

**75 A.D.**

**THE COMPARISON OF PELOPIDAS WITH  
MARCELLUS**

**Plutarch**

**translated by John Dryden**

*Plutarch (46-120) - Greek biographer, historian, and philosopher, sometimes known as the encyclopaedist of antiquity. He is most renowned for his series of character studies, arranged mostly in pairs, known as "Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans" or "Parallel Lives." Pelopidas and Marcellus Compared (75 AD) - Compares and contrasts the lives of Pelopidas, a Theban general, and Marcellus, a Roman general. 75 AD*

## **COMPARISON OF PELOPIDAS WITH MARCELLUS**

THESE are the memorable things I have found in historians concerning Marcellus and Pelopidas. Betwixt which two great men, though in natural character and manners they nearly resemble each other, because both were valiant and diligent, daring and high-spirited, there was yet some diversity in the one point, that Marcellus in many cities which he reduced under his power committed great slaughter; but Epaminondas and Pelopidas never after any victory put men to death, or reduced citizens to slavery. And we are told, too, that the Thebans would not, had these been present, have taken the measures they did against the Orchomenians. Marcellus's exploits against the Gauls are admirable and ample; when, accompanied by a few horse, he defeated and put to flight a vast number of horse and foot together (an action you cannot easily in historians find to have been done by any other captain), and took their king prisoner. To which honour Pelopidas aspired, but did not attain; he was killed by the tyrant in the attempt.

But to these you may perhaps oppose those two most glorious battles at Leuctra and Tegyrae; and we have no statement of any achievement of Marcellus, by stealth or ambuscade, such as were those of Pelopidas, when he returned from exile, and killed the tyrants at Thebes; which, indeed, may claim to be called the first in rank of all achievements ever performed by secrecy and cunning. Hannibal was, indeed, a most formidable enemy for the Romans; but so for that matter were the Lacedaemonians for the Thebans. And that these were, in the fights of Leuctra and Tegyrae, beaten and put to flight by Pelopidas is confessed; whereas Polybius writes that Hannibal was never so much as once vanquished by Marcellus, but remained invincible in all encounters till Scipio came. I myself, indeed, have followed rather Livy, Caesar, Cornelius Nepos and among the Greeks, King Juba, in stating that the troops of Hannibal were in some encounters routed and put to flight by Marcellus; but certainly these defeats conducted little to the sum of the war. It would seem as if they had been merely feints of some sort on the part of the Carthaginians. What was indeed truly and really admirable was, that the Romans, after the defeat of so many armies, the slaughter of so many captains, and, in fine, the confusion of almost the whole Roman empire, still showed a courage equal to their losses, and were as willing as their enemies to engage in new battles. And Marcellus was the one man who

overcame the great and inveterate fear and dread, and revived, raised, and confirmed the spirits of the soldiers to that degree of emulation and bravery that would not let them easily yield the victory, but made them contend for it to the last. For the same men, whom continual defeats had accustomed to think themselves happy, if they could but save themselves by running from Hannibal, were by him taught to esteem it base and ignominious to return safe but unsuccessful; to be ashamed to confess that they had yielded one step in the terrors of the fight and to grieve to extremity if they were not victorious.

In short, as Pelopidas was never overcome in any battle, where himself was present and commanded in chief, and as Marcellus gained more victories than any of his contemporaries, truly he that could not be easily overcome, considering his many successes, may fairly be compared with him who was undefeated. Marcellus took Syracuse; whereas Pelopidas was frustrated of his hope of capturing Sparta. But in my judgment it was more difficult to advance his standard even to the walls of Sparta, and to be the first of mortals that ever passed the river Eurotas in arms, than it was to reduce Sicily; unless, indeed, we say that that adventure is with more of right to be attributed to Epaminondas, as was also the Leuctrian battle; whereas Marcellus's renown, and the glory of his brave actions, came entire and undiminished to him alone. For he alone took Syracuse; and without his colleague's help defeated the Gauls, and, when all others declined, alone, without one companion, ventured to engage with Hannibal; and changing the aspect of the war first showed the example of daring to attack him.

I cannot commend the death of either of these great men; the suddenness and strangeness of their ends gives me a feeling rather of pain and distress. Hannibal has my admiration who, in so many severe conflicts, more than can be reckoned in one day, never received so much as one wound. I honour Chrysantes also (in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*), who, having raised his sword in the act of striking his enemy, so soon as a retreat was sounded, left him, and retired sedately and modestly. Yet the anger which provoked Pelopidas to pursue revenge in the heat of fight may excuse him.

"The first thing for a captain is to gain safe victory; the next to be with honour slain,"

as Euripides says. For then he cannot be said to suffer death; it is rather to be called an action. The very object, too, of Pelopidas's victory, which consisted in the slaughter of the tyrant, presenting itself to his eyes, did not wholly carry him away unadvisedly: he

could not easily expect again to have another equally glorious occasion for the exercise of his courage in a noble and honourable cause. But Marcellus, when it made little to his advantage, and when no such violent ardour as present danger naturally calls out transported him to passion, throwing himself into danger, fell to an unexplored ambush; he, namely, who had borne five consulates, led three triumphs, won the spoils and glories of kings and victories, to act the part of a mere scout, or sentinel, and to expose all his achievements to be trod under foot by the mercenary Spaniards and Numidians, who sold themselves and their lives to the Carthaginians, so that even they themselves felt unworthy, and almost grudged themselves the unhoped-for success of having cut off, among a few Fregellan scouts, the most valiant, the most potent, and most renowned of the Romans. Let no man think that we have thus spoken out of a design to accuse these noble men; it is merely an expression of frank indignation in their own behalf, at seeing them thus wasting all their other virtues upon that of bravery, and throwing away their lives, as if the loss would be only felt by themselves, and not by their country, allies, and friends. After Pelopidas's death, his friends, for whom he died, made a funeral for him; the enemies, by whom he had been killed, made one for Marcellus. A noble and happy lot indeed the former; yet there is something higher and greater in the admiration rendered by enemies to the virtue that had been their own obstacle, than in the grateful acknowledgments of friends. Since, in the one case, it is virtue alone that challenges itself the honour; while, in the other, it may be rather men's personal profit and advantage that is the real origin of what they do.

**THE END**