

THE RACE

Cimon looked nervously across the training ground. A group of young men was milling around the race track. Some were practising their starts. Others, helped by their slaves, were putting on their armour.

Callimachus, the army commander-in-chief, stood stiff and upright near the finishing line. He was a brave man, but tough – as hard as the rock of the Acropolis, they said. He was not Cimon's favourite officer.

Cimon turned to his slave. 'C-come on, N-Naxi', he stuttered. 'I'd b-better g-get ready.' Naxi began tying the heavy bronze breastplate on to his master's chest.

A burly youth left the group and walked towards Cimon. 'Come on, Cimon!' he yelled. 'You'll miss the race.' He glanced back at his friends. 'Or maybe that's what you w-w-want?' he mocked.

Cimon knelt down to put on his metal leg guards and said nothing. He was not going to give the bully Paros another change to make fun of his stutter.

'Don't worry, master', Naxi said kindly. 'One day you'll show them. I know you will.'

Cimon smiled. 'Th-thanks, Naxi. L-let's hope you're r-right.'

Cimon was a fine athlete, one of the best in Athens. He trained hard, too. Rising early, he liked to set off

alone into the silent hills and run till his legs ached and the sun burned his back like a flaming torch. He dreamed of being a messenger, like the great runner Philippides. But who wanted a messenger with a stutter? Sometimes, when he was alone, Cimon cried out to the gods in his misery. Why, he asked, had they given him a perfect body but a broken voice?

The starter climbed on to a stone platform and called the men to him. 'Citizens of Athens', he began, 'Our greatest trial is about to begin! We expect at any moment to hear that the Persians have landed. They have one aim: to destroy us and our city. Will you fight for freedom?'

'Yes! Freedom!' the men shouted.

The bully Paros leaned over and whispered in Cimon's ear, 'D'you hear that, Stammer Boy? You've got to f-fight. Bet you're scared!'

Cimon bit his lip and kept quiet.

'Today', the starter went on, 'Commander-in-Chief Callimachus has come to watch the race in armour. He's looking for soldiers to fill key positions in the battle line. So do your best – and may the gods be with you!'

The men clattered to the starting line and pulled on their helmets. They gripped the stone grooves with their bare toes. On the word from the starter, they were off.

Cimon sprang forward like a hound. With three strides he was almost clear of the field. Paros, to his left, was already half a metre back.

The bully saw what was happening and kicked forward. The blow caught Cimon on the heel. With a cry of dismay, he fell forward on to the dusty track. By the time he had picked himself up, the other runners were well ahead. Cimon grabbed his shield and set off after them, but he had lost too much ground and came in last.

Callimachus congratulated the winner. Then he turned to Cimon. ‘And you’, he snorted, ‘The idiot who can’t even stay on his feet – who are you?’

Cimon looked down at the ground. ‘Ci-Ci ...’, he stammered.

‘What?’ barked the commander. ‘Forgotten your own name?’ He looked round at the others. ‘Who is this fool?’ he demanded.

‘That, sir’, Paros called out, grinning all over his face, ‘is Cimon the St-St-Stutterer!’

Laughter rang around the training ground. Cimon blushed with shame and walked back alone to where Naxi was waiting for him.

Chapter 2

‘THEY’VE ARRIVED!’

The next day, Cimon went down to the training ground early. He wanted to practise with his sword and spear before Paros got there. The last thing he wanted was to be made a fool of again.

Cimon worked hard for a couple of hours. He began with the sword, first running through the basic moves, then having mock fights using wooden weapons. The instructor was pleased with him. If all Athenians fought like Cimon, he told the other soldiers, the Persians would be sent packing in no time.

After sword drill, Cimon went on to the spear. This was the Athenians’ most important weapon. The Persians had the best cavalry in the world. Greek foot-soldiers could beat them only if they stood close together and drove off the enemy horsemen with their long spears. Cimon got Naxi to run at him holding a horse-shaped piece of wood. When it was almost on top of him, he darted to the right and thrust his sword forward.

It was hot work. After a while Cimon took a rest while Naxi went to fetch a drink of water. A couple of minutes later, he was back.

‘Master!’ he cried. ‘They’ve arrived!’

Cimon jumped to his feet. ‘W-who have?’ he asked.

‘The Persians! A huge army has landed a day’s march away. In Marathon Bay.’

A tingle of excitement ran through Cimon’s body. At last! he thought. Now I’ll have a chance to show what I can really do! He set off for the city centre straight away in search of news.

By the entrance to the training ground he passed Paros and his gang. ‘Look who it isn’t!’ the bully yelled when he saw him. ‘It’s the great runner – off to fight the P-Persians!’

Cimon stopped and glared at him. ‘Oh sh-shut up, P-Paros!’ he shouted. ‘C-Can’t you k-keep your g-great m-mouth sh-shut, for once!’

‘Temper, temper!’ Paros sneered. He turned to his friends and asked, ‘By the way, who is this fool?’

Before they could reply, Cimon left the training ground and set off towards the main square. This was no time to be worrying about Paros, he told himself. It was the Persians that really mattered.

The citizens of Athens met in an assembly to decide what to do. Cimon went along to listen to the debate. It was crazy, one speaker said, to face the Persians in battle. They were far too strong. Their cavalry would sweep away the Greek foot-soldiers like leaves.

That was not true, argued Miltiades, one of the city’s ten generals. If the Athenians were careful, they could easily beat the Persians and push them back into the sea. Besides, the people of Platea were bound to help. The powerful army of Sparta would probably also join

them. That would make the Greeks more than a match for the Persians.

In the end, Miltiades got his way. The Athenian army was ordered to Marathon right away. Meanwhile, the runner Philippides was to go to Sparta as fast as possible and ask for help.

Cimon's heart jumped when he heard this. He wished he was going to Sparta. But he knew it was impossible. What would the warlike Spartans think if a stutterer came asking for help?

With a shake of the head, he set out for home. There was no time to be lost. He had to say goodbye to his parents and get ready for the long march to Marathon.