

The Story of Spartacus

by Plutarch



ABOUT THE READING Countless slaves were forced to fight each other for the amusement of the Roman public. In 73 BC a slave named Spartacus escaped and led a revolt. He and many others like him fought for two years against the Roman army. Spartacus was defeated in 71 BC. Stories of his strength, courage, and successes became legends. The Greek historian Plutarch recorded this story of Spartacus.



As you read take note of the different words and phrases that the writer uses to describe Spartacus and his actions.

The [revolt] of the **gladiators** and the [destruction] of Italy, commonly called the war of Spartacus, began upon this occasion. One Lentulus Batiates trained . . . a great many gladiators in Capua, most of them Gauls and Thracians, who, not for any fault by them committed, but simply through the cruelty of their master, were kept in confinement for this object of fighting one with another. Two hundred of these formed to plan an escape, but being discovered, those of them who became aware of it in time . . . , being seventy-eight, got out of a cook's shop chopping-knives and spits, and made their way through the city and lighting by the way on several wagons that were carrying gladiators' arms to another city, they seized upon them and armed themselves. And seizing upon a defensible place, they chose three captains, of whom Spartacus was chief, a Thracian of one of the nomad tribes, and a man not only of high spirit and **valiant**, but in

VOCABULARY

gladiators warriors who fought in Roman arenas

arms weapons

valiant brave

formidable difficult to defeat

praetor a Roman judge

sally a sudden rush forward

centurions Roman commanders

Capua was an ancient city in Italy. Gauls and Thracians were people from regions outside Italy. Some gladiators were criminals or paid volunteers, but many were prisoners of war and slaves who were forced to fight.

The escaping gladiators happen upon wagons full of weapons.

understanding, also, and in gentleness superior to his condition . . . When [Spartacus] first came to be sold at Rome, they say a snake coiled itself upon his face as he lay asleep, and his wife, who at this latter time also accompanied him in his flight . . . declared that it was a sign [predicting] great and **formidable** power to him . . .



Using their wits and new weapons, the gladiators battle the Romans.

First, then, [defeating] those that came out of Capua against them, and thus [taking] a quantity of proper soldiers' arms, they gladly threw away their own as barbarous and dishonorable. Afterwards Clodius, the **praetor**, took the command against them with a body of three thousand men from Rome, and [attacked] them within a mountain, accessible only by one narrow and difficult passage, which Clodius kept guarded, [surrounded] on all other sides with steep and slippery [cliffs]. Upon the top, however, grew a great many wild vines, and cutting down as many of their boughs as they had need of, they twisted them into strong ladders long enough to reach from thence to the bottom, by which, without any danger, they got down all but one, who stayed there to throw down their arms, and after this succeeded in saving himself. The Romans were ignorant of all this, and, therefore, coming upon them in the rear, [Spartacus and the others] assaulted them unawares and took their camp . . .

Wisely considering that he was not to expect to match the force of the empire, [Spartacus] marched his army toward the Alps, [planning], when he had passed them, that every man should go to his own home, some to Thrace, some to Gaul. But [his men], grown confident in their numbers, and puffed up with their success, would give no obedience to him, but went about and [attacked] Italy . . .

Spartacus was gentler than one might expect of a slave trained to fight as a gladiator.

After they have defeated Roman soldiers and have taken the soldiers' weapons, the slaves throw away their gladiator weapons, which they think are coarse and unworthy.

The Roman soldiers force Spartacus and his men into a part of the mountain that has only one way in or out.

Because their escape has not been noticed, Spartacus and his followers are able to sneak up on the Roman soldiers and attack them from behind.

Spartacus knows that his small band of gladiators is outmatched in strength and numbers by the Roman army. He wants his soldiers to go home.

The men with Spartacus are proud of their success so far and think there are enough of them to beat the Romans. They refuse to follow Spartacus's advice.



The leaders of Rome send out Crassus, a famous general, with a large army to defeat Spartacus.

Spartacus . . . [went] to the mountains . . . , but Quintius, one of Crassus's officers . . . pursued and overtook him. But when Spartacus rallied and faced them, [the Roman soldiers] were [totally beaten] and fled . . . This success, however, ruined Spartacus, because it encouraged the slaves [not] to obey their officers, but as they were upon the march, [the slaves] came to them with their swords in their hands, and [forced] them to lead them back again . . . the very thing which Crassus was eager for . . . [Crassus and his men] encamped very near the enemy, and began to make [a wall to surround them]; but the slaves made a **sally** and attacked the [Roman soldiers]. As fresh supplies came in on either side, Spartacus, seeing there was no avoiding it, set all his army in array, and when his horse was brought him, he drew out his sword and killed him, saying, if he got the day he should have a great many better horses of the enemies,' and if he lost it he should have no need of this. And so making directly towards Crassus himself, through the midst of arms and wounds, he missed him, but [killed] two **centurions** that fell upon him together. At last being deserted by those that were about him, he himself stood his ground, and surrounded by the enemy, bravely defending himself, was cut in pieces.

Spartacus does not wish to fight any longer. But after the Roman soldiers follow him, he gathers his men to again battle the Romans.

The men refuse to go home. They use their weapons to force their leaders to continue fighting against the Romans.

Once Spartacus realizes that he and his men will have to fight, he makes sure that they take their proper places.