Hear first how Caius Marcius came to be called Coriolanus, he who was the mightiest soldier, the strongest, bravest patrician in Rome.

The Romans were at war with the Volscians. Their army lay encamped round about Corioli, the Volscian capital, and the Volscians, fearing that the city might be taken by their enemies, were marching to rescue their besieged countrymen.

To prevent this, Cominius, the Roman general, divided his army into two parts. He himself with one half of the troops marched to meet the enemy, leaving the other half -- Caius Marcius among them -- to carry on the siege.

No sooner was Cominius out of sight, than the besieged Volscians rushed from the city and attacked the enemy with such surprising fierceness that the Romans turned to flee.

'Shame Shame upon you, soldiers!' cried Caius Marcius, dashing into the fray, and so terrible was his voice, and so awful his look, that the Volscians fell back in dismay, and the Romans turning again chased them to the very gates of the city. A shower of arrows from the walls met them there, but Marcius took little notice.

'The gates are open for the victors,' he cried, and boldly entered with his enemies, followed only by a few of his bravest soldiers.

Once inside the walls, Marcius fought so furiously that the Volscians fled like frightened rabbits before him. Not one among them dared stand against this terrible stranger with his angry flaming eyes and merciless sword. And before long the city was captured by the strength and valour of one man.

Even then Marcius was not content. With a few soldiers he rode hurriedly to join the rest of the army, and overtook Comimius as he was about to give battle. Wounded as he was, Marcius fought as bravely as ever, doing marvellous deeds of arms. The Volscians were defeated, and many prisoners and much treasure taken from them.

The next day the Consul, before the whole army, offered the hero a tenth part of the captured treasure as a reward for his bravery, -- but this Marcius refused to take.

'I will share and share alike with the rest, for I have only done my duty, and I want no reward,' said he. 'Only one gift will I ask of you. Among the prisoners I have a friend, a good and true man. It would grieve me to see him sold as a slave, therefore I pray you to give me his freedom.'

The soldiers liked Marcius better for this speech than for all the brave deeds he had done, and when the sound of their cheering died away, the Consul answered,

'So be it -- the man is free.'

Then turning to the Romans, he cried, 'Soldiers. if Caius Marcius will take no reward, we cannot force him; but let us give him that which he cannot refuse, let him from henceforth be called Coriolanus, so that he may be honoured for ever as the man who captured Corioli'

Thus Caius Marcius won his famous name.

Hear now how, after peace had been made the with Volscians, Coriolanus was banished, and how he avenged himself.

When first Rome became a republic, the plebeians, that is to say the people, rejoiced greatly -- 'At last we shall be treated with justice,' they said, but soon they found that the patrician senators ruled as harshly and unjustly as the kings had done, and that instead of having one tyrant over them, they had many.

At last they could bear this no longer. A whole band of them left the city, and marched to a hill not far away, where they meant to found a new colony. The senate in alarm sent one of the oldest and wisest patricians to persuade them to return. To his prayers and entreaties they made answer:

'When two men, chosen by us alone, shall be allowed to sit in the Senate, to speak for us, to make laws for us, and to defend our liberty, then and only then will we return to Rome.'

The senators unwillingly granted the request, and the plebeians marched back in triumph. Ever afterwards they had the right to choose their own tribunes -- Tribunes of the Plebs they were called -- who sat in the senate and watched over the cause of the people. At first there were only two, afterwards five, and later even more.

But all this time no work had been done, no harvest gathered, so that there was no corn for the making of bread, and before long the citizens were starving.

War broke out again, but the people sullenly refused to fight. Coriolanus, taking with him all his servants and retainers and as many soldiers as would join him, marched into the enemy's country, returning soon victorious, with food, corn and gold.

The plebeians, seeing the soldiers living in plenty while they were starving, grew angry with Coriolanus. Indeed he had never been a great favourite of theirs. He was the proudest and haughtiest of all the proud and haughty patricians. He despised the people, and they disliked and feared him. They feared him because he was ever trying to take from them the little power they had won, and therefore when he offered himself as consul they refused him, and gave their votes to another patrician.

This made the senate very indignant, for they loved and honoured Coriolanus more than any other man. As for Coriolanus, he grew more angry and bitter against the plebeians than ever before.

At this time a large quantity of bread-corn was brought into the city. Some of it had been bought from other Italian towns, and some was the gift of the King of Syracuse.

When the starving citizens heard the joyful tidings they hurried to the Forum to hear what the senate would say about the matter. They expected to be able to buy some of the corn for very little money and to be given the rest, since it was a royal gift; so patiently and hopefully they waited outside for their tribunes to bring word from the senate.

But within Coriolanus was speaking, the younger senators were approving his every word, the older men were shaking their heads, and the tribunes were growing angrier and more uneasy every moment. For Coriolanus was speaking against the people; he was telling them that the price of the corn must not be lowered, nor the citizens given a grain of it.

'They are growing too powerful,' he said, 'and they must be humbled or we shall soon be nothing but their slaves.'

The tribunes, seeing that most of the senators agreed with him, ran out to the people and angrily told them what was happening.

Wild with hunger and rage they called for Coriolanus to be brought before them. The two tribunes were sent with the aediles (the guardians of the peace) to bring him. Coriolanus refused to go, and when the aediles would have laid hands on him to drag him out by force, the patricians beat them off and thrust the tribunes from the place.

Next morning an angry crowd of citizens thronged the Forum, and so dark were their looks, so threatening their cries, that the senators came hastily out to tell them that all should be as they wished -- that half the corn should be given, and half sold at a small price.

This calmed the anger of some, but others never ceased calling for Coriolanus to come and defend his action. Not only had he tried to keep the corn from them, but he had said that the tribunes ought not to be allowed a place in the senate any longer.

Coriolanus was as eager to speak as they were to hear. But instead of defending his unjust words and designs, he scolded the people for their rebellious ways, and so fiercely and haughtily that they lost all patience.

The tribunes in a rage sentenced him to death, but when the aediles tried to seize and bind him, the patricians, shocked and surprised, gathered round him and would let no one come near, and even the people themselves cried out against such an outrage. Wishing to keep the peace, the tribunes took back the death-sentence, but they ordered Coriolanus to be tried by the people for treason against the republic.

And tried he was and found guilty, and forbidden ever to enter the city of Rome again, for the people could not forget or forgive his tyranny, and the patricians were too much afraid of them to help their friend. Yet while they wept and bewailed his hard fate, Coriolanus showed no sign of sorrow. He was too angry.

Sadly he bade farewell to his mother Volumnia, whom he loved better than any one else in the world, and to his wife and his children -- they also were dear to him. Then in silence he passed through the gates and left Rome for ever.

He first went to a lonely place where he could think and plan how best to be revenged on the people who had turned against him, and the friends who feared to defend him. His poor proud heart instead of being softened by sorrow, had become hard and bitter.

One night a dark figure stole through the streets of Antium, a Volscian city, to the house of the general Tullus. Little did the Volscians know that this stranger was their hated enemy, the man who had captured Corioli -- Coriolanus. He entered the house of Tullus, and going straight to the hearth, where a bright fire was burning, sat down beside it and covered his face with his cloak.

This he did because in those days the fire was a sacred thing, and any one who sat by the hearth, no matter how great an enemy he might be, was safe from all harm.

Tullus was at supper in an upper chamber when the servants told him of the strange man who sat by the fire with his face hid in his cloak. Tullus at once came down to see. When he entered the room Coriolanus uncovered his face, and the two looked at each other for a time in silence.

The Roman was the first to speak:

'Tullus, you know me well; Coriolanus has been no friend to you, and your country-men fear his name still. But now he comes to do you a service. My people have turned against me, my friends have deserted me, and I would be avenged. Give me an army to lead, and before long Rome shall be yours, and the Romans shall rue the day they sent Coriolanus like a stranger from their gates.'

On hearing this Tullus gladly welcomed his strange guest, and in a little while Coriolanus, at the head of a large Volscian army, was marching through the country, burning and capturing the Roman cities and laying waste their lands, and when at last he encamped not far from Rome the citizens gave themselves up for lost.

They were too frightened even to think of fighting their terrible foe. Instead they sent a number of his old friends, the senators, to beg him to spare their city.

'Can ye expect mercy from me,' he said to them bitterly, 'Go, tell the Romans that there can be no peace between us until all the lands that have been taken from the Volscians are surrendered again, together with the city of Rome.'

And he gave them thirty days' grace wherein to make up their minds.

The Romans were terror-struck. They sent the priests next to plead their cause, for in spite of their fears they were too brave to surrender; but the priests returned with the same stern answer.

Then Volumnia and Virgilia, the mother and the wife of Coriolanus, and his two children, together with many noble Roman matrons, made their way to the Volscian camp, and at the sight of them even their enemies were silent.

Coriolanus tenderly kissed his mother, and then his wife and children. Tears came to his eyes, and for a time he could not speak.

Then Volumnia, seeing that he loved them still, began to pray him to have pity on Rome.

Coriolanus at the Gates of Rome.

If you do not grant me my prayer,' she said, 'then to reach Rome your horses will have to trample over my dead body, for I cannot live to see my son either his country's captive or conqueror.'

And when Coriolanus answered her never a word, she cried:

'Why are you silent, O my son? It is no honour to nurse anger and hate in your heart. You of all men who have suffered so for much from ingratitude, should take care not to be ungrateful yourself. You have done much for your country, but what have you done for me -- your mother -- in return for all my love and care? Oh, surely you cannot refuse me this one thing!'

'Ah, mother,' said Coriolanus sadly, 'what have you done? You have saved Rome, but you have slain your son!' for he knew that the Volscians would not forgive him for sparing Rome: nor did they.

When the women had returned with the joyful news, Coriolanus ordered his army to retire. They obeyed, but soon after, at Antium, the Volscian generals, who had grown jealous, slew the great Roman.

Thus died Coriolanus, a man who, great as he was, would have been so much greater had he learned to be as humble and forgiving as he was honourable and brave.