APPIUS CLAUDIUS CÆCUS

I

[104] SOON after the defeat of the Gauls there lived in Rome a great man named Appius Claudius. He belonged to one of the highest families of the city. He was consul for two years, and for several years he held the office of censor (312-308 B.C.).

The censor was a very high and important officer. He was not only head of the department for taking the census, but he had charge of the collecting of the taxes, the erecting of public buildings, and the making of roads and streets.

Appius Claudius was a great soldier. Every Roman citizen had to be a soldier, and every man who was consul had to be able to lead armies and to fight and win battles. But Appius Claudius was chiefly famous for the great public works he planned and directed in Rome, which at that time was a city with a population of about three hundred thousand. One of these works was an aqueduct which brought water to the city from a lake eight miles distant. The Roman aqueducts were the best in the world. [105] Some of them that were built over two thousand years ago are still in use.

But the greatest work of Appius Claudius was the making of a road from Rome to Capua, a distance of one hundred and twenty miles. This road was called the Appian Way in honor of Appius. It was also called the "queen of roads" because it was so well built. Parts of it are still in existence. The Romans had good roads as well as good aqueducts. They were the best road-builders in the world.
While he was censor Appius Claudius very much improved Rome. He was called "the greatest of his countrymen in the works of peace." Even after he retired from office he had great influence in public affairs. His advice was asked by both plebeians and nobles.

Once during the first war which the Romans had with the Greeks the advice of Appius was of great benefit to Rome. At that time there were many Greek settlements in the south of Italy. One of the Greek towns was called Tarentum. It was built close to the sea and had a very good harbor.

Many of the people of this town were well educated. In those days the Greeks were mostly an educated people. They were fond of learning and of art. They called the Romans barbarians and were not friendly to them.

Once when a Roman fleet entered the bay of Tarentum, the people of the town attacked it and after taking five of the ships put the crews to death. When the news of this outrage reached Rome the Senate sent ambassadors to demand satisfaction. One of the ambassadors was a man named Lucius Posthumius. When they arrived at Tarentum they were met by a noisy crowd of people of the town, who made fun of their dress.

The Romans wore an outer dress called a toga. It was a large white woollen cloth, in the shape of a half circle, four or five yards long and of nearly the same width. In putting on this garment they doubled it lengthwise, then passed one end over the left shoulder and under the opposite arm and again over the left shoulder, the other end reaching nearly to the ground in front. The Tarentines laughed at the toga of the Roman ambassadors. They said it was a dress fit only for savages.

In a short time the ambassadors were taken to the public theatre, where the people had assembled to hear the message from Rome. Posthumius spoke to them in Greek, but as this was not his own language he pronounced many of the words in a peculiar way, and the Tarentines laughed. The Roman went on, however, in a dignified manner and finished his speech as if he had not noticed the insult.
Just then a Tarentine moved forward to the place where Posthumius stood and threw some dirt on his white toga. The ambassador held up the soiled garment with his hand and said that Tarentum would be made to suffer for the outrage. Then the theatre rang with laughter and offensive cries.

[108] "Laugh on," said Posthumius, "you may laugh now but you shall weep hereafter. The stain on this toga shall be washed out in your blood!"

Then the ambassadors left the theatre and at once set out for Rome. When they appeared before the Senate Posthumius showed the stain on his toga as proof of the insult offered to Rome by the Tarentines. The Senate at once declared war on Tarentum and sent a powerful army to attack it.

II

At this time the Tarentines had no general they thought would be able to fight the Romans. So they sent across the sea to Epirus, in Greece, for the king of that country to come and help them. The name of this king was Pyrrhus. He was a great soldier and commander and was nearly always engaged in war. He consented to help the Tarentines and crossed over to Italy with a great army in which there was a number of fighting elephants.

When Pyrrhus entered Tarentum he made himself master of the city. The Tarentines were very fond of plays and amusements of all kinds. Pyrrhus closed the theatres, stopped all the amusements and made the people drill as soldiers all day long.

As soon as he was ready to fight he marched out [109] with his army of Greeks and Tarentines against the Romans, and there was a great battle near the city of Heraclea. Both sides fought well for hours, but the Greeks at last began to fall back. They could not stand against the steady, fierce attacks made by the Romans.

Then Pyrrhus brought his elephants upon the field. He had seventy of them, and they were thoroughly trained to fight. They would run into the ranks of the enemy, knock the soldiers down and trample them to death, or lay hold of them with their trunks and throw them high into the air.

ELEPHANTS OF PYRRHUS
As the elephants stood in line waiting for the order to charge, the Romans looked at them with wonder and fear. They knew nothing about elephants, for they had never seen any before. And when the huge beasts came charging furiously across the field, making strange noises, many of the Roman soldiers were terribly frightened and began to run away. The elephants killed hundreds of them, and in a few minutes the Roman army was put to flight.

It was saved from entire destruction by only one thing. A Roman soldier was brave enough to rush at an elephant while it was charging and cut off a part of its trunk with his sword. The animal, wild with pain, turned and ran back to the Greek lines, trampling down the soldiers and causing a great deal of confusion. In the excitement the Romans managed to escape across a river to a friendly city where they were safe.

Pyrrhus won the victory, but he lost thousands of men. When he saw the great number of his soldiers that lay dead on the field, he exclaimed:

"A few more such victories and I must return to Epirus alone!"

III

Shortly after the battle Pyrrhus sent his friend and favorite minister, Cineas, to Rome to offer terms of peace to the Senate. Cineas was a very eloquent man. Often when Pyrrhus could not conquer people in battle, Cineas by his clever speeches induced them to submit to the king and be his friends. This was why the Greeks used to say, "The tongue of Cineas wins more cities than the sword of Pyrrhus."

Cineas proposed to the Roman Senate that the Romans should not make war any longer on the Tarentines, nor on any of the Italian tribes that had helped them, and that all the lands Rome had taken from these tribes in past years should be given back. If the Romans would agree to these terms, then Pyrrhus would be their true friend.

The terms were not good for Rome, but Cineas was so smooth-spoken and so pleasant in proposing them that many of the senators were inclined to accept them. One day while they were discussing the matter in the Senate a thrilling scene occurred.

Appius Claudius was still living in Rome. He was very old and had become blind. For this reason he got the name Cæcus, a word which is Latin for blind. But his mind was remarkably clear, and he had not lost interest in public affairs. When he heard that the Senate was going to accept the terms offered by Pyrrhus he rose from his bed declaring that he would go and speak against the proposal.

So he was carried by his slaves to the Senate house, and his sons led the aged man to his seat. He began his speech amidst the deepest silence. His youth seemed to come back to him. Once more he was the bold censor of thirty years before. In fiery words he spoke against the plan for peace, saying it would be base and cowardly to yield to the Greek king.

"Let us fight on," he said, "as long as we have soldiers. Shall we submit to this Greek invader merely because we have lost one battle? Never! Never! I say. Better to lose all that we have than to disgrace ourselves by submitting!"
The patriotic old man went on speaking in this way until his strength failed him and he sank exhausted into his seat. His speech had so much effect on the senators that they immediately voted against the proposal of Pyrrhus and ordered Cineas to depart from Rome.

Then the war was carried on vigorously. A great battle was fought at Asculum, and again the Romans were defeated by the Greeks. But they were not discouraged. The Consul Curius Dentatus fought another battle against Pyrrhus at Beneventum, and won a glorious victory. The Greeks were utterly defeated, and Pyrrhus soon afterwards left Italy and returned to his own country.

Then the Romans speedily took possession of Tarentum and made its people pay well for their insult to the Roman ambassadors.