarantees from the Allies as to the ultimate division of the spoil. But the King and the heads of the Army the broad outlook of Venizelos, they were convinced of the ultimate victory of Germany, and thought its policy of no guarantees, successful though it was on one occasion, was too risky to be adopted on this. Why Venizelos paid no attention to the King is not quite clear as yet. The King has no power to interfere in such a case, and Venizelos had only to get the sanction of Parliament to his wishes, which he could easily have done, since the people were of his way of thinking, and would probably have agreed to the surrender of Cavalla at his persuasion, bitterly though they dislike the idea. Once Parliament had agreed, the King would have been powerless. M. Venizelos did not adopt this plan, for reasons best known to himself, but we may be sure that in pursuing the course he did he was working for the best interests of the State. He is now back again in power. What his next move will be no one knows, but it is certain that ultimately Greece will be found fighting on the side of the Allies.

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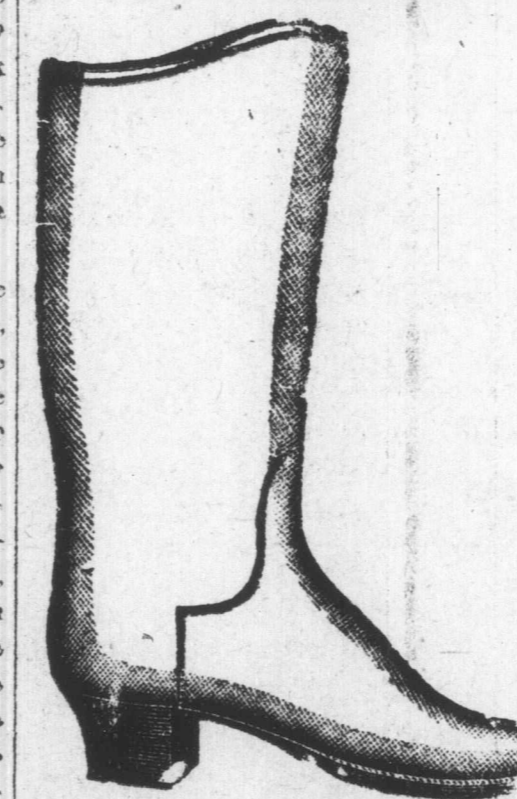
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