Plutarch

# Plutarch Selection

For our Plutarch selection, we have chosen the chapter "Caesar's Fortune," a study of Caesar from *The Children's Plutarch: Stories of the Romans*, 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 Caesar with the edited (for length and content) study guide from Ambleside here:

https://amblesideonline.org/plutarch-caesar

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

# Caesar's Fortune

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

"WELL, WELL, sir, we have got you now!"

"No doubt," said the young Roman, whom the pirates had just brought a prisoner to their island; "but of course you will let me go if my friends pay a ransom?"

"Certainly."

"How much do you ask?"

"Twenty talents" ($20,000).

"Is that all?" laughed Julius Cæsar. "I will promise you fifty." He sent various friends to the nearest city where he was known to procure the money.

In the mean time he made himself at home among these fierce Cilician pirates, of whom I have told you in the life of Pompey. For thirty-eight days he dwelt on the island, and he treated the sea-robbers as if he were their lord, not their captive.

"When I am free again," he said to them, "I shall return here and crucify you."

They smiled at his frank talk.

The money arrived. Julius departed, got together a fleet of vessels, sailed back to the pirates' hold, and, true to his dreadful word, put them all to death. Young as he was, you see he had a stern and iron will. And if you think he was cruel toward the pirates, you must bear in mind that men in those old days (as is too often the case now) thought it right to crush enemies without mercy.

In Rome young Cæsar was famous for his ready tongue. Persons who needed defence against any that accused them were glad to have Cæsar to speak on their behalf.

He found his way to the hearts of the people. They admired Pompey, but they began to love Cæsar more. And one day he was to rise over all others, and stand as master of the Roman world, by sea and land.

You remember Marius, the general who ate dry bread. He was dead; but Cæsar, who was nephew to the wife of Marius, did not wish him to be forgotten. Marius had taken the side of the people against the proud patricians. Cæsar felt sure the Roman world was now too wide for these patricians to govern. He must win the mass of the people to his side, and get the power into his own hands, because he believed he could give order and peace to Italy, and all the other lands of the republic.

One morning some people entered the temple on the Capitol hill. "See!" cried one, "there are some new statues!"

"And all of burnished gold!" exclaimed another. "Whose figures are they?" "Oh, I know this face! It is the face of the brave Marius. And here is writing below the statue. It says that the figures represent Marius overcoming the Cimbri of the North."

Before long immense crowds had swarmed up the hill to view the golden statues. The patricians frowned; the plebs (or common people) were joyful. It was soon known that Julius Cæsar had placed the figure of Marius in the Capitol.

Cæsar stepped from office to office—magistrate, chief priest, and then prætor, wearing the cloak with purple trimming. For a while he had a command in Spain. On his way to Spain he crossed the Alps. He and his troops marched by a little town.

"I wonder," said a friend, pointing to the group of houses on the hillside, "if the people there strive for the highest places, as men do in Rome?" "Why not?" replied Cæsar. "I should do so if I dwelt in that town. I had rather be the first man here than the second man in Rome."

He carried on the war in Spain with much spirit, forcing the wild tribes to submit to the Roman eagles; and he led his legions as far as the Atlantic Ocean. On his return to Rome he was elected consul. Then he took over the rule of Gaul—the country which is now the home of the great French nation, with the Belgians as their neighbors; but at that time it was parted among three hundred different tribes. And beyond the sea in the north was the land so often clothed in fog and beaten by contrary winds—the land of the Britons. In the plains and forests of this vast region the Romans—hard as oak, proud as kings, bold as lions—met the tribes, and grappled with them in many a dreadful struggle. It is said that Cæsar took eight hundred cities in Gaul, and engaged in various battles with three million men, a million of whom his armies slew, and a million were taken captive. Of course, we cannot be sure of the numbers, but the fact is clear that Cæsar conquered.

The general was slender in body. His health was not robust; sometimes his head ached painfully, and a fit would seize him. Yet nothing stayed him from his purpose. He set his face like a flint; and his men seemed to worship him, just as the French did with Napoleon long ages afterward.

For instance, in Britain the Romans met the natives in a marshy spot, and a band of Cæsar's men found themselves entrapped among the Britons. One of the Romans took the lead, hewed right and left among the islanders, beat them off, and rescued his comrades.

Then he plunged into the stream that ran by, swam it, waded through the mud of the swamp, and reached the place where the general was watching. However, he lost his shield, and, in deep distress, he fell at Cæsar's feet, saying:

"General, I have lost my shield. I ask your pardon!"

As if he had done something disgraceful! Again, one of Cæsar's ships being captured off the coast of Africa, all the crew were put to death except one, to whom quarter (or mercy) was shown. But he was too proud to accept even life from an enemy. Exclaiming, "It is not the custom of Cæsar's soldiers to take quarter, but to give it!" he thrust a sword into his own breast.

Cæsar was not merely a strict commander. He took thought for the comfort of his followers so far as he could. One day he and some friends were on a journey. A storm burst, and, looking round for shelter, they spied a poor man's hut. To this they ran. There was only one room in the dwelling, and only space to take in one of the strangers. I suppose (though the story does not say) that the owner of the hut was himself present.

One of Cæsar's party, named Oppius, was taken ill. To Cæsar, as the person of highest rank, the bed in the hut was given; for the tempest howled, and it was plain that the travellers could fare no farther that night. But Cæsar yielded place to the sick man, and he himself, with the rest of his companions, slept under a shed that stood outside the cottage. Thus did Cæsar show his belief that it is the duty of the strong to help the weak.

When a battle was to be fought Julius Cæsar did not stand in an easy place while his soldiers bore the brunt of war. In his campaign in Gaul he was surprised by a sudden rush of the Helvetian tribes. Very hastily the Roman army drew itself into close array, and faced the foe. A page brought Cæsar's horse, but he would not mount.

"Take it away," he said to the attendant, "until the enemy retire, and until I need my horse for the pursuit."

So saying, the general charged on foot upon the natives; and his men, feeling that their leader was sharing the peril, did not flinch from the sharp conflict.

His hardest won battle was with the Nervii folk, in the thick forests of Belgium. The Romans were fixing their camp in the wood, digging trenches and stabling the horses, when sixty thousand Nervii, their shaggy hair streaming, raised a shout and attacked. Many Roman officers were slain. Cæsar snatched a buckler from one of his soldiers, and sprang forward to encourage his troops. At one moment it looked as if the whole Roman force would be crushed. The Tenth Legion were on a hill. Seeing the extreme danger, they hurried down, and turned the tide of battle.

Across the broad river Rhine, Cæsar built a large wooden bridge, in spite of the strong current of the water.

Over this bridge the Romans marched, and thence made their way into the land of the Germans. The most savage region could not daunt them.

Beyond the sea lay the British Islands. The Romans had often talked about this far-off country.

"We don't believe there is any such place," said some.

"Oh yes," others would answer; "but it is so enormous a continent that it is hopeless to try and conquer it."

Julius Cæsar did not talk about it. He acted.

With a large fleet he crossed the water now called the English Channel. Soon Roman soldiers were seen carrying their eagles along the chalk cliffs of Kent, along the banks of old Father Thames, and in the forests beyond.

At length the time was come to return to Italy. The citizens of Rome were in very frequent tumult and fear. Pompey could not keep the love of the people. The noblemen of Rome—the patricians—had not the great hearts and great minds that were needed to sway so wide an empire.

"Oh, that Cæsar would come!" the folk whispered.

Cæsar led his splendid army through Gaul to the border of Italy, and halted at the little river Rubicon. Should he cross over to Italian soil? Should he declare war against his old friend Pompey, who had married Cæsar's daughter? Should he spill Roman blood? Dare he, like a player with dice, throw a die which might mean the loss of the grand game, and be his ruin?

He looked at the water; he looked at his friends. At last he plunged his horse into the stream, crying:

"The die is cast!"

Cæsar marched toward Rome—stern, calm, strong, like the rise of a tide which no man can stay.

In and out of the gates of Rome rushed people, on foot, on horseback, or carried in litters. "We are for Cæsar!" cried some.

"We are for Pompey!" cried others.

"We are for the patricians!" cried some.

"We are for the plebs!" cried others.

Thus the city was divided.

A Roman gentleman went to Pompey and said, with a sneer:

"Stamp with your foot, sir! You said once that, if you only did that, an army would spring up!"

Pompey did not stamp. He fled to the coast, and crossed the sea, and prepared the troops who gathered about him for the last stand against Cæsar. Now that he was master of Italy, Cæsar went over to Spain, and put down all men who sided with Pompey.

And now that he was master also of Spain he returned to Italy, was made consul by the Romans, and then set out to meet Pompey. So fast did he march to the eastern shore of Italy that the main part of his army lagged behind, and they murmured bitterly.

"It is winter," they said. "This man stops for neither wind nor hail. When will our labors be ended? Does he think our bodies are made of stone or iron? Our very shields and breastplates call out for rest!"

But when they reached the sea, and found that their general had already sailed for the opposite coast, they felt ashamed, and anxiously waited for the fleet to return and fetch them.

Cæsar, on his part, wished to bring his whole army together as soon as possible; for Pompey's legions were swarming on the land, and Pompey's ships sailing on the Adriatic Sea. One night he left his camp, entered a twelve-oared galley on a river, and bade the rowers hasten down to the sea as rapidly as they could. They worked hard. Cæsar, clad in a shabby cloak, sat silent and thoughtful. As the galley neared the mouth of the river the water became extremely rough, and hurrying clouds and darkened air made a terrible scene. The pilot trembled. He did not know Cæsar was on board, for the general wrapped himself close in the cloak.

"It is folly to go farther!" exclaimed the pilot. "We must turn back!"

Cæsar rose up, threw back his cloak, and said:

"Go forward, my friend, and fear nothing. You carry Cæsar and his fortune."

Like giants the oarsmen pulled against the storm. Cæsar's look and voice seemed to double their strength. However, nature is more mighty than man. The galley had to turn back and return to the camp. The troops were transported from Italy later on.

The armies of Pompey and Cæsar were now face to face. So spirited were Cæsar's men that, in spite of their want of food and other comforts, they showed a gay front. They dug up some eatable roots, soaked them in milk, and made a sort of bread—poor fare, but better than nothing. Some of them crept near Pompey's camp, and flung a number of these hard biscuits into the trenches, crying:

"So long as the earth yields roots we will resist Pompey!"

I have already told you of the battle of Pharsalia, 48 B.C., in which Pompey was beaten.

Cæsar's ships bore him to the land of the Nile and the Sphinx (Egypt), over which reigned the beautiful Queen Cleopatra, who lived from 69 to 30 B.C.

The tread of the Romans was next heard in Syria, and Cæsar's eagles were seen on the banks of the Jordan River.

News came that the Roman garrisons in Asia Minor were defeated by the Armenians. Cæsar at once pushed northward, across the Lebanon mountains, where the cedars grow, across the Taurus mountains, and as far as the plains of Pontus. One battle finished the war. When the victory was won, Cæsar sat in his tent and wrote a message to the senate of Rome. It contained (in Latin) but three words:

"Came—Saw—Conquered!"

He had come to Pontus; he had seen the enemy; he had beaten them. Cæsar's speech was terse—that is, he used only just enough words to make his meaning clear. Whenever you take a message, you should try to do likewise. See how few words you can say it in. Only, of course, you must not be too curt, else people will think you rude.

The next scene is in Africa, near the ruins of the city of Carthage. A large army of Numidians—barbaric horsemen who dwelt in the country now known as Algeria—threatened the Romans. So scarce was food for the horses at one time that seaweed had to be mixed with grass for the Roman steeds.

One day Cæsar's cavalry were resting. No enemy appeared in sight. The sound of a flute was heard. It was played by a black-skinned African, who danced to his own tune. The soldiers ran out of their camp, and sat round the African dancer, and laughed as he frisked about and rolled his eyes.

Suddenly a war-cry was heard. The Numidians had rushed out from a hiding-place. Many of the Roman cavalry were killed. The enemy even entered the camp. But Cæsar rushed forward, and the Africans recoiled and fled.

Not long afterward another engagement took place. An eagle-bearer was running away from the Numidians. Cæsar met him, seized him by the neck, turned him right-about-face, and said, quietly:

"Look on this side for the enemy!"

The final victory was won after a surprise. Cæsar led his men across rocky passes and through dark forests, and fell unawares upon the Numidian camp. King Juba fled in great haste, and Cæsar was lord of North Africa.

So now the time was come when he could go to Rome and enjoy a Triumph, while all the city shouted, "Yo! yo! yo!" In the grand procession through the streets walked the son of Juba, a young prince, who lived a long time in Rome, and became a writer of history and a great favorite of the citizens.

Cæsar entertained the people with feasts so large that the guests sat at twenty-two thousand tables. Combats of gladiators took place in the theatres. Fights between ships also pleased the public, the ships being floated in immense ponds made for the purpose. The people now said to one another: "Pompey is dead, Crassus is dead; who is there able to govern the great Republic but Cæsar? Let us give all power into his hands."

He was made consul for the fourth time. Then he was made dictator, or master—lord of Rome, lord over the senate, lord of the armies, lord of all the Roman provinces. It would have been very easy for him now to take revenge upon his enemies. Their lands, their money, their houses, their lives—he could have taken all away, and none could withstand his will. But Cæsar loved Rome and the republic. He wished to heal her wounds. He wanted all the classes—aristocrats and the plebeians (or common folk)—to dwell in union. When the Roman senate saw how generously he behaved toward his foes, they ordered a new temple to be built to show their admiration of his spirit. The temple was built in honor of the goddess Mercy, or (in Latin) "Clementia."

Another high-minded act of Cæsar's was to raise up the fallen statues of Pompey. These figures had been flung down by his followers, but now they stood upright again for passers-bys to behold and to salute.

When Cicero, the famous speaker, saw this deed, he said:

"Cæsar has made himself a statue by raising up Pompey's."

Some of the patricians hated the new dictator. They felt that he stood in their way, and prevented them from obtaining riches and command. Cæsar's friends knew of this hatred, and begged him never to go out without a body-guard.

"No," he replied; "it is better to die once than always to walk about in fear of death."

Cæsar would sit alone in his chamber and make great plans. He dreamed dreams of things he would do for Rome and for the world. He said to himself:

"I will march against the Parthians in the East, and against the Germans in the North, and bend them all to my will.

"I will dig through the neck of land by Corinth, so that ships may pass through a sea-canal.

"I will make the river Tiber deeper for big merchant vessels to bring their loads of corn and wine and oil to the gates of Rome.

"I will drain the filthy water out of the great marshes, so that pleasant fields may take the place of deadly swamps.

"I will build a dike along the western coast of Italy, and construct harbors in which hundreds of galleys may ride at anchor."

If he had lived, I believe he would have done all these things. But his life was cut short.

One thing, however, he was able to carry out, which should win our thanks to-day. The reckoning of days, months, and years had got into disorder. You hear people say that there are three hundred and sixty-five days in a year. So there are; but that is not the whole story. The people of Egypt long ago found out there were three hundred and sixty-five and a quarter days in a year. The Romans had not reckoned this extra quarter. Cæsar arranged that, as four-quarters of a day make a complete day, this extra day should be added to the year each fourth year. Thus we have what we call a leap-year of three hundred and sixty-six days. As Julius Cæsar set the calendar right, we name it the Julian calendar. And we may also note that one of the months—July—is so styled in his memory.

One day shouting and laughter were heard in the streets of Rome. It was the holiday known as the Lupercal (Loo-per-kle). Cæsar sat on a golden chair in the forum, and watched the lively crowds.

Presently his friend Antony came up to Cæsar, and, in view of the people, offered him a crown adorned with laurel leaves.

"O King, wear this crown!" said Antony.

Cæsar shook his head, and the Romans cheered loudly. They were pleased that he refused it.

Again Antony presented it. Again Cæsar declined. Again the Romans cheered. A third time Cæsar put the crown away from him. This incident reminds us how, many centuries later, the noble Cromwell refused the crown of England.

Some of Cæsar's foolish friends put crowns on the statues of Cæsar. Angry patricians tore them off. Cæsar's enemies whispered to one another that the time was come to check the tyranny. He must be slain.

Two of these whisperers were Brutus and Cassius. Often did they talk of the best way to get rid of the dictator. Their dark thoughts made them look pale and anxious. Cæsar noticed it, and (as we read in Shakespeare's play) he remarked to his friend Antony:

Let me have men about me that are fat;
Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep at nights.
Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look;
He thinks too much; such men are dangerous.

Some of Cæsar's friends knew there was danger in the air, as people say. Indeed, tales were afterward told that men made of fire were seen fighting in the sky, and strange lights flashed across the heavens by night. You know how the Romans believed in such signs, or omens, which hinted at good or evil events about to happen. A certain man, said to be wise in omens, resolved to warn Cæsar. This soothsayer said to him one day:

"Beware the Ides of March!"

I must explain that each month of the year had in it a number of days called Ides; and in the month of March the Ides lasted from the eighth day till the end of the fifteenth—one week.

It was now the middle of March, in the year 44 B.C. Cæsar had supper with his friends, and then signed letters which his secretary brought to him. The guests were talking loudly.

"What are you conversing about?" asked Cæsar.

"The best kind of death. Which do you think the best?"

"A sudden one."

His death—a sudden one—came next day.

In the morning Cæsar—"the foremost man of all the world," as Shakespeare calls him—went out to the meeting of the senate. A crowd was in the streets.

"There goes Cæsar!" buzzed many voices.

He saw the soothsayer, and said to him: "The Ides of March are come!"

"Yes, but they are not gone!" replied the soothsayer.

A parchment, folded up, was thrust into Cæsar's hand.

"Sir, pray read it; it is most important," whispered a voice.

"Hail, Cæsar!" shouted the people.

"Make way for the dictator!" cried the officers.

Amid all this noise and movement he had no chance to read the paper in his hand; but on it was written a friendly message, warning him that certain patricians meant to take his life.

He entered the senate-house, and the elders rose to greet him. A statue of Pompey looked down upon the scene. Cæsar took his seat. Brutus, Cassius, and other senators gathered round.

One bowed, and said:

"Sir, I beg of you to allow my exiled brother to come back to Rome."

"It cannot be done. He is an enemy to Rome."

"Oh, sir, I beg of you!"

"No, I am resolved not to—"

A shout—a scuffle—a fall—Cæsar's cloak was dragged off his shoulders! Swords and daggers struck him. Cassius struck him. Brutus struck him.

And when his friend Brutus struck, Cæsar groaned, and lay down and died at the base of Pompey's statue.

Brutus and the other plotters marched, waving swords, to the Capitol, and crying:

"Freedom! freedom for Rome!"

"Freedom!" replied some of the passers-by; but many kept a gloomy silence.

Cæsar had wished to put an end to the power of a small group of men who boasted of their noble birth, and who wished to make themselves rich out of the broad empire which Rome had won. He wished Rome still to be the capital city; but he wanted to make the dwellers in Spain, Gaul, Greece, and other conquered lands, sharers in Rome's glory—to be citizens rather than beaten foes.

The day after the murder the body of Cæsar was carried through the streets of Rome, and through the forum.

The people heard Cæsar's will read to them. In this will he left much of his riches to the citizens. In death, as in life, he thought of others rather than his own enjoyment.

In Shakespeare's play the will is read to the people by Antony, who also shows them the wounds in Cæsar's body:

I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech,
To stir men's blood; I only speak right on;
I tell you that which you yourselves do know;
Show you sweet Cæsar's wounds, poor, poor dumb mouths,
And bid them speak for me!

The citizens then rushed away in fury to burn the houses of the plotters, and to slay them that had laid cruel hands on Cæsar.

A comet blazed in the sky for seven days after the murder. People gazed at it, and said it was a sign of the wrath of the gods at the evil deed of Brutus and Cassius.

A year or two later Brutus was preparing to fight his last battle against Antony and Augustus, and he lay in his tent, and the light of the lamp burned dim, as if in a fog. Then there stood beside the bed a strange, tall, and terrible figure, and it said:

"Brutus, I am your evil genius; you shall meet me at Philippi."

"I will meet you there," answered Brutus, boldly.

Then the ghost vanished into the night.

This story is, of course, only a legend. But you see it proves to us how the people of that time believed it was a wicked thing to slay Cæsar; and they thought it a just punishment upon Brutus that he should be beaten at Philippi. When Brutus saw the day was lost, he fell upon his own sword and died.