

## Socrates Wounded

Socrates, the midwife's son, who was able in his dialogues to deliver his friends of well-proportioned thoughts so soundly and easily and with such hearty jests, thus providing them with children of their own, instead of, like other teachers, foisting bastards on them, was considered not only the cleverest of all Greeks but also one of the bravest. His reputation for bravery strikes us as quite justified when we read in Plato how coolly and unflinchingly he drained the hemlock which the authorities offered him in the end for services rendered to his fellow-citizens. Some of his admirers, however, have felt the need to speak of his bravery in the field as well. It is a fact that he fought at the battle of Delium, and this in the light infantry, since neither his standing, a cobbler's, nor his income, a philosopher's, entitled him to enter the more distinguished and expensive branches of the service. Nevertheless, as you may suppose, his bravery was of a special kind.

On the morning of the battle Socrates had primed himself as best he could for the bloody business by chewing onions which, in the soldiers' view, induced valour. His scepticism in many spheres led to credulity in many others; he was against speculative thought and in favour of practical experience and so he did not believe in the gods, but he did believe in onions.

Unfortunately he felt no real effect, at least no immediate one, and so he traipsed glumly in a detachment of swordsmen who were marching in single file to take up their position in a reaped field somewhere. Behind and ahead stumbled Athenian boys from the suburbs, who pointed out that the shields from the Athenian arsenals were too small for fat people like him. He had been thinking the same thing, but in terms of *broad* people

who were less than half covered by the absurdly narrow shields.

The exchange of views between the man in front of him and the man behind on the profits made by the big armourers out of small shields was cut short by the order: 'Fall out'.

They dropped on to the stubble and a captain reprimanded Socrates for trying to sit on his shield. He was less upset by the reprimand than by the hushed voice in which it was given. It looked as though the enemy were thought to be near.

The milky morning haze completely obscured the view. Yet the noise of tramping and of clanking arms indicated that the plain was peopled.

With great disquiet Socrates remembered a conversation he had had the previous evening with a fashionable young man whom he had once met behind the scenes and who was a cavalry officer.

'A capital plan!' the young puppy had explained. 'The infantry just waits drawn up, loyal and steadfast, and takes the brunt of the enemy's attack. And meanwhile the cavalry advances in the valley and falls on him from the rear.'

The valley must lie fairly far to the right, somewhere in the mist. No doubt the cavalry was advancing there now.

The plan had struck Socrates as good, or at any rate not bad. After all, plans were always made, particularly when your strength was inferior to the enemy's. When it came to brass tacks, it was simply a matter of fighting, that is, slashing away. And there was no advance according to plan, but merely according to where the enemy let you.

Now, in the grey dawn, the plan struck Socrates as altogether wretched. What did it mean: the infantry takes the enemy's attack? Usually one was glad to evade an attack, now, all of a sudden, the art lay in taking the brunt of it. A very bad thing that the general himself was a cavalryman.

The ordinary man would need more onions than there were on the market.

And how unnatural it was, instead of lying in bed, to be sitting here on the bare ground in the middle of a field so early in the morning, carrying at least ten pounds of iron about your person and a butcher's knife in your hand. It was quite right to defend the city if it was attacked, for otherwise you would be exposed to gross inconveniences; but why was the city attacked? Because the shipowners, vineyard proprietors and slave-traders in Asia Minor had put a spoke in the wheel of Persian shipowners, vineyard proprietors and slave-traders. A fine reason!

Suddenly everyone sat up.

Through the mist on the left came a muffled roar accompanied by the clang of metal. It spread fairly rapidly. The enemy's attack had begun.

The detachment stood up. With bulging eyes they stared into the mist before them. Ten paces away a man fell on his knees and gibbered an appeal to the gods. Too late, in Socrates' view.

All at once, as if in answer, a fearful roar issued from further to the right. The cry for help seemed to have merged into a death-cry. Socrates saw a little iron rod come flying out of the mist. A javelin.

And then massive shapes, indistinct in the haze, appeared in front: the enemy.

Socrates, with an overpowering sense that perhaps he had already waited too long, turned about awkwardly and took to his heels. His breastplate and heavy greaves hampered him a good deal. They were far more dangerous than shields, because you could not throw them away.

Panting, the philosopher ran across the stubble. Everything depended on whether he could get a good enough start. If only the brave lads behind him were taking the attack for a bit.

Suddenly a fiendish pain shot through him. His left sole stung till he felt he simply could not bear it. Groaning, he sank to the ground, but leapt up again with another yell of pain. With

frantic eyes he looked about him and realized what was up. He had landed in a field full of thorns.

There was a tangle of low undergrowth with sharp thorns. A thorn must have stuck in his foot. Carefully, with streaming eyes, he searched for a spot on the ground where he could sit down. He hobbled a few steps in a circle on his sound foot before lowering himself for the second time. He must pull the thorn out at once.

He listened intently to the noise of battle: it extended pretty far on both sides, though straight ahead it was at least a hundred paces away. However, it seemed to be coming nearer, slowly but unmistakably.

Socrates could not get his sandal off. The thorn had pierced the thin leather sole and was deeply embedded in his flesh. How dared they supply soldiers, who were supposed to defend their country against the enemy, with such thin shoes? Each tug at the sandal was attended by searing pain. Exhausted, the poor man's massive shoulders drooped. What now?

His dejected eye fell on the sword at his side. A thought flashed through his mind, more welcome than any that ever came to him in debate. Couldn't the sword be used as a knife? He grabbed it.

At that moment he heard heavy footsteps. A small squad broke through the scrub. Thank the gods, they were his own side! They halted for a few seconds when they saw him. 'That's the cobbler,' he heard them say. Then they went on.

But now there was a noise from the left too. And there orders in a foreign language rang out. The Persians!

Socrates tried to get to his feet again, that is, to his right foot. He leant on his sword, which was only a little too short. And then, to the left, in the small clearing, he saw a cluster of men locked in combat. He heard heavy groans and the impact of dull iron on iron or leather.

Desperately he hopped backwards on his sound foot. Twisting it he came down again on the injured one and dropped with a

moan. When the battling cluster – it was not large, a matter of perhaps twenty or thirty men – had approached to within a few paces, the philosopher was sitting on his backside between two briars looking helplessly at the enemy.

It was impossible for him to move. Anything was better than to feel that pain in the ball of his foot even once more. He did not know what to do and suddenly he started to bellow.

To be precise it was like this: he heard himself bellowing. He heard his voice roaring from the mighty barrel of his thorax: 'Over here, Third Battalion! Let them have it, lads!'

And simultaneously he saw himself gripping the sword and swinging it round him in a circle, for in front of him, appearing from the scrub, stood a Persian soldier with a spear. The spear was knocked sideways, tearing the man down with it.

And Socrates heard himself bellowing again and saying:

'Not another step back, lads! Now we've got them where we want them, the sons of bitches! Crapolus, bring up the Sixth! Nullus, to the right! If anyone retreats I'll tear him to shreds!'

To his surprise he saw two of his own side standing by gaping at him in terror. 'Roar!' he said softly, 'for heaven's sake, roar!' One of them let his jaw drop with fright, but the other actually started roaring something. And the Persian in front of them got up painfully and ran into the brush.

A dozen exhausted men came stumbling out of the clearing. The yelling had made the Persians turn tail. They feared an ambush.

'What's going on here?' one of his fellow-countrymen asked Socrates, who was still sitting on the ground.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Don't stand about like that gaping at me. You'd better run to and fro giving orders, so that over there they don't realize how few we are.'

'We'd better retreat,' said the man hesitantly.

'Not one step!' Socrates protested. 'Have you got cold feet?'

And as a soldier needs to have not only fear, but also luck, they

suddenly heard from some way off, but quite clearly, the trampling of horses and wild shouts, and these were in Greek! Everyone knows how overwhelmingly the Persians were routed that day. It finished the war.

As Alcibiades at the head of the cavalry reached the thorn field, he saw a group of foot soldiers carrying a stout man shoulder high.

Reining in his horse, he recognized Socrates, and the soldiers told him how, by his unflinching resistance, he had made the wavering battle-line stand firm.

They bore him in triumph to the baggage-train. There, despite his protests, he was put on one of the forage wagons and, surrounded by soldiers streaming with sweat and shouting excitedly, he made his return to the capital.

He was carried shoulder high to his little house.

Xantippe, his wife, made bean soup for him. Kneeling at the hearth and blowing at the fire with puffed out cheeks, she glanced at him from time to time. He was still sitting on the chair where his comrades had set him down.

'What's the matter with *you*?' she asked suspiciously.

'Me?' he muttered, 'nothing.'

'What's all this talk about your heroic deeds?' she wanted to know.

'Exaggeration,' he said. 'It smells first class.'

'How can it smell when I haven't got the fire going yet? I suppose you've made a fool of yourself again,' she said angrily. 'And tomorrow when I go for the bread I shall find myself a laughing-stock again.'

'I've not made a fool of myself at all. I gave battle.'

'Were you drunk?'

'No. I made them stand firm when they were retreating.'

'You can't even stand firm yourself,' she said, getting up, for the fire had caught. 'Pass me the salt-cellar from the table.'

'I'm not sure,' he said slowly and reflectively, 'I'm not sure

if I wouldn't prefer on the whole not to eat anything. My stomach's a little upset.'

'Just as I said; you're drunk. Try standing up and walking about the room a bit. We'll soon see.'

Her unfairness exasperated him. But in no circumstances did he intend to stand up and show her that he could not put his foot to the ground. She was uncannily sharp when it came to nosing out something discreditable to him. And it would be discreditable if the underlying reason for his steadfastness in battle came to light.

She went on busying herself round the stove with the pot and in between let him know her mind.

'I haven't any doubt that your fine friends found you some funk-hole again, well in the rear, near the cookhouse. It's all a fiddle.'

In torment he looked out of the little window on to the street where a lot of people with white lanterns were strolling about, for the victory was being celebrated.

His grand friends had tried to do nothing of the sort, nor would he have agreed to it; at all events, not straight off.

'Or did they think it quite in order for the cobbler to march in the ranks? They won't lift a finger for you. He's a cobbler, they say, and let him stay a cobbler. Otherwise we shouldn't be able to visit him in his filthy dump and jabber with him for hours on end and hear the whole world say: what do you think of that, he may be a cobbler, but these grand people sit about with him and talk philersophy. Filthy lot!'

'It's called philerphoby,' he said equably.

She gave him an unfriendly look.

'Don't keep on correcting me. I know I'm uneducated. If I weren't you wouldn't have anybody to bring you a tub of water now and again to wash your feet.'

He winced and hoped she had not noticed it. On no account must there be any question of washing his feet today. Thank the gods, she was off again on her harangue.

'Well, if you weren't drunk and they didn't find a funk-hole for you either, then you must have behaved like a butcher. So there's blood on your hands, eh? But if I squash a spider, you start shouting. Not that I believe you really fought like a man, but you must have done something crafty, something a bit underhand or they wouldn't be slapping you on the back like this. I'll find out sooner or later, don't you worry.'

The soup was now ready. It smelled enticing. The woman took the pot and, holding the handles with her skirt, set it on the table and began to ladle it out.

He wondered whether, after all, he had not better recover his appetite. The thought that he would then have to go to the table restrained him just in time.

He did not feel at all easy. He was well aware that the last word had not yet been said. There was bound to be a lot of unpleasantness before long. You could hardly decide a battle against the Persians and be left in peace. At the moment, in the first flush of victory, no one, of course, gave a thought to the man responsible for it. Everyone was fully occupied proclaiming his own glorious deeds from the housetops. But tomorrow or the day after, everyone would wake up to the fact that the other fellow was claiming all the credit, and then they would be anxious to push him forward. So many would be able to score off so many others if the cobbler were proclaimed the real hero in chief. They couldn't stand Alcibiades as it was. What pleasure it would give them to throw in his teeth: Yes, you won the battle, but a cobbler fought it.

And the thorn hurt more savagely than ever. If he did not get his sandal off soon, it might mean blood-poisoning.

'Don't smack your lips like that,' he said absentmindedly.

The spoon remained stuck in his wife's mouth.

'Don't do what?'

'Nothing,' he hastened to assure her in alarm. 'I was miles away.'



She stood up, beside herself, banged the pot down on the stove and went out.

He heaved a deep sigh of relief. Hastily he levered himself out of the chair and hopped to his couch at the back, looking round nervously. As she came back to fetch her wrap to go out she looked suspiciously at the way he lay motionless on the leather-covered hammock. For a moment she thought there must be something the matter with him after all. She even considered asking him, for she was very devoted to him. But she thought better of it and left the room sulkily to watch the festivities with the woman from next door.

Socrates slept badly and restlessly and woke up feeling worried. He had got his sandal off, but had not been able to get hold of the thorn. His foot was badly swollen.

His wife was less sharp this morning.

She had heard the whole city talking about her husband the evening before. Something really must have happened to impress people so deeply. That he had held up an entire Persian battle-line she certainly could not accept. Not him, she told herself. Yes, hold up an entire public meeting with his questions, he could do that all right. But not a battle-line. So what had happened?

She was so uncertain that she brought him his goat's milk in bed.

He made no attempt to get up.

'Aren't you going out?' she asked.

'Don't feel like it,' he growled.

That is not the way to answer a civil question from your wife, but she thought that perhaps he only wanted to avoid being stared at and let the answer pass.

Visitors began arriving early: a few young men, the sons of well-off parents, his usual associates. They always treated him as their teacher and some of them even made notes while he talked, as though it were something quite special.

Today they told him at once that Athens resounded with his fame. It was an historic date for philosophy (so she had been right after all: it was called philersophy and not something else). Socrates had demonstrated, they said, that the great thinker could also be the great man of action.

Socrates listened to them without his usual mockery. As they spoke he seemed to hear, still far away, as one hears a distant thunderstorm, stupendous laughter, the laughter of a whole city, even of a whole country, far away, but drawing nearer, irresistibly approaching, infecting everyone: the passers-by in the streets, the merchants and politicians in the market-place, the artisans in their little workshops.

‘That’s all rubbish what you’re saying,’ he said with a sudden resolve. ‘I didn’t do anything at all.’

They looked at each other and smiled. Then one of them said:

‘That’s just what we said. We knew you’d take it like that. What’s this hullabaloo all of a sudden, we asked Eusopulos outside the gymnasium. For ten years Socrates has been performing the greatest intellectual feats and no one so much as turned his head to look at him. Now he’s won a battle and the whole of Athens is talking about him. Don’t you see how disgraceful it is, we said.’

Socrates groaned.

‘But I didn’t win it at all. I defended myself because I was attacked. I wasn’t interested in this battle. I neither trade in arms nor do I own vineyards in the area. I wouldn’t know what to fight battles for. I found myself amongst a lot of sensible men from the suburbs, who have no interest in battles, and I did exactly what they all did, at the most, a few seconds before them.’

They were dumbfounded.

‘There you are!’ they exclaimed, ‘that’s what we said too. He did nothing but defend himself. That’s his way of winning battles. With your permission we’ll hurry back to the gym-

nasium. We interrupted a discussion on this subject only to wish you good morning.'

And off they went, wallowing deeply in discussion.

Socrates lay propped up on his elbows in silence and gazed at the smoke-blackened ceiling. His gloomy forebodings had been right.

His wife watched him from a corner of the room. Mechanically she went on mending an old dress.

All of a sudden she asked softly: 'Well, what's behind it all?'

He gave a start. He looked at her uncertainly.

She was a worn-out creature, flat-chested as a board and sad-eyed. He knew he could depend on her. She would still be standing up for him when his pupils would be saying: 'Socrates? Isn't that the vile cobbler who repudiates the gods?' He'd been a bad bargain for her, but she did not complain - except to him. And there had never yet been an evening without some bread and a bit of bacon for him on the shelf when he came home hungry from his rich pupils.

He wondered whether he should tell her everything. But then he realized that before long, when people, like those just now, came to see him and talked about his heroic deeds, he would have to utter a whole lot of lies and hypocrisies in her hearing, and he could not bring himself to do that if she knew the truth, for he respected her.

So he let it be and just said: 'Yesterday's cold bean soup is stinking the whole place out again'.

She only shot him another suspicious look.

Naturally they were in no position to throw food away. He was only trying to find something to sidetrack her. Her conviction that there was something wrong with him grew. Why didn't he get up? He always got up late, but simply because he went to bed late. Yesterday he had gone to bed very early. And today, with victory celebrations, the whole city was on the go. All the shops in the street were shut. Some of the cavalry that had been pursuing the enemy had got back at five o'clock in the morning,

the clatter of horses' hoofs had been heard. He adored tumultuous crowds. On occasions like this he ran round from morning till night, getting into conversation with people. So why wasn't he getting up?

The threshold darkened and in came four officials. They remained standing in the middle of the room and one of them said in a businesslike but exceedingly respectful tone that he was instructed to escort Socrates to the Areopagus. The general, Alcibiades himself, had proposed that a tribute be paid to him for his martial feats.

A hum of voices from the street showed that the neighbours were gathering outside the house.

Socrates felt sweat breaking out. He knew that now he would have to get up and, even if he refused to go with them, he would at least have to get on his feet, say something polite and accompany these men to the door. And he knew that he would not be able to take more than two steps at the most. Then they would look at his foot and know what was up. And the enormous laughter would break out, there and then.

So, instead of getting up, he sank back on his hard pillow and said cantankerously:

'I require no tribute. Tell the Areopagus that I have an appointment with some friends at eleven o'clock to thrash out a philosophical question that interests us, and therefore, much to my regret, I cannot come. I am altogether unfitted for public functions and feel much too tired.'

This last he added because he was annoyed at having dragged in philosophy, and the first part he said because he hoped that rudeness was the easiest way to shake them off.

The officials certainly understood this language. They turned on their heels and left, treading on the feet of the people standing outside.

'One of these days they'll teach you to be polite to the authorities,' said his wife angrily and went into the kitchen.

Socrates waited till she was outside. Then he swiftly swung his heavy body round in the bed, seated himself on the edge of it, keeping a wary eye on the door, and tried with infinite caution to step on the bad foot. It seemed hopeless.

Streaming with sweat he lay back again.

Half an hour passed. He took up a book and read. So long as he kept his foot still he felt practically nothing.

Then his friend Antisthenes turned up.

He did not remove his heavy coat, remained standing at the foot of the couch, coughed in a rather forced way and scratched his throat with its bristly beard as he looked at Socrates.

'Still in bed? I thought I should only find Xantippe at home. I got up specially to enquire after you. I had a bad cold and that was why I couldn't come along yesterday.'

'Sit down,' said Socrates monosyllabically.

Antisthenes fetched a chair from the corner and sat down by his friend.

'I'm starting the lessons again tonight. No reason to interrupt them any longer.'

'No.'

'Of course, I asked myself whether they'd turn up. Today there are the great banquets. But on the way here I ran into young Phaeston and when I told him that I was taking algebra tonight, he was simply delighted. I told him he could come in his helmet. Protagoras and the others will hit the ceiling with rage when it's known that on the night after the battle they just went on studying algebra at Antisthenes'.'

Socrates rocked himself gently in his hammock, pushing himself off the slightly crooked wall with the flat of his hand. His protuberant eyes looked searchingly at his friend.

'Did you meet anybody else?'

'Heaps of people.'

Socrates gazed sourly at the ceiling. Should he make a clean breast of it to Antisthenes? He felt pretty sure of him. He himself

never took money for lessons and was therefore not in competition with Antisthenes. Perhaps he really ought to lay the difficult case before him.

Antisthenes looked with his sparkling cricket's eyes inquisitively at his friend and told him:

'Giorgius is going about saying to everyone that you must have been on the run and in the confusion gone the wrong way, that's to say, forwards. A few of the more decent young people want to thrash him for it.'

Unpleasantly surprised, Socrates looked at him.

'Rubbish,' he said with annoyance. He realized in a flash what trumps his opponents would hold if he declared himself.

During the night, towards morning, he had wondered whether he might not present the whole thing as an experiment and say he had wanted to see just how gullible people were. 'For twenty years I've been teaching pacifism in every back street, and one rumour was enough for my own pupils to take me for a berserker,' and so on and so on. But then the battle ought not to have been won. Patently this was an unfavourable moment for pacifism. After a defeat even the top dogs were pacifists for a while; after a victory even the underdogs approved of war, at any rate for a while, until they noticed that for them there wasn't all that difference between victory and defeat. No, he couldn't cut much ice with pacifism just now.

There was a clatter of horses in the street. The riders halted in front of the house and in came Alcibiades with his buoyant step.

'Good morning, Antisthenes, how's the philosophy business going? They're in a great state,' he cried, beaming. 'There's an uproar in the Areopagus over your answer, Socrates. As a joke I've changed my proposal to give you a laurel wreath to the proposal to give you fifty strokes. Of course, that annoyed them, because it exactly expressed their feelings. But you'll have to come along, you know. We'll go together, on foot.'

Socrates sighed. He was on very good terms with young

Alcibiades. They had often drunk together. It was very nice of him to call. It was certainly not only his wish to rile the Areopagus. And that wish itself was an honourable one and deserved every support.

At last he said cautiously as he went on rocking himself in his hammock: 'Haste is the wind that blows the scaffolding down. Take a seat.'

Alcibiades laughed and drew up a chair. Before he sat down he bowed politely to Xantippe, who stood at the kitchen door wiping her wet hands on her skirt.

'You philosophers are funny people,' he said a little impatiently. 'For all I know you may be regretting now that you helped us win the battle. I daresay Antisthenes has pointed out to you that there weren't enough good reasons for it.'

'We've been talking about algebra,' said Antisthenes quickly and coughed again.

Alcibiades grinned.

'Just as I expected. For heaven's sake, no fuss about a thing of this sort, what? Now to my mind it was sheer bravery. Nothing remarkable, if you like; but what's so remarkable about a handful of laurel leaves? Grit your teeth and go through with it, old man. It'll soon be over, and it won't hurt. And then we can go and have one.'

He looked searchingly at the broad powerful figure, which was now rocking rather violently.

Socrates thought fast. He had hit on something that he could say. He could say that he had sprained his foot last night or this morning. When the men had lowered him from their shoulders, for instance. There was even a moral to it: the case demonstrated how easily you could come to grief through being honoured by your fellow-citizens.

Without ceasing to swing himself, he leant forward so that he was sitting upright, rubbed his bare left arm with his right hand and said slowly:

'It's like this. My foot . . .'

As he spoke the word his glance, which was not quite steady – for now it was a matter of uttering the first real lie in this affair; so far he had merely kept silence – fell upon Xantippe at the kitchen door.

Socrates' speech failed him. All of a sudden he no longer wanted to produce his tale. His foot was not sprained.

The hammock came to a standstill.

'Listen, Alcibiades,' he said forcefully and in a quite different voice, 'there can't be any talk of bravery in this matter. As soon as the battle started, that's to say, as soon as I caught sight of the first Persian, I ran for it and, what's more, in the right direction – in retreat. But there was a field full of thorns. I got a thorn in my foot and couldn't go on. Then I laid about me like a savage and almost struck some of our own men. In desperation I yelled something about other units, to make the Persians believe there were some, which was absurd because of course they don't understand Greek. At the same time they seem to have been a bit nervous themselves. I suppose they just couldn't stand the roaring at that stage, after all they'd had to go through during the advance. They stopped short for a moment and at that point our cavalry turned up. That's all.'

For a few seconds it was very quiet in the room. Alcibiades stared at him unblinkingly. Antisthenes coughed behind his hand, this time quite naturally. From the kitchen door, where Xantippe was standing, came a loud peal of laughter.

Then Antisthenes said drily:

'And so of course you couldn't go to the Areopagus and limp up the steps to receive the laurel wreath. I can understand that.'

Alcibiades leant back in his chair and contemplated the philosopher on the couch with narrowed eyes. Neither Socrates nor Antisthenes looked at him.

He bent forward again and clasped one knee with his hands.



His narrow boyish face twitched a little, but it betrayed nothing of his thoughts or feelings.

'Why didn't you say you had some other sort of wound?' he asked.

'Because I've got a thorn in my foot,' said Socrates bluntly.

'Oh, that's why?' said Alcibiades. 'I see.'

He rose swiftly and went up to the bed.

'Pity I didn't bring my own wreath with me. I gave it to my man to hold. Otherwise I should leave it here for you. You can take my word for it, I think you're brave enough. I don't know anybody who in this situation would have told the story you've just told.'

And he went out quickly.

As Xantippe was bathing his foot later and extracting the thorn she said acrimoniously:

'It could have meant blood-poisoning.'

'If nothing worse,' said the philosopher.