

MARATHON

THOMAS AQUINAS COLLINS, O.P.,

"The mountains look on Marathon,
And Marathon looks on the sea.
And musing there an hour alone,
I dreamed that Greece might still be free."

—Lord Byron: *Don Juan*



BRAHAM LINCOLN, in his address at Gettysburg, said that the world would "little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."

Paradoxically, almost every schoolboy is far more familiar with the words of the classic address, than with the details of the battle of Gettysburg. We have, in a measure, forgotten what they did there, and remembered what he said there.

The famous battle of Marathon has shared somewhat of the same fate. After he had gasped out the news of the Athenian victory at Marathon, twenty miles away, an exhausted runner fell dead in the streets of Athens. His heroic deed will be remembered as long as men run, swim, or dance marathons. A marathon is symbolic of the stamina and courage of the messenger who gave his life to announce the glorious victory of his countrymen, yet here again, we have forgotten "what they did here," though what they did was of tremendous importance, not only to the glory that was Greece, but also to the history of European civilization. On the plains of Marathon, the Athenians administered a crushing defeat to a mighty empire that was steamrolling its way westward, and her victory was the first of a series, which so thoroughly checked the advance of the East that "for 1100 years, from the battle of Salamis, 480 B.C., to the siege of Constantinople, 620 A.D., no Oriental conqueror again approached the Hellespont to threaten the Balkan Peninsula with annexation to an Asiatic realm."¹

The Middle East, during the upheaval in the fifth and sixth centuries before Christ, witnessed the crash of five great civilizations,

¹ Oman: *History of Greece*, p. 124. Longmans, Green & Co. 1895.

and the emergence, from the ruins, of a sixth, the empire of the Persians, or of the Medes, as they were known to the Greeks. Before the conquering armies of Cyrus and his son, Cambyses, all Asia, from Lydia to India, and from Chorasmia to the Persian gulf, and Egypt, too, became subjects under the new empire. Cambyses was succeeded by an imposter, an imposter whom Darius, son of Hystaspes, slew in a surprise attack in the night. Darius, who was to prove even greater than Cyrus himself, was not of the branch of Elamites which had produced Cyrus and Cambyses, and the new empire, refusing to submit to the new king, broke up into a hopeless mass. For three years Darius fought the pretenders to the throne, and finally he succeeded in reorganizing his entire empire into twenty-three provinces, each with its own military governor, a civil governor, and a royal secretary. Under his rule, what was formerly a heterogeneous mass of vassal states now began to flourish so rapidly, that Darius began to look across the Aegean into Europe for more worlds to conquer.

The rumor that the king of the Persians was contemplating an invasion of Europe terrified the Greeks on the west of the Aegean, and they had good reason to be frightened. Nature seemed determined that Greece should be the home of powerful little city-states, each independent, proud of their own little country and its customs. No one has ever accused Greece of political unity. Not even the great struggle with the East forced her to unite. In his description of the lack of unity in Greek political life during the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., H. R. Hall writes, "A century later the strength of pan-hellenic feeling was to be tested to the full, not by a single Greek town, but by the whole embattled force of the emperor of Asia, in whose armies conquered Assyria, Babylonia and Egypt marched but as subject tribes. Hellenic patriotism won through, despite the cowards: but political unity did not come after that tremendous trial, nor was it in the mind of the nation that it should. Athens was punished for her unification of the maritime Greeks: Sparta for her attempts at land-hegemony. The unity of the Greeks was strongest in diversity. And when the Macedonian 'unified' them, they died."²

While it is true that Greece was the home of powerful and independent city-states, not even these states were always as united as they might have been. The great personal and political rivalry between powerful party leaders had always been the curse of Athens.

² H. R. Hall, *The Ancient History of the Near East*, p. 530. Macmillan & Co., New York, 1935.

Fortunately, Athens had completely reorganized her political economy at the end of the sixth century, and had adopted a constitution which had as its basis a principle so foreign to Greek political science that many an oligarchical eyebrow was raised in surprise at the power which had been given to the people. Never had a Greek city given such power to its citizens. Never had its citizens been given the supreme juridical power at home, and a supreme control over its foreign policy. This new freedom of the Athenians has been compared, by H. R. Hall, "to the energy of the French democracy in 1792. And in both cases the result was the victory of a new principle and the dawn of a new era in the world. I continue to believe that the democracy of the freeman was the moving spirit of the resistance of Athens to Persia."³

About 510 B.C. Darius began his bid for the extension of his power to the West by marching, not to the country of the Hellenes, but to the north to pay off an old score against the Scythians who had invaded Asia the century before, during the reign of Cyaxares the Mede. The wily Scythians proved a match for the genius of Darius. Instead of attempting to face the might of the Persians, the Scythians merely withdrew into the wastes of the Russian steppes, and the chase was on. For two months Darius marched his forces against an enemy who was ever in sight but never in reach. The futile trek through a desolate land began to take its toll on the morale of his troops. Weary of the chase, and threatened by a food shortage, Darius finally called the whole thing off, and left a large force under his lieutenant, Megabazos, to subdue Thrace, and exact tribute from Amyntas, king of Macedon. The Ionian revolt at home prevented an immediate crossing of the Aegean into Athens, for it took the Persians six years to put down the uprising. During the revolt, the Ionians had sacked and burned the city of Cardis, in 499 B.C., with the help of Athenians, a fact which infuriated Darius, and a fact which he never permitted himself to forget. Legend has it that he commissioned his cupbearer to repeat thrice at every banquet, "Master; remember the Athenians."

In 492 B.C., when peace had been restored at home, and sufficient preparations had been made, the Persians set out to destroy the Athenians. Under Mardonios, a land and sea force set out by way of Thrace, but the expedition failed when a storm wrecked the Persian fleet of Mt. Athos, thereby preventing support of the troops. "From Thasos the fleet stood across to the mainland, and sailed along

³ H. R. Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 542.

shore to Acanthus, whence an attempt was made to double Mount Athos. But here a violent north wind sprang up, against which nothing could contend, and handled a large number of the ships with much rudeness, shattering them and driving them aground upon Athos. "Tis said the number of the ships destroyed was little short of three hundred; and the men who perished were more than twenty thousand. For the sea about Athos abounds in monsters beyond all others; and so a portion were seized and devoured by these animals, while others were dashed violently against the rocks; some, who did not know how to swim, were engulfed; and some died of the cold."⁴

Two years later, 490 B.C., the Persians set out again, this time by way of the islands, mindful of the wreck of Mardonios. The great fleet terrified the islanders who immediately paid tribute to the Persian king. Under the guidance of the aged Hippias, a former tyrant of Athens who had visions of ascending to his former throne, the Persians took the town of Eretria, placing the entire populace on the ships in chains. The fleet landed on the plains of Marathon, and prepared to humiliate what they considered to be an insolent little city. The fall of Eretria had galvanized the Greeks into action. Pheidippides, a famous runner, was dispatched to the Spartans for the aid of the fierce Spartan troops, but, though he covered the 150 miles in the amazing time of two days, Pheidippides ran in vain, for a religious law forbade the Spartans to march at that time. Meanwhile, with the Persians on the plains below, the ten generals on the war council at Athens were deadlocked, five of them voting for resistance, and five others, appalled at the number of the enemy, voted for a peaceful settlement. Though the Athenians were outnumbered, it is difficult to accept the figure of 100,000 Persians, for while Herodotus speaks of a host of Medes, he does not indicate that the 10,000 Athenians were outnumbered ten to one. Modern historians hold the opinion that they may have engaged three times their number, but no more. Miltiades, who was to prove the hero of Marathon, realizing that the deadlock would forever seal the fate of Athens, rose and addressed Kallimachos, the polemarch. "If they bow their necks beneath the yoke of the Medes, the woes they will have to suffer when given into the power of Hippias are already determined. Thou hast only to add thy vote to my side and thy country will be free, and not free only, but the first state in Greece."⁵ The polemarch could break the tie with his vote, and he gave it to Miltiades, who immediately

⁴ *The History of Herodotus*, Tudor Publishing Co., New York, 1932, p. 321.

⁵ Herodotus, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

was given supreme power by the other generals.

He formed the Athenian line so that it was of equal length with the Persians, but was forced, though lack of numbers, to weaken his center, while he heavily reinforced the wings. When everything was ready, Miltiades took a gamble for one of the highest stakes in history. He sent the Athenians racing madly down to the plains, and they smashed into the startled Medes on the dead run. One brave, mad drive would have to do it, or the Athenians must bow their knees as the Assyrians, the Egyptians, and the Babylonians had done. The Persians, hastily drawing up a line of battle to meet the desperate Greeks, cracked through the weak center, but began to retreat before the determined Plataeans and Athenians on the wings. Suddenly, panic swept over their ranks. A few started to race for the ships, and soon the forces on both wings were dashing to the ships for safety. Then the Plataeans and Athenians snapped tight the trap and caught those who had smashed through their center. "Joining the two wings into one, they fell upon those who had broken their own center, and fought and conquered them. These likewise fled, and now the Athenians hung upon the runaways and cut them down, chasing them all the way to the shore, on reaching which they laid hold of the ships and called aloud for fire. It was in the struggle here that Callimachus the polemarch, after greatly distinguishing himself, lost his life; and Stesilaus too, the son of Thrasilaus, one of the generals, was slain; and Cynaegirus, the son of Euphorion, having seized on a vessel of the enemy's by the ornament at the stern, had his hand cut off by the blow of an axe, and so perished."⁶

When the Persians finally got their ships under way, they had left over six thousand dead on the field, while the Greeks lost only one hundred and ninety-two. In actual bloodshed, the battle was far less fierce than others which the Medes had fought and won in their rise to power. To them, the present defeat was a surprise, to be sure, but they had been surprised and defeated before, only to return with a new and greater force. As the Persians sailed away from Marathon, there was little doubt in their minds that Darius would immediately begin preparations for an invasion which would bring the insolent Athenians to his feet. The importance of Marathon was the tremendous effect it had on the Athenians. To them, as to all other Greeks, the might of the conquering Persians had become a legend. When Miltiades came forward with his daring plan, many a Greek heart must have skipped a few beats, upon realizing that an

⁶ *Ibid.*

army which ruled most of the world was encamped on the plains below. Yet, when the moment came, they struck the Persian line with the fury and frenzy of madmen, and when it was all over, a new Athens was born. "They had measured themselves with the conquerors of the East, and found that, man for man, and army for army, they were far superior. It was the enthusiastic self-confidence which Marathon gave, that enabled them to bear so cheerfully the trials of the invasion of Xerxes, and afterwards to strike so boldly for the empire of the seas."⁷

The victory over the Medes placed Athens in a new light before her sister city-states. For, indeed, they had faced the terrible Persians practically alone, and, "were the first of the Greeks, as far as I know, who introduced the custom of charging the enemy at a run, and they were likewise the first who dared to look upon the Median garb, and to face men clad in that fashion. Until this time the very name of the Medes had been a terror to the Greeks to hear."⁸ Such a state could hardly be ignored by those whose freedom it had preserved. Boeotia, Aegina, Argos and others would have submitted to the Persians, had the Athenians bowed to the yoke of Darius. But a victorious Athens became, as Miltiades had promised, "not free only, but the first state in Greece." Her sister-states would take courage when they remembered that Athens had dared to face the hated Mede and send him scurrying from the field.

In the present struggle against the Axis, Greece has proved to the world that she has not forgotten how to fight for freedom. She has proved, too, that she has not forgotten what her brave Athenians did on the plains of Marathon. May she soon enjoy that freedom and peace of which the poet dreamed.

⁷ Oman, *History of Greece*, p. 181.

⁸ Herodotus, *op. cit.*, p 345.