The history of Greece may well seem remarkable to modern readers, since it brings us in contact with conditions which have ceased to exist anywhere upon the earth. To gain some idea of its character, we should have to imagine each of the counties of one of our American States to be an independent nation, with its separate government, finances, and history, its treaties of peace and declarations of war, and its frequent fierce conflicts with some neighboring county. Each of these counties would have its central city, surrounded by high walls, and its citizens ready at any moment to take arms against some other city and march to battle against foes of their own race and blood. In some cases a single county would have three or four cities, each hostile to the others, like the cities of Thebes, Plataea, Thespiae, and Orchomenos, in Boeotia; standing ready, like fierce dogs each in its separate kennel, to fall upon one another with teeth and claws. It may further be said that of the population of these counties five out of every six were slaves, and that these slaves were white men, most of them of Greek descent. The general custom in those days was either to slay prisoners in cold blood, or sell them to spend the remainder of their lives in slavery.

This state of affairs was not confined to Greece. It existed in Italy until Rome conquered all its small neighbor states. It existed in Asia until the great Babylonian and Persian empires conquered all the smaller communities. It was the first form of a civilized nation, that of a city surrounded by enough farming territory to supply its citizens with food, each city ready to break into war with any other, and each race of people viewing all beyond its borders as strangers and barbarians, to be dealt with almost as if they were beasts of prey instead of men and brothers.

The cities of Greece were not only thus isolated, but each had its separate manners, customs, government, and grade of civilization. Athens was famous for its intellectual cultivation; Thebes had a reputation for the heavy-headed dulness of its people; Sparta was a rigid war school, and so on with others. In short, the world has gone so far beyond the political and social conditions of that period that it is by no means easy for us to comprehend the Grecian state.

Among those cities Sparta stood in one sense alone. While the others were enclosed in strong walls, Sparta remained open and free,—its only wall being the valorous hearts and strong arms of its inhabitants. While other cities were from time to time captured and occasionally destroyed, no foe man had set foot within Sparta's streets. Not until the days of Epaminondas was Laconia invaded by a powerful foe; and even then Sparta remained free from the foe man's tread. Neither Philip of Macedon, nor his son Alexander, entered this proud city, and it was not until the troubous later times that the people of Sparta, feeling that their ancient warlike virtue was gone, built around their city a wall of defence.

But the humiliation of that proud city was at hand. It was to be entered by a foe man; the laws of Lycurgus, under which it had risen to such might, were to come to an end; and lordly Sparta was to sink into insignificance, and its glory remain but a memory to man.

About the year 252 B.C. was born Philopoemen, the last of the great generals of Greece. He was the son of Craugis, a citizen of Megalopolis, the great city which Epaminondas had built in Arcadia. Here he was thoroughly educated in philosophy and the other learning of the time; but his natural inclination was towards the life of a soldier, and he made
a thorough study of the use of arms and the management of horses, while sedulously seeking the full development of
his bodily powers. Epaminondas was the example he set himself, and he came little behind that great warrior in
activity, sagacity, and integrity, though he differed from him in being possessed of a hot, contentious temper, which
often carried him beyond the bounds of judgment.

Philopoemen was marked by plain manners and a genial disposition, in proof of which Plutarch tells an amusing story.
In his later years, when he was general of a great Grecian confederation, word was brought to a lady of Megara that
Philopoemen was coming to her house to await the return of her husband, who was absent. The good lady, all in a
tremor, set herself hurriedly to prepare a supper worthy of her guest. While she was thus engaged a man entered
dressed in a shabby cloak, and with no mark of distinction. Taking him for one of the general's train who had been sent
on in advance, the housewife called on him to help her prepare for her master's visit. Nothing loath, the visitor threw
off his cloak, seized the axe she offered him, and fell lustily to work in cutting up fire-wood.

While he was thus engaged, the husband returned, and at once recognized in his wife's lackey the expected visitor.

"What does this mean, Philopoemen?" he cried, in surprise.

"Nothing," replied the general, "except that I am paying the penalty of my ugly looks."

Philopoemen had abundant practice in the art of war. Between Arcadia and Laconia hostility was the normal condition,
and he took part in many plundering incursions into the neighboring state. In these he always went in first and came out
last. When there was no fighting to be done he would go every evening to an estate he owned several miles from town,
would throw himself on the first mattress in his way and sleep like a common laborer, and rising at break of day would
go to work in the vineyard or at the plough. Then returning to the town, he would employ himself in public business or
in friendly intercourse during the remainder of the day.

When Philopoemen was thirty years old, Cleomenes, the Spartan king, one night attacked Megalopolis, forced the
guards, broke in, and seized the market-place. The citizens sprang to arms, Philopoemen at their head, and a desperate
conflict ensued in the streets. But their efforts were in vain, the enemy held their ground. Then Philopoemen set himself
to aid the escape of the citizens, making head against the foe while his fellow-townsmen left the city. At last, after
losing his horse and receiving several wounds, he fought his way out through the gate, being the last man to retreat.
Cleomenes, finding that the citizens would not listen to his fair offers for their return, and tired of guarding empty
houses, left the place after pillaging it and destroying all he readily could.

The next year Philopoemen took part in a battle between King Antigonus of Macedonia and the Spartans, in which the
victory was due to his charging the enemy at the head of the cavalry against the king's orders.

"How came it," asked the king after the battle, "that the horse charged without waiting for the signal?"

"We were forced into it against our wills by a young man of Megalopolis," was the reply.

"That young man," said Antigonus, with a smile, "acted like an experienced commander."

During this battle a javelin, flung by a strong hand, passed through both his thighs, the head coming out on the other
side. "There he stood awhile," says Plutarch, "as if he had been shackled, unable to move. The fastening which joined
the thong to the javelin made it difficult to get it drawn out, nor would any one about him venture to do it. But the fight
being now at its hottest, and likely to be quickly decided, he was transported with the desire of partaking in it, and
struggled and strained so violently, setting one leg forward, the other back, that at last he broke the shaft in two; and
thus got the pieces pulled out. Being in this manner set at liberty, he caught up his sword, and running through the
midst of those who were fighting in the first ranks, animated his men, and set them afire with emulation."

As may be imagined, a man of such indomitable courage could not fail to make his mark. Antigonus wished to engage
him in his service, but Philopoemen refused, as he knew his temper would not let him serve under others. His thirst for
war took him to Crete, where he brought the cavalry of that island to a state of perfection never before known in
Greece.

And now a new step in political progress took place in the Peloponnesus. The cities of Achaea joined into a league for common aid and defence. Other cities joined them, until it was hoped that all Peloponnesus would be induced to combine into one commonwealth. There had been leagues before in Greece, but they had all been dominated by some one powerful city. The Achaean League was the first that was truly a federal republic in organization, each city being an equal member of the confederacy.

Philopoemen, whose name had grown to stand highest among the soldiers of Greece, was chosen as general of the cavalry, and at once set himself to reform its discipline and improve its tactics. By his example he roused a strong warlike fervor among the people, inducing them to give up all display and exercise but those needed in war. "Nothing then was to be seen in the shops but plate breaking up or melting down, gilding of breastplates, and studding buckles and bits with silver; nothing in the places of exercise but horses managing and young men exercising their arms; nothing in the hands of the women but helmets and crests of feathers to be dyed, and the military cloaks and riding frocks to be embroidered.... Their arms becoming light and easy to them with constant use, they longed for nothing more than to try them with an enemy, and fight in earnest."

Two years afterwards, in 208 B.C., Philopoemen was elected _strategus_, or general in-chief, of the Achaean league. The martial ardor of the army he had organized was not long left unsatisfied. It was with his old enemy, the Spartans, that he was first concerned. Machanidas, the Spartan king, having attacked the city of Mantinea, Philopoemen marched against him, and soon gave him other work to do. A part of the Achaean army flying, Machanidas hotly pursued. Philopoemen held back his main body until the enemy had become scattered in pursuit, when he charged upon them with such energy that they were repulsed, and over four thousand were killed. Machanidas returning in haste, strove to cross a deep ditch between him and his foe; but as he was struggling up its side, Philopoemen transfixed him with his javelin, and hurled him back dead into the muddy ditch.

This victory greatly enhanced the fame of the Arcadian general. Some time afterwards he and a party of his young soldiers entered the theatre during the Nemean games, just as the actor was speaking the opening words of the play called "The Persians:"

"Under his conduct Greece was glorious and was free."

The whole audience at once turned towards Philopoemen, and clapped their hands with delight. It seemed to them that in this valiant warrior the ancient glory of Greece had returned, and for the time some of the old-time spirit came back. But, despite this momentary glow, the sun of Grecian freedom and glory was near its setting. A more dangerous enemy than Macedonia had arisen. Rome, which Pyrrhus had gone to Italy to seek, had its armies now in Greece itself, and the independence of that country would soon be no more.

The next exploit of Philopoemen had to do with Messenia. Nabis, the new Spartan king, had taken that city at a time when Philopoemen was out of command, the generalship of the League not being permanent. He tried to persuade Lysippus, then general of the Achaean, to go to the relief of Messenia, but he refused, saying that it was lost beyond hope. Thereupon Philopoemen set out himself, followed by such of his fellow citizens as deemed him their general by nature's commission. The very wind of his coming won the town. Nabis, hearing that Philopoemen was near at hand, slipped hastily out of the city by the opposite gates, glad to get away in safety. He escaped, but Messenia was recovered. The martial spirit of Philopoemen next took him to Crete, where fighting was to be had to his taste. Yet he left his native city of Megalopolis so pressed by the enemy that its people were forced to sow grain in their very streets. However, he came back at length, met Nabis in the field, rescued the army from a dangerous situation, and put the enemy to flight. Soon after he made peace with Sparta, and achieved a remarkable triumph in inducing that great and famous city to join the Achaean League. In truth, the nobles of Sparta, glad to have so important an ally, sent Philopoemen a valuable present. But such was his reputation for honor that for a time no man could be found who dared offer it to him; and when at length the offer was made he went to Sparta himself, and advised its nobles, if they wanted any one to bribe, to let it not be good men, but those ill citizens whose seditious voices needed to be silenced.
In the end Sparta was destined to suffer at the hands of its incorruptible ally, it having revolted from the League. Philopoemen marched into Laconia, led his army unopposed to Sparta, and took possession of that famous seat of Mars, within which no hostile foot had hitherto been set. He razed its walls to the ground, put to death those who had stirred the city to rebellion, and took away a great part of its territory, which he gave to Megalopolis. Those who had been made citizens of Sparta by tyrants he drove from the country, and three thousand who refused to go he sold into slavery; and, as a further insult, with the money received from their sale he built a colonnade at Megalopolis.

Finally, as a death-blow to Spartan power, he abolished the time-honored laws of Lycurgus, under which that city had for centuries been so great, and forced the people to educate their children and live in the same manner as the Achaeans. Thus ended the glory of Sparta. Some time afterwards its citizens resumed their old laws and customs, but the city had sunk from its high estate, and from that time forward vanished from history.

At length, being then seventy years of age, misfortune came to this great warrior and ended his warlike career. An enemy of his had induced the Messenians to revolt from the Achaean League. At once the old soldier, though lying sick with a fever at Argos, rose from his bed, and reached Megalopolis, fifty miles away, in a day. Putting himself at the head of an army, he marched to meet the foe. In the fight that followed his force was driven back, and he became separated from his men in his efforts to protect the rear. Unluckily his horse stumbled in a stony place, and he was thrown to the ground and stunned. The enemy, who were following closely, at once made him prisoner, and carried him, with insult and contumely, and with loud shouts of triumph, to the city gates, through which the very tidings of his coming had once driven a triumphant foe.

The Messenians rapidly turned from anger to pity for their noble foe, and would probably have in the end released him, had time been given them. But Dinocrates, their general and his enemy, resolved that Philopoemen should not escape from his hands. He confined him in a close prison, and, learning that his army had returned and were determined upon his rescue, decided that that night should be Philopoemen's last.

The prisoner lay—not sleeping, but oppressed with grief and trouble—in his prison cell, when a man entered bearing poison in a cup. Philopoemen sat up, and, taking the cup, asked the man if he had heard anything of the Achaean horsemen.

"The most of them got off safe," said the man.

"It is well," said Philopoemen, with a cheerful look, "that we have not been in every way unfortunate."

Then, without a word more, he drank the poison and lay down again. As he was old and weak from his fall, he was quickly dead.

The news of his death filled all Achaea with lamentation and thirst for revenge. Messenia was ravaged with fire and sword till it submitted. Dinocrates and all who had voted for Philopoemen's death killed themselves to escape death by torture. All Achaean mourned at his funeral, statues were erected to his memory, and the highest honors decreed to him in many cities. In the words of Pausanias, a late Greek writer, "Miltiades was the first, and Philopoemen the last, benefactor to the whole of Greece."

(The end)

Charles Morris’s short story: Philopoemen And The Fall Of Sparta

By Charles Morris