



## Plutarch Selection

For our Plutarch selection, we have chosen "The Man with Many Faces," a study of Alcibiades, a brilliant yet changeable man whose shifting loyalties reveal the dangers of ambition without steady character.

This chapter is taken from *The Children's Plutarch: Stories of the Greeks*, and is 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 Alcibiades with the edited (for length and content) study guide from Ambleside [here](#).

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 Man with Many Faces

## By Frederick James Gould

TWO boys were wrestling in the streets of Athens, each trying to fling the other to the ground. One of them was just on the point of falling when he bit the hands of his rival, and made him let go his hold.

"Ho!" cried the other wrestler, "you are biting like a woman!" "No," he replied, "I bite like a lion."

Well, lions may bite if they please; but it does not appear to me to be manly for lads to bite, even in sport.

The boy who bit had a long Greek name—Alcibiades (Al-ki-by-a-deez). He lived from about 450 B.C. to 404 B.C.

One day he was playing at dice with other Athenian lads in the street. Just as he was about to throw the little square blocks of bone a wagon rumbled along, and Alcibiades called out to the driver to stop. The man took no notice of the boy's call, and came on. Thereupon Alcibiades laid himself across the narrow road, and dared the driver to run over him. This, of course, the driver would not do, and he was obliged to come to a halt, and the boy laughed at having got his own way.

When he grew to be a young man he was the talk of the city. He was rich, his house was splendid, his clothes costly; and many persons followed him and courted him in the hope of getting favors and gifts. As a man, he did strange freaks just the same as in his earlier years, and the Athenian folk would tell each other, with smiles, stories of his jests and peculiar deeds. He would not play the flute because he said it made the player twist his mouth into ugly shapes, but he would rather play the stringed instrument called the lyre. And the young men of Athens followed his fashion, and none of them would buy or touch a flute.

A certain man invited Alcibiades to a feast at his house, and prepared a grand meal, setting gold and silver vessels on his table. Many guests were entering the banqueting-hall, when Alcibiades suddenly strode in, attended by several of his serving-men, and he bade them snatch up half the precious cups and carry them away. And they did so. The guests expected the master of the house to rush after Alcibiades and angrily demand his cups back again. The foolish man, however, only said:

"No, let him go. After all, he has only taken half, and if he had liked he might have taken all."

The fact was he was so stupidly fond of Alcibiades that he was ready to give him his richest ornaments. And all the time Alcibiades did not feel respect for these people who were so eager to make his acquaintance. He seemed (at any rate, sometimes) to care much for the company of Socrates.

Now, Socrates was an ugly-looking man, who would sit in the market-place of Athens, or in the house of a friend, and talk to the people who gathered about his chair. He was the best and wisest of the citizens, and young men would listen to his speech with great eagerness. I fear, however, that Alcibiades loved many other things quite as much as he loved Socrates, and these things were not always good or useful. He seemed to be a man with many faces. One day he would wear the face of a student, fond of learning. The next day he would wear the face of a clown, taking delight in jokes. He was very changeable.

Having met a well-known and honorable man, Alcibiades went up to him and gave him a box on the ears for no reason whatever, except that he had told his companions he would do so, and they would not believe it. The next morning he called at the house of the old citizen whom he had thus insulted and begged his pardon, and even offered to take any beating which the gentleman might care to give him. But the Athenian bore no ill-will, and freely forgave the daring young man; and I suppose the people passed the story round as a merry jest. He knew the citizens talked about him. He would have been rather miserable if they had not, for he was of a vain and conceited temper. Having bought a very fine dog for a considerable sum of money, he actually cut off the creature's beautiful bushy tail.

"Everybody in the town is talking about the odd way in which you treated your dog," a friend told him.

"This," he replied, "is just what I wanted, for I would rather have the Athenians talk of this action, lest they might find something worse to say about me!"

You will be amused to hear that he, like many Athenians, was fond of breeding a sort of bird called quails. If you look in your book of natural history and examine a picture of a quail, you may not think it a very handsome bird; but it was the fancy of the young men in Athens to make pets of these quails, and Alcibiades used often to carry one under his robe. When he walked in the streets once his quail got loose, and a whole crowd of people went scampering after it to see which should have the honor of restoring it to the owner! They thought Alcibiades a very jolly fellow, and especially when he once sent seven chariots to the Olympic games to take part in the races. Loud were the shouts as he dashed by in one race after another, raising an immense dust about the hoofs of the horses and the wheels of his chariots. He won three prizes, and was so pleased at the result that at his own expense he gave a feast to all the thousands of people who had witnessed the races. When he passed along public places, dressed in a long purple cloak, he was gazed at with much admiration.

"Here is a noble leader for us," some people would say. "See how handsome a man he is; how well he would lead us in war!"

You may remember how I told you of the long, long war (it lasted twenty eight years) between Athens and Sparta. This struggle was now going on, and the man in the purple cloak—the man with many faces—thought he could be a mighty warrior as well as a flute-player, a quail-breeder, a chariot-racer, and a friend of Socrates.

He would make speeches to the crowds, and tell them what a great city Athens was, and what victories she would win. One shrewd man, named Timon, called out to him once:

"Go on, my brave boy, and prosper; for your prosperity will bring ruin on all this crowd."

He meant that, if the people put their faith in Alcibiades, it would do no good to the city.

But for a while Alcibiades made himself a famous name in the wars, and won several battles; and when the Athenians (as I have related) set sail to conquer Sicily he was captain of one hundred and forty galleys, fifty-one hundred soldiers in heavy armor, and thirteen hundred archers and slingers. But he did nothing of much note in Sicily, and was called back to Athens to answer a charge. It was brought against him that, one night, in a mad trick, he and his friends had gone round the streets breaking the images of Hermes (*Her-meas*), which stood at the doors of all houses in Athens. These images were guardians of the homes, and it was thought a very dreadful thing to interfere with them. Whether Alcibiades had really done this I do not know, but people knew his character, and thought he was quite likely to have insulted the images; and he was condemned to lose his property, and to be sent into exile. Where do you think he went to? He went to Sparta, the city which hated Athens, and was making war against his own native place. In Sparta he acted as he did in Athens. He tried to set everybody admiring him. All his fine clothes were hidden away; he was now dressed in coarse garments; his curls were clipped, his hair close shaven; he ate the Spartan black bread, and drank the black broth, and sat on rough wooden seats, and would have neither carpets nor pictures in his house. This pleased the people of Sparta, and that was all Alcibiades cared for. He pleased them yet more when he joined their armies, and took part in the war against his own countrymen. When, at length, the King of Sparta grew suspicious of him, and thought he was not to be trusted, the man with many faces went over to Asia Minor, and took refuge with a Persian grandee, or nobleman; and the Persians, as you have heard, were bitter foes to the Athenians, but it was all the same to Alcibiades. With the Persians he drank and ate, and sang and hunted; and they also regarded him as a fine fellow. Later on he changed again, and took the side of Athens, and helped in a sea-battle against the Spartans, and won a victory. Other battles were won, and the citizens welcomed him back, gave him his lands again, and crowned him with crowns of gold.

But this glory did not last. The Spartans were masters at the end of the war, and the walls of Athens lay in ruin.

And where was Alcibiades? He had fled to Asia again, and there the Persians slew him, in order to please the powerful Spartans. They had set fire to his house one night. He sallied out, sword in hand, and died fighting.

Certainly, he was clever; and he was witty; and he was handsome; and he was brave; and he was popular—that is, people thought a great deal of him. And do you consider he was good? No. And why not? His aim was always to make the folk admire him, wonder at him, and talk about him. From one thing to another he changed; in one respect only he was forever the same—he never seemed to care for any one but himself. Socrates was ugly; but we honor his memory. Alcibiades was handsome; his cloak was rich purple; his house filled with treasures; but we do not honor his memory. He could not teach even a dog to love him; neither could any man trust him.