

THE EXPLOITS OF XENOPHON



GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

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PREFACE

THIS STORY OF BATTLE and adventure was first published about the year 371 B.C., but it may seem to you as vivid as if it had been written by a colonel in the last war. This is because Xenophon is describing at first hand what he did, what he suffered and what he saw.

He was born, probably, about 431 B.C. and died about 354 B.C. His chief interests were farming, soldiering and horsemanship, but he had had the most glorious education that the world has ever known: he was schooled in Athens at the time of her greatest splendor, and had Socrates as his teacher. So writing was a natural amusement for his hours of leisure.

He has left us a history of the revolutionary years in Athens; essays on cavalry, the training of youth and economics; his recollections of Socrates; and this great story which is called the *Anabasis*. If you learn Greek, you will probably begin your reading with extracts from it.

It is the very first book of war reminiscences which has come down to us, and it gives a superb picture of a lively Greek army and its impact upon the ancient civilization of the East. Though the adventure was only a heroic retreat, it did show the Greeks that they need not be frightened by the immense spaces of Asia, and that they could march wherever they chose, provided they learned to use cavalry and archers as well as the Persians did.

Xenophon passed on his experience to the Spartan King, Agesilaus, who employed him to raise and train squadrons of regular cavalry for the invasion of Asia Minor. Their new tactics were developed still further by Alexander the Great, who conquered and governed the whole Persian Empire. So the fact that Greek culture and language spread as far east as India—and, incidentally, that the New Testament was written in Greek—is partly due to the expedition which Xenophon describes and the lessons which he and his fellow commanders learned on the long march.

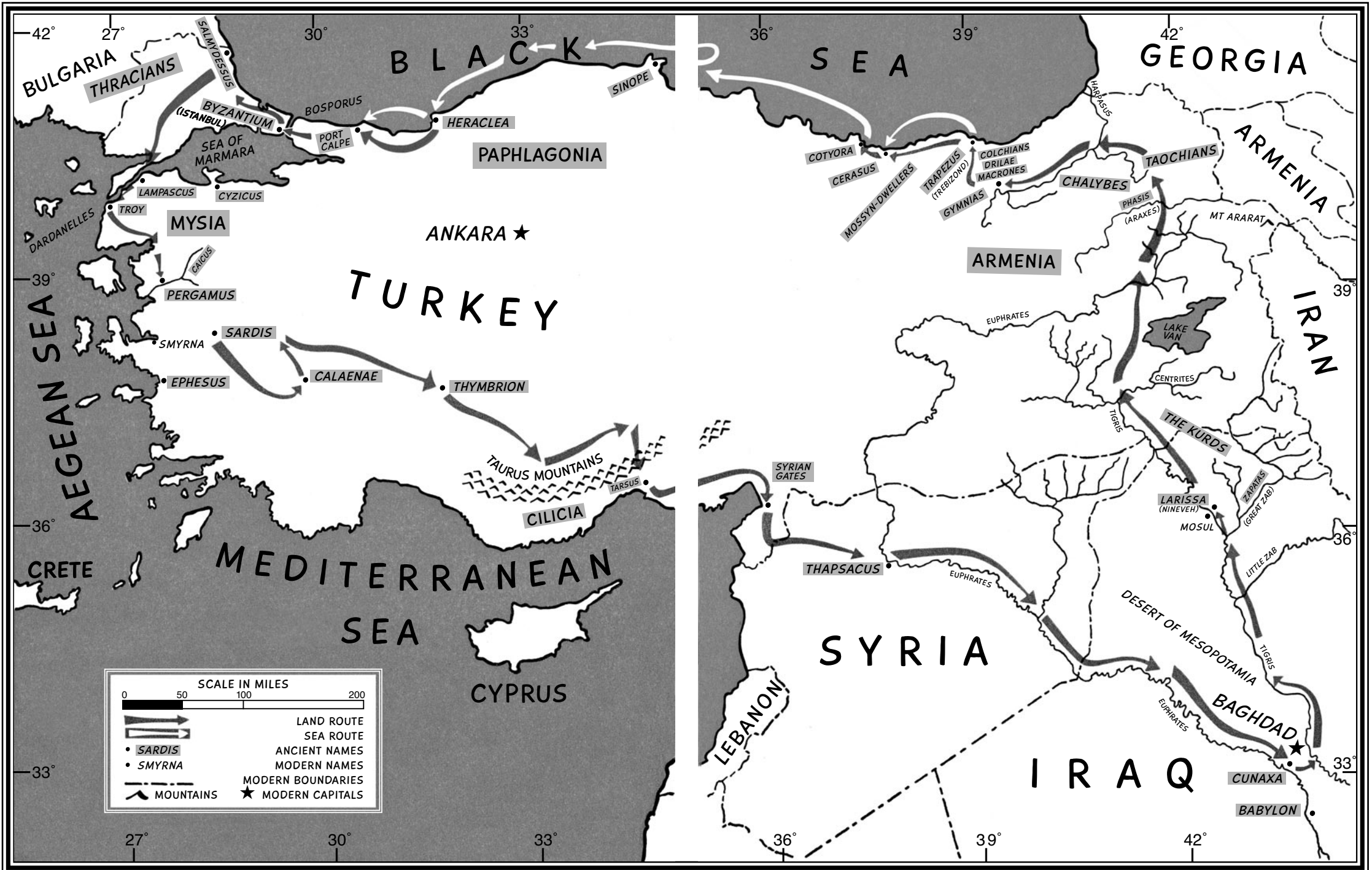
I have cut down Xenophon's book to a quarter of its length, and I have given him a more modern style than

he really has. Also I have made him speak of himself in the first person as *I*, though he chose to write in the third person—*Xenophon* said this and *Xenophon* did that.

Apart from those changes, I have added nothing at all that he does not say or imply; so you will be reading very nearly what boys and men read in Athens 2,320 years ago.

GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

1955



MARCH OF THE

TEN THOUSAND

THE EXPLOITS OF
XENOPHON

THE CAMP

Chapter One

XENOPHON'S STORY BEGINS in the spring of 401 B.C., when he was about twenty-nine years old. The thirty years of war in which Sparta at last defeated Athens were over. All the independent states of Greece—some of them cities, some of them islands, some just groups of country towns—were at peace; but they were poor, uneasy and full of displaced persons, many of whom were experienced soldiers.

All the rest of the civilized world, as it was then known to the Greeks, was united into a single, immense, fabulously wealthy empire. It stretched from Turkey to India, and from the Caspian Sea to Egypt. This empire was governed and organized by the Persians, who were at that time a people of pure European stock, often fair-haired and of great physical beauty. Greeks were always impressed by their height and splendid clothes and courtly manners; but they had no respect at all for the Persian political system.

The Greeks invented government by the vote, and they were very proud of it. Their little states used it in many different ways. In Sparta, for example, the form of government was close to what we now call fascism. In Athens, especially during

the war, it was more like socialism. But all the Greeks were of one opinion in despising the peoples of the Persian Empire, who simply obeyed an all-powerful king.

They had no respect for the Persian armies either, which they had soundly defeated when King Darius and King Xerxes invaded Greece. Still, no general had dared to dream of marching into the heart of the Empire; for a little Greek army, however efficient, was bound to be surrounded and starved out by the uncountable hordes of Persian troops.



I am an Athenian, but I cannot say that I was very happy in Athens after the war. Revolution, state trials, party dictatorship—we went through them all. So when one day I got a letter from my friend Proxenus, asking me to join his staff in Asia Minor, I must admit I was tempted.

Proxenus was a citizen of Boeotia who had spent a lot of money on his own education and was determined to win wealth and fame. So he had gone over to Asia, and was living at the court of a Persian prince named Cyrus.

He wrote to me that he was recruiting troops for a regiment of his own in Cyrus' army, and asked me to come in with him—not as an officer or enlisted man, but simply as a personal friend. He said that Cyrus had the finest type of Persian character—honorable, generous and very fond of horses and hunting—that he was sure

to like me and that I had a very good chance of making my fortune.

Times were hard for a plain country gentleman like myself, and the offer was just what I wanted; but I decided first to ask the advice of my old teacher, Socrates. He was doubtful. He pointed out that Cyrus had favored the Spartans against Athens, and that I should find myself very unpopular if I made a friend of him. He advised me to make a pilgrimage to the temple at Delphi, where I should pray to the god Apollo for guidance.

So there I went, and asked the priestess of Apollo the following question:

“To what gods ought I to pray and sacrifice in order to set out with honor and return in safety?”

I received the answer that I should sacrifice to Zeus the King. This I told Socrates when I got home to Athens, but he was not pleased with me. He said I had cheated. I had not prayed for divine guidance on whether I should go or not; I had just announced that I was going and asked which of the gods would look after me.

“However, it's done now,” he said. “And so long as you pay some attention to what Apollo told you, I think you might as well go.”

I made the proper sacrifices and then embarked for Asia with my arms and armor and a few of my favorite

horses. And from the port I traveled upcountry to Sardis, where I found Proxenus and Cyrus and the army.

This Cyrus was a son of the Great King; but it was his brother, Artaxerxes, who inherited the empire. Cyrus was pretty lucky that he didn't have his head cut off, for his brother had heard that he was plotting against him. However, thanks to his mother, Cyrus escaped, and was appointed one of the imperial governors of Asia Minor. He made himself very powerful in his own province, and had raised several brigades of first-class Greek infantry. They got good pay and got it regularly, too. So they were quite happy to do Cyrus' fighting for him.

At Sardis we were some seven thousand infantry of the line, of whom Proxenus had raised fifteen hundred. Other Greek contingents, each under its own commander, were coming in; and we heard that Clearchus, a tough Spartan who was under sentence of death in his own country, was marching south with his own picked regiment.

The expeditionary force, so Cyrus told us, was to strike at Tissaphernes, the Governor of Ionia. That sounded reasonable, for the Great King didn't bother much about wars between his governors so long as he received his taxes—and those Cyrus was very careful to remit. But the fact is we didn't inquire too closely. Cyrus was a very great commander and one of the most charming men I have ever met.

In little things he was delightful. I remember him making us a present of a jar of wine, with the message: "I am sending you this because it's the best stuff I have come across for a long time. It's worth while giving a party to drink it up."

Or he would send along a dish of roast geese, just saying that he had enjoyed it and hoped we would too. He even thought of his friends' horses and would tell us, when we were short of fodder, to lead them over to his camp and let them fill up on the royal hay.

In spite of all this kindness, he still managed to keep up the tradition of the court of the Great Kings, where a man learns to command and to obey. He was quite fearless—he still bore the scars he had got from a bear he killed after she had pulled him off his horse. And he dealt so mercilessly with criminals that Persians or Greeks could travel through any of his provinces without a thought of being robbed.

Yes, as a governor he was first-class. He made it his business to see that those of his assistants who were just and honorable would always be better off than those who tried merely to make as much money as they could. The result was that he got the best officers for any job, military or civil.

The whole force marched east from Sardis to Celaenae, where Cyrus had a palace and a zoo. We did 150 miles

in seven days, and all the time more detachments of Greeks were coming in. At Celaenae, Clearchus the Spartan joined us with 1,000 infantry of the line, 800 light troops and 200 Cretan archers who were a godsend later on. Our strength was now 13,000.

Another 200 miles took us to Thymbrion. We were marching too fast for Cyrus to collect the revenues and get his accounts straight, and the soldiers would gather around his tent in the evening and demand their pay. Cyrus was very upset about this, for he was the last man to hold back pay if he had it.

On the march, however, Epyaxa, the Queen of Cilicia, turned up. She fell in love with Cyrus, and I don't think it was altogether a coincidence that shortly afterward he handed out four months' pay. In return he ordered a review for the Queen.

First of all Cyrus inspected his horde of Persian troops; then he drove in a chariot along the Greek front with the Queen following in her carriage. We were drawn up in line, four men deep. Clearchus was on the left, Menon and his Thessalians were on the right, and Proxenus with the rest of the independent commands was in the center. We were dressed in full battle array—covers off the shields, red shirts, bronze helmets and leg armor.

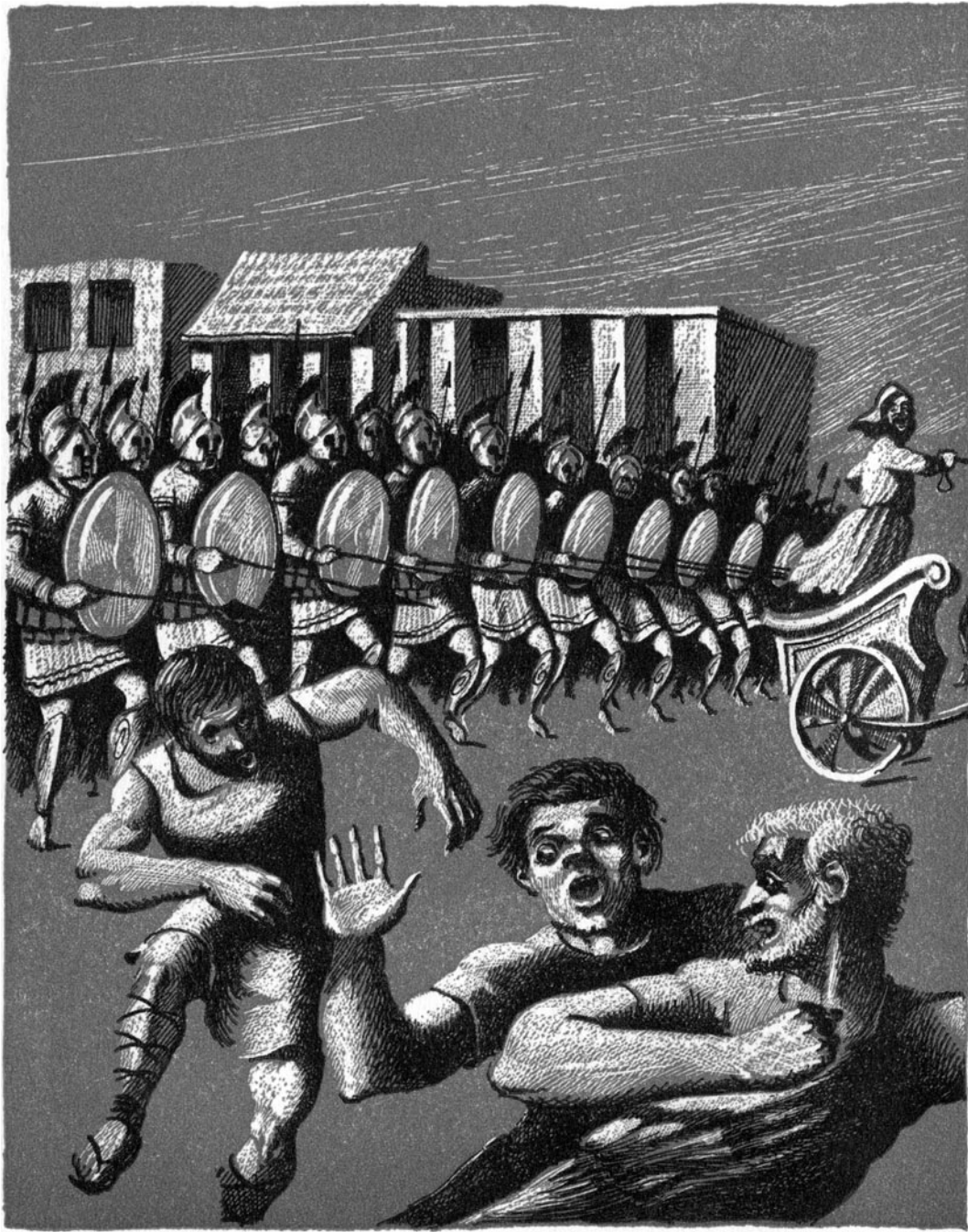
Then Cyrus sent his aide-de-camp to the Greek generals with the order to advance. The trumpet sounded.

The line of upright spears suddenly dropped and surged forward toward the imaginary enemy. It was very like the real thing, so the pace quickened and we shouted and charged our own camp.

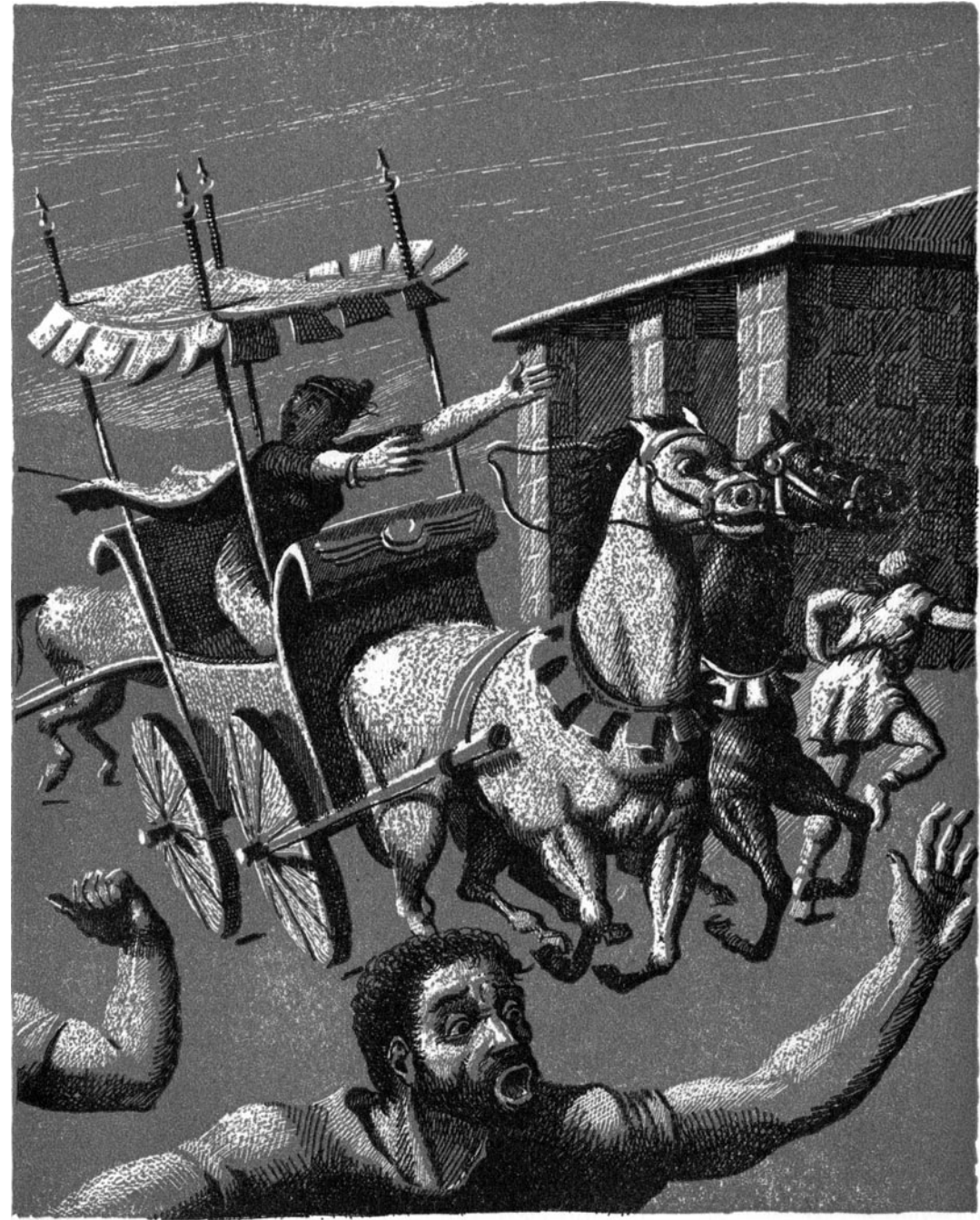
The result was startling. The Queen fled in her carriage. All the merchants in the market bolted for their lives, and the whole place was emptied by the time we went off laughing to our tents. Cyrus was delighted. It showed what the effect on the Persians would be when we meant business.

Up to this time it was possible to believe that the expedition was against Tissaphernes. But once we had crossed the Taurus Mountains, it looked as if Cyrus must be leading us against the Great King. So at Tarsus the army mutinied, refusing to go any farther. When Clearchus ordered his own brigade to get moving, they threw stones at him and nearly killed him.

But Clearchus was a man who enjoyed war for its own sake. There was nothing he didn't know about leading Greek troops—except that he was sometimes too brutal and treated his men as if they were small boys and he a schoolmaster with a cane. However, he knew he had gone too far on this occasion, so he just stood quite silent in front of his men with the tears pouring down his face. When he had them thoroughly shaken, he made one of his manly Spartan speeches. He was a soldier without a



Cyrus ordered a review of the troops for the Queen.



It was so realistic that she fled in her carriage.

country, he said; his only home was the army, and if they wouldn't have him for their general he was perfectly prepared to serve in the ranks and go wherever they did.

Cyrus, of course, was desperate and kept on sending for Clearchus. And Clearchus, to impress the troops, kept on refusing to go. But at the same time he sent a secret message to Cyrus telling him that there was no need to worry, that everything was under control.

So Clearchus called a soldiers' meeting and asked them to speak up and give their opinions. Some said that if Cyrus would not lead us back we should attack his camp. Others pointed out—and of course Clearchus had put them up to it—that even if we managed to beat Cyrus' native troops, we should be left without any means of feeding ourselves, unable either to stay where we were or to march away. And then some idiot suggested that Cyrus must give us ships to take us home. Why on earth should he? In the end we elected delegates to go with Clearchus to ask Cyrus what he really wanted the army for.

Cyrus put off the delegates with a lot of local politics. He said that the army ought to do another twelve days' march, as far as the river Euphrates, and see what happened then. It wasn't very convincing, but what really won the delegates over was that Cyrus raised the pay from one gold piece a month to one and a half.

We marched on, expecting to have to fight for the Syrian Gates, where an army must pass between the sea

and the mountains to enter Syria. Cyrus brought up his fleet to support us, but still we made no contact with any enemy. We hit the Euphrates at Thapsacus. We had now been on the march five months and had covered about a thousand miles.

At Thapsacus Cyrus told us at last that his intention was to march on Babylon, turn Artaxerxes off the throne and make himself king. The Greek army was furious. After cursing the generals and accusing them of knowing all along what Cyrus meant to do, the troops demanded more pay and got it. But what really won us all over was the thought of Cyrus' gratitude and the wealth and promotion that would be ours if we won the kingdom for him. Even the Euphrates seemed to be in favor of Cyrus. The people of Thapsacus said that the water had never been so low, and that the river was bowing like a courtier before a king. So we waded across and committed ourselves to the adventure.

Now came our first view of the desert—a perfectly flat plain with sweet-scented shrubs all over it and no trees. We covered 105 miles in five days, and it was a lot of fun for those who had horses as I did. The desert was crawling with game—wild asses, ostriches, bustards and gazelles. The wild asses were much faster than our horses, and we could catch them only by hunting them around in circles with relays of riders; they were very good eating and tasted like tender venison. The ostriches completely beat

us, and we didn't catch one. But the bustards were easy, for they fly a little way and then settle like partridges, and you can soon tire them out. I liked bustard.

On we went through the heat of August, and down south the country was utterly bare. The few inhabitants



Not a single ostrich was caught by the hunters.

quarried grindstones on the river banks, shaped them up and sold them in Babylon for food. Our transport animals began to die of hunger; our supplies of corn ran out; and the troops lived on nothing but meat. Meanwhile, Cyrus made the marches very long and halted only for water and fodder. He was racing to reach Babylon before Artaxerxes could mobilize his whole army.

When we still had some seventy miles to go to reach the city, we found that Artaxerxes' cavalry patrols were out in front of us and burning the crops. From the hoof-marks and horse droppings we put their number at about two

thousand. Then deserters began to come in, and these were interrogated by Cyrus' intelligence officers. We learned that Artaxerxes was defending Babylon with three armies, each of 300,000 men. A fourth army was unlikely to arrive in time. Against this force of nearly a million, Cyrus had 100,000 native troops and 13,000 Greeks.¹

Thanks to us, however, he was not frightened by the odds. He called a Greek officers' conference and told us, from his own experience, what the battle would be like. He had to admit that he didn't think much of Persian armies. We should find, he said, that they attacked in huge masses with a lot of shouting, but if we stood firm we should see it was all bluff.

"And if we win," he added, "you can go home. But I think most of you will prefer to stay and accept what I can offer."

One of our officers said that promises in time of danger were cheap, and he only hoped Cyrus would remember them when he had won. That sounded impertinent; but Cyrus, I think, had told him to make some such suggestion. And this was what he replied:

"Gentlemen, the Empire of the Great King stretches to regions where man cannot live, from the cold deserts

¹ The Greeks were vague about numbers too large to be counted. Artaxerxes' whole army might have consisted of 100,000 men and Cyrus' native troops about 30,000.

of the north to the hot deserts of the south. But all the country between is ruled by the governors appointed by my brother. If we win, those governorships will be entrusted to my friends; and I am only afraid that I may not have enough friends for all I can give them. And I will add to the prospects before you the present of a golden coronet to every one of the Greeks.”

We were quite confident of defeating Artaxerxes, so naturally we were very enthusiastic about all this. After the conference a good many of us went to Cyrus and told him pretty frankly what sort of jobs we would like. We begged him, too, not to go into battle himself but to stay in the rear. For if he were killed, victory would be no use to us. I do not think he would ever have agreed to this, but Clearchus made it quite impossible by asking him whether he thought Artaxerxes would fight at all. Cyrus was offended and replied that of course he would, that no son of Darius would avoid a battle.

The next day we marched nine miles in battle formation, expecting to be engaged at any moment; but Artaxerxes’ cavalry screen continued to fall back on the main body. When we came to a dry ditch eighteen feet deep which had been dug to stop us, and saw that the King was not even defending it, we grew careless. We put all our heavy equipment on the transport animals and marched in our usual disorderly columns.



More than 2,400 years ago one of the most thrilling war stories in history was being read and discussed in Greece. It was called the *Anabasis*, written by a Greek noble named Xenophon who described at first hand what he did, what he suffered, and what he saw during a campaign against the Persians.

The Exploits of Xenophon is a vivid text that reads as if it had been written by a leader in the last war. In it, Geoffrey Household has cut the *Anabasis* to a quarter of its length and modernized Xenophon’s style. It retells much of the war hero’s own story, a superb picture of a valiant Greek army.

In that day, it was customary for men to hire themselves out as soldiers fighting for another country. More than 13,000 Greeks, including Xenophon, were serving with Cyrus, one of the imperial governors of ancient Persia. Cyrus wanted to seize the throne from his brother, Artaxerxes; but in the Battle of Cunaxa, Cyrus was killed and his Greek army was defeated. Panic seized the men as they realized they were leaderless and 1,000 miles from home. In short order, they selected Xenophon as one of their new commanders and began their heroic retreat through enemy territory.

Geoffrey Household worked with British Intelligence in World War II, covering much the same terrain that Xenophon did in the Middle East.

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