



## Plutarch Selection

For our Plutarch selection, we have chosen the chapter "The Conqueror," a study of Alexander the Great from *The Children's Plutarch: Stories of the Greeks*, and included it on the following pages. The book may also be purchased on Amazon.

If your children are 6th grade or older, we recommend spending a full 12-week term studying Alexander the Great with the edited (for length and content) study guide from Ambleside here:

<https://amblesideonline.org/plutarch-alexander1>

You can also purchase the guide by Anne White on Amazon. (This is in place of *The Children's Plutarch*, not in addition to.)

Plutarch

# The Conqueror

*The Children's Plutarch: Tales of the Greeks, by F. J. Gould*

"YOU will run in the races, of course?"

"Yes," said the young Prince Alexander; "I will run if I can run with kings."

Alexander had a very high spirit. He showed it also in the affair of the mettlesome horse which had been offered to King Philip for thirteen talents (\$12,500). The animal turned fiercely upon the grooms who came near him, and would let no one get astride on his back. King Philip bade the owner take the horse away.

"What a fine creature you are losing," said the young prince, "simply because they have not the skill and spirit to manage him."

"My son," replied his father, "it is easy to find fault, but do you think you could manage him any better yourself?"

"Yes."

"And suppose you failed?"

"I would pay the thirteen talents."

The bystanders laughed. Alexander, by his father's leave, made the trial. He first turned the horse's head toward the sun, so that the steed should not see his own shadow dancing on the ground. Then he stroked him, and spoke gently, and at length leaped on his back, using neither whip nor spur. The horse ran at a great pace, and then Alexander shouted and spurred, and the animal flew. King and onlookers all stood silent until the prince returned in safety. Philip kissed the youth, and cried:

"Seek another kingdom, my son, for Macedonia is too small for thee!" He did seek another kingdom, for in a few years' time Alexander, who was born 356 B.C., had made himself master of all the known world. In war he showed the same courage and will-power that he had shown in taming the horse. Often did he read the poem of Homer, called the "Iliad" (*Il-i-ad*), which told of the siege of the city of Troy, and of the battles of Greeks and Trojans:

*Now shield with shield, with helmet helmet closed,  
To armor armor, lance to lance opposed,  
Host against host with shadowy squadrons drew,  
The sounding darts in iron tempests flew.*

This poem of war Alexander used to put under his pillow, along with a sword, before he slept.



After Philip died Alexander set out to conquer Asia. Already the people of Greece and Macedonia looked upon him as a man of power, for already he had done great deeds in battle. He visited the city of Corinth, where a meeting of Greek captains and statesmen was held. Many men of renown came to see him and say pleasant things. But not Diogenes (*Dy-oj-en-eez*), who was a stern and wise teacher, though he was strange in his manners. So Alexander went to see the philosopher, who often used to lie in a large tub for shelter. I suppose he did that to show folk how small and simple a dwelling a man could live in without any real need of rich furniture and things like that. Diogenes was lying on the ground, enjoying the sunshine.

"Sir," said King Alexander, "I have heard of you as a sage, and have often wished to see you. In what way can I serve you?"

"Only stand a little out of my sunshine," said the philosopher.

"Brute!" said one courtier.

"Wretched rude fellow!" exclaimed another.

Alexander's thoughts were different. He admired the brave man who would not bend the knee to kings.

"If I were not Alexander," he remarked, "I should like to be Diogenes."

Before he left his native land the young king gave away almost all his lands and goods to various friends. Some one said to him:

"You are very free in giving. What have you left for yourself?" "Hope," said Alexander.

With hope in his heart, Alexander crossed the narrow sea between Europe and Asia, taking with him horses, chariots, and about thirty-five thousand men. A rapid stream barred the road. On the rocky bank on the opposite side the Persians crowded in thick masses, armed with bow and spear. Through the splash of the river Alexander made his way, and his friends kept close to their leader. On his left arm was strapped a buckler; on his head rested a large helmet, on each side of which waved a white feather. The arrows of the Persians rattled on the shields of the invaders. Persian horsemen rushed down the steep slopes and charged the cavalry of Alexander, and the king's helmet was split by a battle axe. Just then an officer named Clitus slew the holder of the battle-axe with his spear. Later on in the fight Alexander's horse (not the proud creature of whom I have just told you) was killed under him. The victory lay with the Greeks (for the Macedonians were a kind of Greeks).

In his march toward Persia, Alexander came to the town of Gordium, which he captured. A temple stood there, and in it was kept a chariot, round the pole of which was fastened a rope, very cunningly tied with many knots. The citizens had a saying that "The man who untied the Gordian Knot should have the empire of the world." Alexander pulled at the tangled rope for some time, until he got out of patience. Then he drew his sword and cut the Gordian Knot.

And now Darius (*Da-ry-us*), the sultan, or king, of Persia, had come forth with a host of half a million warriors to meet the Greek foe; and he hoped to deal Alexander a deadly blow when he met him in the mountains of Cilicia (*Sy-lis ia*). One army was so large, the other so small, it was like an elephant, at war with a lion.

Not long before these two armies clashed together in horrid war, Alexander bathed in a cold stream and took a chill, and lay abed in sore pain, and the soldiers in his camp felt great fear lest their master should die. Nor were any of the medical men in the army able to heal his sickness. They were afraid to give him drugs which might not cure, and then the wrath of the army would fall upon them. But one physician, whose name was Philip, held Alexander in much love, and he also desired, for the sake of the people, to save the king's life. Therefore, he said he would prepare a drink which would send the king to sleep, and on waking he would feel much relief from his illness. The king agreed.

While the potion (or drink) was being mixed by the careful hands of Philip, the sick king received a letter from one of his friends.

It read thus: Sir, beware of the man Philip. The King of Persia has promised to give him much gold, and also a princess for wife, if he will poison you.

Alexander smiled as he read this note. He did not believe it was true, and he thrust it under his pillow.

Presently the physician gave him the cup. The king handed the letter to Philip and began to drink. As the king sipped the potion he watched the face of Philip. The physician read the cruel words. He looked angry, and then:

"Oh, sir," he cried, as he knelt by the royal bedside, "you surely do not think I would be so base as to do you this harm?"

Alexander shook his head, and went to sleep. It was a long, long sleep, and the officers of the army came in from time to time to gaze at the kingly sleeper's pale features. Perhaps the writer of the letter came and glanced darkly at Philip. But the king awoke; his fever had waned, his blood was cooler, and the camp was filled with joy.

The battle took place soon afterward, and the huge forces of Darius melted away before the onset of the phalanxes of Alexander. We may say that already was Alexander master of Persia. Darius fled in a chariot, leaving behind him his wife and daughters and his treasures. The Macedonians took of the spoil, each man for himself; but they kept the tent of the Persian king for their leader. It was a large and splendid tent, hung with curtains, and containing gold and silver boxes, and vases, and dishes, and other precious things. Alexander stood for a while gazing silently at the glittering heap, and then he said:

"And so this is being a king!"

He smiled as he spoke the words, for well he knew that kingship did not lie in having piles of jewels and rare objects, but in wise thoughts and valiant deeds.

And it is the same with men who are not kings. A man's worth is not to be reckoned by the valuable coat he wears or the rich villa he dwells in. We may dress an ape in cloth of gold, and he will still be an ape.

The unhappy ladies left by the King of Persia wondered what evil fate would now come upon them. They were much comforted by a message from Alexander saying that they were not to fear, for he would bid his soldiers pay all respect to them. Placed in a tent by themselves, with women to serve them as in the brighter days now past, the Persian queen and princesses were treated with honor. Alexander was a man of noble temper. When he behaved so fairly and courteously to the women he was chivalrous, and all boys and men ought to be like him. To be chivalrous means to act with respect toward women, and especially toward women who are weak and need help.

Early one morning the army of King Alexander was astir. Chariot-horses were being harnessed; footmen strapping their armor on; cavalymen were mounting.

"Fire!" cried a soldier.

A fire was burning near the king's tent, but when the men ran up no one was allowed to throw water. The flames leaped in and out of a large heap of clothes, boxes, all sorts of valuable goods. It was the baggage of the king and his friends.

"Why is the king burning the luggage?" was the question asked by every one.

The king replied:

"Because we are going to India. The march will be a heavy one. We shall need all our strength to meet the dangers and hindrances of the journey. We do not want to be burdened with this spoil."

The army thought the king was right. Each man brought to the fire whatever he did not really need, and so the Macedonians set out for India with a very light baggage.

On the way they attacked a castle which stood on the top of a steep hill. Among the band of Greeks who were to lead the onset was a young fellow named Alexander. King Alexander said to the young soldier Alexander:

"You must bear yourself bravely, my friend, in order to do justice to your name."

And he did; and the king heard with much pleasure that the young warrior had behaved as a man named Alexander should.

All you girls and boys who read this page have the names of your parents— Taylor, Smith, Johnson, Wood, and so on. And all these names are good names; and so you must act in a way that is worthy of the name borne by your mother and your father.

Another fortress which the army lay siege to was protected by a river. "What a wretch am I," cried Alexander, "that I did not learn to swim!" Not a wretch, indeed; but the king had the sense to confess that he had left undone a thing which he ought to have done.

Well, before the assault had gone far a group of men came out of the fort and asked to see the Greek king, for they wished to make an offer to surrender the place. A meeting was arranged, and servants brought the king a couch. He at once invited the oldest of the visitors to take a seat, while he himself stood—a good example of the thoughtful manner in which younger people should treat the aged.

Dreadful was the battle which Alexander fought with the Indian Prince Porus. This Indian was very tall, and he rode on the back of a very large elephant. Many of his followers were also mounted on these huge beasts. Greek courage did not flinch before the Indian elephants or the Indian arrows. The elephant on which Porus was carried fought with a most determined spirit, as if it knew that India and the prince were in danger. At length it knelt, for the prince was sore wounded, and must needs dismount, and yield himself prisoner to the foe.

"How do you wish me to treat you?" asked Alexander.

"As a king," replied Porus.

"But have you nothing more to ask?"

"No, it is all summed up in the word king."

Alexander, who was brave himself, admired other men who were brave. Pleased with the Indian's answer, he gave him back all his land, which he was to rule as governor under the chief kingship of Alexander.

In the midst, however, of this great triumph, a sadness came upon the Greek king. The faithful horse, of whose taming I have told you the story, died at the age of thirty, and was buried with great respect.

Many of the Macedonians died in India. The army would not march farther into that far land. Alexander at first shut himself up in his tent, and would speak to no man, so deep was his grief. At last he gave way to the will of the soldiers, and began the return journey to the West. For seven months he and his followers sailed down the big river Indus, stopping here and there to fight with the natives on the banks. Then the Greek warriors tramped a weary march along the shore of the Persian gulf; over sand, dust, stones; under the hot sun; in a region where little food could be got. For sixty days the distress lasted. When the army passed from this dry and hopeless land they rested awhile, and then, for seven days, went forward by easy marches in a kind of procession, as if on a holiday. The king was drawn in his chariot by eight horses. So large was the royal chariot that it was covered with a broad wooden platform, on which tables could be placed; and here Alexander and his friends, crowned with flowers, sat eating and drinking (especially drinking). Many other chariots came in the train of the king's, some being adorned with purple hangings, others with branches of trees. The soldiers tripped along to the sound of flutes and clarionets. They sang loud songs; and often they stayed to dip their cups in open tubs of wine which the king had provided.

And so they danced, and so they drank, and so they sang. But Alexander had a different feeling in his heart when, on coming back to Persia, he arrived at the grave of the famous King Cyrus. On a slab of stone over the tomb were cut these words, which the King of Macedon read: "O man, whoever you are, and no matter where you come from, I who lie here am CYRUS, the founder of the Persian Empire. Do not envy me the little earth that covers my body."

A long time did Alexander stand still, after reading these words; for they made him think how soon the great power of kings may vanish away.

Alexander had a dear friend named Hephæstion (*Hef-eeest-yon*), who fell sick of a fever. The doctor bade the sick man keep from rich food. But, while the medical man was away enjoying a play at the theatre, the patient ate a roast fowl and drank a large jug of cold wine. A few days after this foolish act he died.

Alexander was thrown into a dreadful sorrow. All the horses and mules in the army had their hair shorn in token of mourning, and the doctor was nailed to a cross and crucified.

Not a sound of music was allowed in the camp for a long time; and, in his mad grief, the king bade that all prisoners taken in the wars should be slain.

I fear, indeed, that the mind of this wonderful king and conqueror was touched with strange disorder. He had led the Greeks from Greece to India. He had made the people of the East bow before the might of the people of the West. He had broken the rule of the proud kings of Persia, who had so often marched armies to the West, and tried to make slaves of the Greeks. And where the Greeks went they took their books and poetry and music, and so gave new ideas and new manners to the folk who were less learned than themselves. But these deeds had puffed up Alexander's soul with pride. He became vain, and he became more selfish than he once had been. He had conquered the world, but he could not conquer himself. Soon he would lose his kingship.

One day he had gone to the bath, and, after washing, he clad himself in a light dress, and played at ball with some young men. When he had played all he wanted he bade his comrades fetch his clothes. They entered the throne-chamber, and there they saw a strange man, dressed in Alexander's robes, seated on the throne, wearing the crown, and looking dreamily in front of him, speaking never a word. He was not right in his mind, and was removed and put to death.

Ah, but the king himself would not sit many more times on the throne. He had now reached the city of Babylon. A fever seized him. When he felt the illness coming on he would not take care for his health, but, like the friend of whom I have told you, he swallowed deep draughts of wine. Now and then he seemed much better, and he would lie on his couch and listen to the stories related by the admiral of the fleet. The king had sent a fleet of ships to sail along the coasts of Persia and Arabia, and the sunburnt sailor had seen the wonders of the Indian Ocean. After Alexander had been sick twenty-five days the soldiers took alarm. They crowded about the house where he lay. They must see him. So they were allowed to enter his chamber, in long lines, walking softly past the bed where the conqueror's pale face turned uneasily on the pillow. One evening, in the month of June, in the year 323 B.C., Alexander the Great died, only thirty-three years of age.