

A FRIEND OF CREVIA

Why a Ruinous War Came to a Sudden End

By ALAN SULLIVAN

THE City of Crevia lay in the hollow of a giant bay—and on either side of the port long arms of land, olive crowned and dotted with villas ran out, till, punctuated with light-houses, they dipped into the sapphire sea. To the north, gently rising ridges lifted to the foothills, and on their slopes orange and palm gave way to olive and vine, these in their turn to pine and cedar. From the timber line the mountains flung themselves up scarred, split and precipitous, and then came snow and eternal silence. But to all this Crevia was apathetic. Along the docks her empty granaries swung their idle doors, salt tides crept in and out between deserted piers and landings, a few ships huddled up to their moorings with spars and rigging unkempt and all awry, and in the cobbled streets that led to the water's edge grass thrust up in crannies between the polished stones. For bitter war was waging between Crevia and Apulia, her neighbour on the north.

An old feud, its seeds had been sown long before Crevia had astonished the world with her science and art, and Apulia had flung a prodigal fertility into the mouths of hungry millions. But now the end was in sight, and the sheer weight of men and money was closing every door to freedom.

Far to the south a few faint wreaths of smoke told where the remnants of the Crevian Navy grinned defiance inside the lines of an inflexible blockade. The mountain passes were still safe, but beyond them sat the foe and waited, for that which he knew must come.

Dark though the clouds hung over Crevia there was that within her that was darker still. In front of the Government buildings was mustered the Civic guard. Their ranks bore pitiful evidence to the long drain upon Crevia's manhood; and awkward boys rubbed elbows with white-haired pensioners. They faced the wide stone steps and behind them surged the crowd, humming with conjecture and terrified rumour. Within a strange scene was being enacted. In a lofty chamber, its walls panelled with the record of past glories and hung with the banners of the vanquished, sat the Council of War. In the centre the President of the Republic and around him his cabinet, worn but not dismayed, every face drawn and grave; the burden of a nation's salvation lay heavy upon them.

The President had risen and, leaning forward on his hands, spoke with intense earnestness and palpable sorrow to an aged figure which stood at attention, erect and respectful, but with a world of misery in his gaze. As his auditor saluted the speaker, his eyes wandered for a moment to the motionless trophies around and above him, and his mouth twitched convulsively. Slowly and clearly the President spoke, every word a hammer, which struck his listener square in his undaunted face.

"General," he said, "Crevia has her back to the wall. A year ago you told us that Apulia would be a rag in your hands to wring and throw away. To-day of thirty regiments only five are left, to guard a twentieth of our former territory. Our provinces have been taken, as a man plucks figs. Reverse has followed reverse; our most secret plans have miscarried, and our credit is exhausted. We have strengthened our arms till our own are feeble, and what have we for it all. Apulia camps almost within sight of Crevia, and the fragments of our fleet do but thwart for a moment what seems to be the inevitable end.

The men of Crevia call for another leader, the army has not lost faith in itself, but in you. A few successes mean a new lease of life, improved credit, reviving hope. Permit me to express my intense regret that it is my duty to ask for your resignation as Commander-in-Chief.

The President bowed with deep commiseration, his gaze rivetted on the marble visage of the old soldier, who stood so motionless, that he would have appeared inanimate save for the burning fire in his eyes, which no ashes of age could quench. A tense silence lay over the room—one long ray of sunlight pierced the dome, and fell with slanting fingers on a dusty Apulian flag. The General

glanced at the colours; surely here was his opening. He had won them and placed them there, but his lips uttered no appeal, no vindication. His hand rose to the salute, "With or without me, long live Crevia; the day is coming when you will understand," and this was all he said.

The President waited for a moment and then rose: "Gentlemen, the Council is adjourned." One by one the members rose, gathered their papers, and left the chamber, many of them turning as they reached the door to glance at the motionless figure, his hand still at the salute.

Then, as the last voices died away, utter stillness and sunshine filled the room. The old soldier stretched out his arms to the tattered banners overhead. "A little more time, dear God, a little more time," he breathed.

The city population had been thinned. In the first flush of war, her men had left counting house and factory, office and warehouse, and swung out into the northern fastnesses, light of foot and heart, and to those at home it was as if a stone had been dropped into some black and bottomless pool. An echo of music, a ringing of steel, a rumble of guns



Drawn by George Butler.

He saw a gigantic column of vivid flame.

over the paved streets, the dwindling columns writhing up the mountain slopes, and then silence and heartache, till the agonized return of maimed, broken and grim-faced men, whose youth was buried on the flanks of the voiceless hills.

As before a wintry wind, the dry leaves go whirling down their forest aisles, the waiting crowds dispersed into the streets that led upon the square. Long-drawn tension gave way to new-born hope. With the announcement of the Council's decision came also the name of the new Commander-in-Chief, and the action commended itself to the majority. In the prime of life, active, resourceful and popular, the tent knew more of him than the Council Chamber. His service had savored more of the foray than the deep-laid campaign, but the city called for action; a quick, decisive home thrust would give them breathing time. A few old veterans shook their heads. "We need the brain behind the hand," they said, but the great body of citizens was content, nay, more, re-encouraged.

In distant trenches that zigzagged across the spurs of frowning hills, grizzled men drank to the health of their new leader, and through the summer

airs imperceptible vibrations sped the news to the patrolling warships, as they lurched through the long swells that lifted under a windless sky. New levies were made, the skeletons of the battered regiments were re-clothed with men and ammunition and once again the mountains yawned and swallowed them. The fleet assumed the offensive and succeeded in some minor actions, till from behind the clouds the sun of a long-sought victory looked down on Crevia. But of the old Commander, the Crevians could find nothing. He had disappeared utterly from among them and no man knew the time or manner of his going. His villa was deserted, his servants, who were devoted to him, had vanished too, his official papers were found, docketed, classified and in order, but of the man himself not a vestige. On the sea, all passage was blocked and landward, were precipice and gorge, and behind them, the enemy. The mystery held the people for a period and then in the face of their extremities died away.

Tarsis, the capital of Apulia, lay basking in the centre of a vast alluvial plain, and smiled up at her favouring skies. Around her stretched the broad, fat meadows from which her pristine wealth had sprung, now occupied by opulent estates and trelised with vine and delicate flowering shrub. From the foot hills which bounded the blue horizon aqueducts threaded down brimming with crystal waters. Her streets were wide and gorged with traffic, her squares were cool and green, her buildings marble and monumental. Everywhere her flags swung lazily in the breeze, and beneath them swarmed her people, like bees in some honey-laden hive. Flushed with success, confident and prosperous, their papers satisfied them with news of further advances toward Crevia, and further additions to the already swollen spoils of victory. In the privacy of the war-department chamber, the popular president of Apulia, held converse with his advising Committees. The long table in front of them was littered with maps, showing in varied colours the territory as taken at different stages of the war, and reports from the military authorities spoke with confidence of its early termination. The loss of life had been great, and, with the sure and certain prize in sight, orders had been given to avoid further sacrifice and not unduly hasten the inevitable end. The meeting had been a record of pride and progress, and the President was about to adjourn when the sentry at the door presented arms and admitted the Assistant Secretary of the Department, who respectfully saluted the President and handed him a letter. "Sir," he said, "this was found on the steps of this building at daybreak, but has only just reached me."

The letter was addressed to the President, sealed, but unstamped. He opened it, while his colleagues prepared to leave. Suddenly he stopped them, his face expressing bewilderment, not unmixed with mirth. "Gentlemen, a moment, while I read you this."

The President,

The Republic of Apulia:

Sir,—In the name of humanity cease your onslaughts against Crevia. The earth and its people have been given into my hands and with them an engine of war, so terrible, that perforce all war must cease. I give you one week in which to withdraw your forces by land and sea. If within this time my orders have not been obeyed, your temerity will cost Tarsis her War Office, and whatever lives and moves within it. That you may not scoff at this letter, the writer will deposit its duplicate on the steps of this building to-night. Once more, in the name of humanity, I bid, I implore you to end a useless slaughter.

A Friend of Crevia.

An amused smile spread over the faces of his auditors as the President finished. They were in condition for a joke, and this would be welcomed by club and fireside. The Minister of War laughingly saluted the President. "I think, Sir, we may safely leave the precautions in your hands." When he was alone, the President stood for a moment, plunged in thought, and then touched a bell. "Tell the Prefect of Police I should like to see him," he said to the man who answered, and in a few moments the Prefect stood before him, impassive of face. "Your orders, Sir?"

"My orders are, Prefect, that you establish a cordon of your best men around this building from