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Mission to Marathon

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The Persians Are Coming

'Is that you, Philip?'

Father sounded impatient. Philip hurried into the workshop.

'I'm here, Father.'

'Where on earth have you been?'

'Only school.' Philip was puzzled. Where else could he have been?

His father faced him, hammer and chisel in hand. The floor was littered with marble chippings. 'Dawdling along with your school friends, I suppose?'

Father was really the kindest of men. But he was also Lycon, one of the best sculptors in Athens. Any artist could get impatient when his mind was full of the work in hand.

Philip had not dawdled. In fact he had

hurried home. Some of the men in the street looked so worried. They were talking in low tones. He had felt a tension in the air.

He pointed to the shadow at his feet, cast by the sunshine slanting through the doorway. The workshop faced south. That shadow might be short or long, according to the season or the time of day. But its angle proved whether you were late or early.

It now stretched roughly along the line it usually did when he returned from school.

'I'm sorry,' said Father. 'I was so anxious to get on with the statue. I've done so little work of any kind today. There was a sudden meeting of the Assembly. I had to go.'

Every citizen was expected to attend. They had to stream out to a little rocky hill, the Pnyx, on the west side of the city, crowding its slopes in their thousands. Every man had the right to speak in the debate if he wanted to. Every man had a vote. Father was not much interested in politics but he had to be there.

Was this why the passers-by had been looking so anxious? Philip wanted to ask, but he knew better.

'Now you're here,' said Father, 'I can get back to the statue. It's that left arm. The muscles.'

Philip was his model for the young god Pan, the protector of shepherds, who led the nymphs dancing over the mountains to the music of his pipes. He was worshipped all over Greece but not so much by the townsfolk of Athens. His father had been delighted when a rich man ordered a statue of Pan. The shepherds' god, half boy, half goat, made a change from the more dignified gods and goddesses.

Philip jumped up on the slab of stone they used as a pedestal, threw aside the knee-length tunic which was all he wore, and picked up his pipes, which he had made with reeds corded together and waxed. He raised them to his lips as if about to play.

'An inch or two higher,' his father ordered.

It was a tiring pose. Father gave him occasional rests but he seemed anxious to get on. The tightened muscles showed in the uplifted arms.

'I must get them just right,' he said. So many statues were so stiff and solid.

He always tried to get life and warmth into them – even in marble.

At last Father seemed satisfied. 'That will do. I had to get this done today. I shall not have your services tomorrow.'

'Why not?' asked Philip in amazement. He stepped down and put on his tunic.

'You will not be here, my boy. Let me explain. As we heard a day or two ago, the Persians have got as far as Euboea.'

Philip nodded, listening eagerly. Euboea was dangerously close. It was the long narrow island stretching down the eastern coast of mainland Greece, separated from it by a thin strait of sea. So the Persians were now as near as that! No wonder the people in the streets were looking scared.

He had heard a lot about the Persians. Their Darius – who was known as the Great King – ruled over a vast empire. It now extended far beyond Persia itself and came down to the shores of Asia, facing Greece across the Aegean Sea.

'We were told at the Assembly today,' his father went on, 'that their expedition has conquered Euboea. They have plundered

the temples and burnt them down. They are deporting the people into slavery—'

'*No*!'

'Yes,' said his father firmly. 'And now, we learn, they are crossing over to the mainland. The Great King is determined to teach Athens a lesson. But his armies are not likely to sail straight across to us here.'

The invasion forces would choose a place where they could land without opposition, have good anchorage for their hundreds of ships and find a level plain – so rare amid the mountains of Greece – where they could use the splendid cavalry of which they were so proud.

'So,' Father concluded, 'the Bay of Marathon is an obvious choice.'

'*Marathon*?' Philip's eyes almost started out of his head. What about his grandmother? And his aunt?

'Won't everybody be in danger?' he asked.

'Exactly. That is why you will not be here with me tomorrow.'