Plutarch Selection

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

Plutarch

The Admiral of the Fleet

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

"THEY are coming! The enemies are coming! We shall be taken by the Persians; our houses burned; our husbands slain!"

So screamed the women in the streets of Athens; and the children added their shrill cries.

"We will mount our horses and go out to meet the Persians before they reach the city," shouted an Athenian.

"No," cried a young man, who pushed his way among the crowd. Tall and handsome was Cimon (Ky-mon), and the hair fell in thick locks over his shoulders.

"No," he said, as he held up a horse's bridle in his hand. "Come with me, friends, to yonder temple; and after we have offered our prayers there we will do as the wise Themistocles (Them-is-to-kleez) has advised. We will go into our ships."

The sound of his strong voice and the brave look on his face seemed to put heart into the folk of Athens and many men, women, and children went at his heels as he made his way to a temple. There he laid upon the altar his horse's bridle, saying that Athens had no need of horses and horsemen just now. She must be saved by the wooden walls—that is, the ships. Then he took a shield down from the wall of the temple, and walked along the street to the harbor. A large number of galleys were anchored there. Soon the vessels were crammed with families carrying such articles as they had been able to snatch in haste from their homes. The women and children sailed across the bay. And that evening Cimon fought among the Greeks at the famous sea-fight of Salamis, about which I told you a few pages back.

Some time afterward the Athenian fleet needed a new captain.

"The man we want," said the people, "is Cimon, for when we were stricken with fear he made a stout show, and gave us fresh courage; and for an admiral of the fleet we want a man that will encourage his countrymen besides knowing all about the handling of ships."

So Cimon was elected admiral, and, in the service of the city, he did many great deeds. He gained much treasure in the wars, and his house was well furnished, and his estate was large. Cimon, however, had no desire to keep his goods all to himself, and he did not write the word "PRIVATE" at his gate.

He ordered all the fences round his fields and gardens to be thrown down, so that every passer-by who cared might go in and rest or partake of the fruit. I believe that is quite the right thing for rich men to do, if only they could be sure that strangers would behave with care, and pay respect to the beauty of the garden, and refrain from injuring tree or shrub. Perhaps the Athenian people were more polite in their conduct than many American people. Well, besides this, he bade his servants lay out a supper-table every evening, the dishes being laden with plain but wholesome food, and any poor man might enter and eat as he pleased.

Sometimes you could see Cimon walking in the street in the company of well-dressed young men who formed his guard. An old and meanly attired citizen would pass by.

"You see that old gentleman?" Cimon would say, turning to one of his young men. "Change clothes with him."

Then the young man would take off his handsome cloak and tunic and hand them to the aged Athenian, who, in his turn, would give up his patched and worn garments. And sometimes, by order of the admiral, his companions would slip money quietly into the pocket of a needy man, and not perhaps until he reached home did the poor fellow discover that he was richer than he knew!

"Ah," said certain people, who loved to sneer, "why does Cimon bestow so many gifts upon the citizens? It is only in order that they may elect him to some office or make him a mighty man in the State of Athens."

But that was not the case; for, when the common folk had a dispute with the nobles, Cimon took the side of the nobles. He neither flattered the poor people nor bowed humbly to the rich. When a Persian gentleman rebelled against his king, and came to Athens for refuge, he was followed by spies who sought to arrest him and carry him back to Persia. He thought he could not do better than seek the protection of the admiral of the fleet. So one day he called at Cimon's house and asked to see him. As soon as he was admitted to the antechamber (the chamber joining the room where Cimon sat) he placed two cups, easy to be seen, one full of silver coins and the other full of gold. This was what we should call a bribe. He did not think it would be enough just to beg for Cimon's aid; he made sure Cimon would do nothing unless he was paid for it.

While Cimon was talking with the Persian his eyes fell on the cups, and he smiled.

"Sir, would you rather have me for your hired servant or your friend?"

"My friend, of course," eagerly answered the Persian.

"Go, then," said the admiral, "and take these things away. I am willing to be your friend, and no doubt, if ever I need money, you will always be ready to give some to your friend when he asks."

Thus you see Cimon would not stoop to take bribes. He loved Athens, and he loved his fellow-men, and if he did a service to any he did it because it was a just and generous thing to do, and not because he wanted a commission (or payment) for it.

In the year 466 B.C. he sailed along the coast of Asia Minor with two hundred galleys, and met a Persian fleet of over three hundred ships at the mouth of a river. A battle followed; arrows flew; sails were torn; ships sunk; men drowned; and the Greeks captured two hundred of the enemy's vessels. That very same day the Athenians landed and attacked a Persian army on the shore, and captured many tents that were full of spoil. The treasures thus obtained were taken to Athens, and helped to pay for the building of new walls round the city. Cimon had no wish to keep his share of the spoil, and he spent it in draining the muddy water off from a marsh near Athens; also in planting trees in a place called the Academy, so that people might walk up and down in shady avenues. He thus used his wealth for the public good; and that is what every rich man ought to do.

You may remember what I told you about the hardy men of Sparta; and you know Sparta was a Greek State (or country) not far from Athens. Perhaps, too, you may remember that the Spartans kept slaves called Helots (Hel-ots). Now, these Helots were not content to be slaves, and now and then plotted to gain their freedom; and no doubt we to-day should think they had a right to do so; but, you see, in those times the Greeks and Romans and all nations considered it quite a proper thing to keep slaves. Well, the Helots of Sparta were waiting for a chance to gather together and slay their masters. And one day this chance seemed to have come.

Hundreds of Spartan young men and boys were leaping, running, boxing, and performing other exercises in a large building known as the Portico. A shout was suddenly raised. "Hi! look at that hare!"

The timid creature was scampering past the Portico as hard as it could run. With a great halloo the young men followed after it, laughing and joking. Just then an earthquake happened. The ground trembled; the rocks on the mountain near the city were loosened, and the Portico fell with a crash, burying the boys in the ruins. People were in terror lest their houses should come down upon their heads, and ran hither and thither for safety. In the midst of the terror the slaves were quietly assembling. They had no houses to lose; they wanted their liberty; and they thought now was the moment to strike. When one of the Spartan rulers saw the danger he bade men blow trumpets of alarm, and, at the sound, the Spartan citizens seized swords, spears, and shields, and rushed to the usual meeting-place of the warriors; and then they were told of the peril of the slaves. Even as it was the Helots would not give up hope, but retired to the country, so as to form an army for the assault on the city of Sparta.

In the hour of distress the Spartans sent word to Athens, and begged for help. The messenger was clad in a red cloak, and when he stood among the crowd of Athenians who gathered round him they noticed the strange contrast between the redness of his robe and the ashen paleness of his cheeks.

"No," cried one speaker; "let the Spartans fight their own battles. It is not our business. Sparta has always been proud and jealous toward Athens. Let the slaves make themselves lords, and Sparta will learn a lesson and be humble."

Then stood up the admiral of the fleet, and the faces of the people were turned toward him earnestly.

"It may be true," he said, "that Sparta has been proud and jealous; and that was wrong. But, after all, my friends, Sparta is a Greek State, and the city of Sparta is a companion to Athens. We ought not to take pleasure in seeing the limbs of our friends crippled; and we ought not to take pleasure in seeing the companions of Athens injured."

At that the people raised a great shout, and asked Cimon to lead them to the aid of Sparta; and he did so, and Sparta was delivered from the fear of the Helots.

Years afterward Cimon commanded the fleet of Athens in an expedition against the Persians, and he arrived off the shores of Egypt, in sight of the enemy's ships; but there he fell sick and died. As he lay dying he said to the sailors about him:

"Conceal my death. If the Persians know I am dead, they will attack you with the more boldness. Sail away before they learn the fact."

And the sails were spread, and the Athenian fleet made its way toward Greece as the sun was setting; and the sun went down, and the admiral died. His last thought was for the city which he loved.