

The Brave Spartan Boy

This famous story epitomises the Spartans' unforgiving approach to rearing brave warriors. The extract is taken and adapted from *The Story of the Greeks* by H. A. Guerber.

As strange as it sounds, the Spartans trained their boys to steal. They praised them when they succeeded in doing so without being found out, and punished them only when caught in the act. The reason for this strange custom was this: the Spartans were often engaged in war, so they had to depend entirely upon the provisions they could get on their way. If the Spartan soldiers had not been trained to steal, many of them would have starved during campaigns. Once a year all the boys were brought to the Temple of Diana, where their courage was tested by a severe flogging; and those who stood this whipping without a tear or moan were praised. The little Spartan boys were so eager to be thought brave, that it is said that some let themselves be flogged to death rather than complain. The bravery of one of these boys was so amazing that you will find it mentioned in nearly every Greek history you read. This little fellow had stolen a live fox which he planned to eat, and hid it underneath his shirt on his way to school. The imprisoned fox, hoping to escape, began to gnaw a hole in the boy's chest, and to tear his flesh with his sharp claws. If the boy had cried with pain, he would have been seen as weak. And if he had let the fox go, he would have been caught stealing. So, in spite of the pain, he just sat still. It was only when the boy fell lifeless to the floor that the teachers found the fox, and saw how cruelly he had torn the brave little boy to pieces. The boy died, having never said so much as a word. To strengthen their muscles, the boys were also carefully trained in gymnastics. They could handle weapons, throw heavy weights, wrestle, run with great speed, swim, jump, and ride, and were experts in all exercises which tended to make them strong, active, and well. They were also taught to treat old people, many of whom would have survived great and terrible wars, with total respect.