

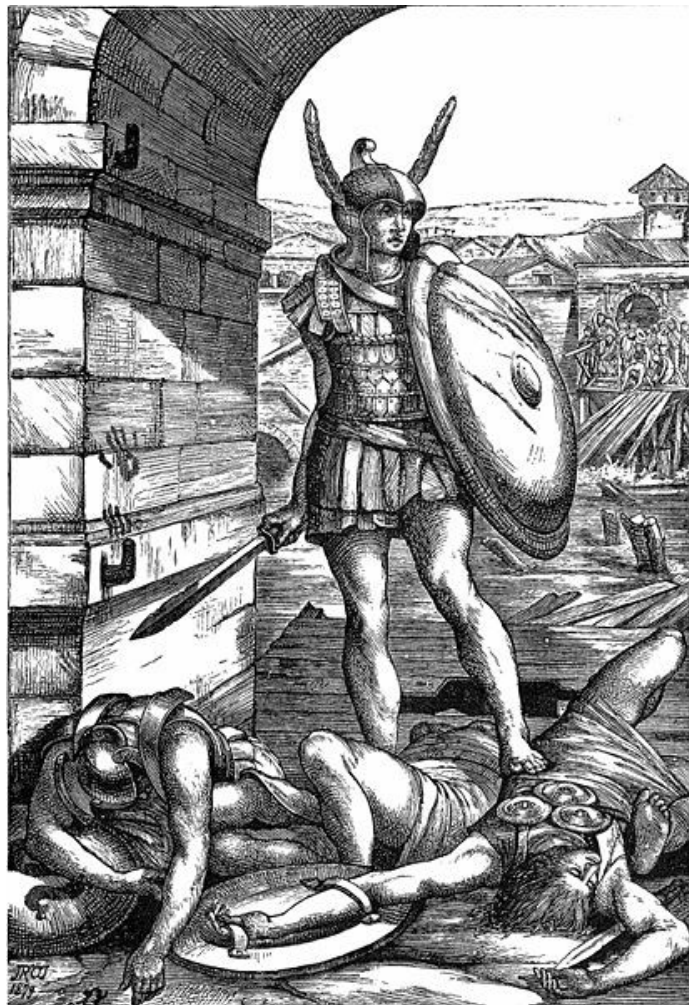
Horatius at the Bridge

By Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1842

Countless schoolchildren have encountered *Horatius at the Bridge* as a means of introducing them to history, poetry, and the moral values of courage, self-sacrifice, and patriotism emphasized by Macaulay. Reported to have been Winston Churchill's favorite poem, he memorized all 70 stanzas as a boy, believing it would inspire courage. He continued to recite it throughout his life.

Horatius describes how Publius Horatius and two companions, Spurius Lartius and Titus Herminius, held the Sublician bridge against the Etruscan army of Lars Porsena, King of Clusium. The three heroes are willing to die in order to prevent the enemy from crossing the bridge, and sacking an otherwise ill-defended Rome. While the trio close with the front ranks of the Etruscans, the Romans hurriedly work to demolish the bridge, leaving their enemies on the wrong side of the swollen Tiber. ("Lays of Ancient Rome." *Wikipedia*, 2015)

"Horatius at the Bridge" is too long a poem for children to memorize. But I never saw a boy who did not want some stanzas of it. "Hold the bridge with me!" Boys like that motto instinctively. —T.B. Macaulay (1800-59).



John Reinhard Weguelin, Horatius defending the Sublician bridge, woodcut by John Reinhard Weguelin, from the 1881 edition. Of "Lays of Ancient Rome," by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay

[Lars Porsena](#) of Clusium, by the Nine Gods he swore
That the great house of [Tarquin](#) should suffer wrong no more.
By the Nine Gods he swore it, and named a trysting day,
And bade his messengers ride forth,
East and West and South and North,
To summon his array.

East and West and South and North the messengers ride fast,
And tower and town and cottage have heard the trumpet's blast.
Shame on the false Etruscan who lingers in his home,
When Porsena of Clusium is on the march for Rome!

The horsemen and the footmen are pouring in amain
From many a stately market-place, from many a fruitful plain;
From many a lonely hamlet which, hid by beech and pine
Like an eagle's nest hangs on the crest of purple Apennine;

From lordly Volaterrae, where scowls the far-famed hold
Piled by the hands of giants for god-like kings of old;
From sea-girt Populonia, whose sentinels descry
Sardinia's snowy mountain-tops fringing the southern sky;

From the proud mart of Pisae, queen of the western waves,
Where ride Massilia's triremes, heavy with fair-haired slaves;
From where sweet Clanis wanders through corn and vines and flowers;
From where Cortona lifts to heaven her diadem of towers.

Tall are the oaks whose acorns drop in dark Auser's rill;
Fat are the stags that champ the boughs of the Ciminian hill;
Beyond all streams Clitumnus is to the herdsman dear;
Best of all pools the fowler loves the great Volsinian mere.

But now no stroke of woodman is heard by Auser's rill;
No hunter tracks the stag's green path up the Ciminian hill;
Unwatched along Clitumnus grazes the milk-white steer;
Unharm'd the water fowl may dip in the Volsinian mere.

The harvests of Arretium, this year, old men shall reap;
This year, young boys in Umbro shall plunge the struggling sheep;
And in the vats of Luna, this year, the must shall foam
Round the white feet of laughing girls whose sires have marched to Rome.

There be thirty chosen prophets, the wisest of the land,
Who always by Lars Porsena both morn and evening stand:
Evening and morn the Thirty have turned the verses o'er,
Traced from the right on linen white by mighty seers of yore;

And with one voice the Thirty have their glad answer given:
"Go forth, go forth, Lars Porsena! Go forth, beloved of Heaven!
Go, and return in glory to Clusium's round dome,
And hang round Nurscia's altars the golden shields of Rome."

And now hath every city sent up her tale of men;

The foot are fourscore thousand; the horse are thousands ten.
Before the gates of Sutrium is met the great array.
A proud man was Lars Porsena upon the trysting day.

For all the Tuscan armies were ranged beneath his eye,
And many a banished Roman, and many a stout ally;
And with a mighty following to join the muster came
The Tusculan Mamilius, Prince of the Latian name.

But by the yellow Tiber was tumult and affright:
From all the spacious champaign to Rome men took their flight.
A mile around the city the throng stopped up the ways:
A fearful sight it was to see through two long nights and days

For aged folks on crutches, and women great with child,
And mothers sobbing over babes that clung to them and smiled.
And sick men borne in litters high on the necks of slaves,
And troops of sun-burned husbandmen with reaping-hooks and staves,

And droves of mules and asses laden with skins of wine,
And endless flocks of goats and sheep, and endless herds of kine,
And endless trains of wagons that creaked beneath the weight
Of corn-sacks and of household goods choked every roaring gate.

Now, from the rock Tarpeian, could the wan burghers spy
The line of blazing villages red in the midnight sky.
The Fathers of the City, they sat all night and day,
For every hour some horseman came with tidings of dismay.

To eastward and to westward have spread the Tuscan bands;
Nor house, nor fence, nor dovecote in Crustumium stands.
Verbenna down to Ostia hath wasted all the plain;
Astur hath stormed Janiculum, and the stout guards are slain.

I wis, in all the Senate, there was no heart so bold,
But sore it ached, and fast it beat, when that ill news was told.
Forthwith up rose the Consul, up rose the Fathers all;
In haste they girded up their gowns and hied them to the wall.

They held a council standing before the River-Gate;
Short time was there, ye well may guess, for musing or debate.
Out spake the Consul roundly: "The bridge must straight go down;
For since Janiculum is lost, naught else can save the town..."

Just then, a scout came flying, all wild with haste and fear:
"To arms! To arms, Sir Consul! Lars Porsena is here!"
On the low hills to westward the Consul fixed his eye,
And saw the swarthy storm of dust rise fast along the sky,

And nearer fast and nearer doth the red whirlwind come;
And louder still and still more loud, from underneath that whirling cloud,
Is heard the trumpet's war-note proud, the trampling and the hum.
And plainly and more plainly now through the gloom appears,

Far to left and far to right, in broken gleams of dark-blue light,
The long array of helmets bright, the long array of spears.

And plainly and more plainly, above that glimmering line,
Now might ye see the banners of twelve fair cities shine;
But the banner of proud Clusium was highest of them all,
The terror of the Umbrian; the terror of the Gaul.

And plainly and more plainly now might the burghers know,
By port and vest, by horse and crest, each warlike Lucumo.
There Cilnius of Arretium on his fleet roan was seen;
And Astur of the four-fold shield, girt with the brand none else may
wield,
Tolumnius with the belt of gold, and dark Verbenna from the hold
By reedy Thrasymene.

Fast by the royal standard, o'erlooking all the war,
Lars Porsena of Clusium sat in his ivory car.
By the right wheel rode Mamilius, prince of the Latian name,
And by the left false Sextus, who wrought the deed of shame.

But when the face of Sextus was seen among the foes,
A yell that rent the firmament from all the town arose.
On the house-tops was no woman but spat toward him and hissed,
No child but screamed out curses, and shook its little first.

But the Consul's brow was sad, and the Consul's speech was low,
And darkly looked he at the wall, and darkly at the foe.
"Their van will be upon us before the bridge goes down;
And if they once might win the bridge, what hope to save the town?"

Then out spoke brave [Horatius](#), the Captain of the Gate:
"To every man upon this earth, death cometh soon or late;
And how can man die better than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers, and the temples of his Gods,

And for the tender mother who dandled him to rest,
And for the wife who nurses his baby at her breast,
And for the holy maidens who feed the eternal flame,
To save them from false Sextus, that wrought the deed of shame?"

Hew down the bridge, Sir Consul, with all the speed ye may!
I, with two more to help me, will hold the foe in play.
In yon strait path, a thousand may well be stopped by three:
Now, who will stand on either hand and keep the bridge with me?"

Then out spake Spurius Lartius; a Ramnian proud was he:
"Lo, I will stand at thy right hand and keep the bridge with thee."
And out spake strong Herminius; of Titian blood was he:
"I will abide on thy left side, and keep the bridge with thee."

"Horatius," quoth the Consul, "as thou sayest, so let it be."
And straight against that great array forth went the dauntless Three.
For Romans in Rome's quarrel spared neither land nor gold,

Nor son nor wife, nor limb nor life, in the brave days of old.

Then none was for a party; then all were for the state;
Then the great man helped the poor, and the poor man loved the
great.
Then lands were fairly portioned; then spoils were fairly sold:
The Romans were like brothers in the brave days of old.

Now Roman is to Roman more hateful than a foe,
And the Tribunes beard the high, and the Fathers grind the low.
As we wax hot in faction, in battle we wax cold:
Wherefore men fight not as they fought in the brave days of old.

Now while the Three were tightening their harness on their backs,
The Consul was the foremost man to take in hand an axe:
And Fathers mixed with Commons seized hatchet, bar and crow,
And smote upon the planks above and loosed the props below.

Meanwhile the Tuscan army, right glorious to behold,
Came flashing back the noonday light,
Rank behind rank, like surges bright of a broad sea of gold.
Four hundred trumpets sounded a peal of warlike glee,
As that great host, with measured tread, and spears advanced, and
ensigns spread,
Rolled slowly towards the bridge's head where stood the dauntless
Three.

The Three stood calm and silent, and looked upon the foes,
And a great shout of laughter from all the vanguard rose:
And forth three chiefs came spurring before that deep array;
To earth they sprang, their swords they drew, and lifted high their
shields, and flew
To win the narrow way;

Aunus from green Tifernum, Lord of the Hill of Vines;
And Seius, whose eight hundred slaves sicken in Ilva's mines;
And Picus, long to Clusium vassal in peace and war,
Who led to fight his Umbrian powers from that grey crag where, girt
with towers,
The fortress of Naquinum lowers o'er the pale waves of Nar.

Stout Lartius hurled down Aunus into the stream beneath:
Herminius struck at Seius, and clove him to the teeth:
At Picus brave Horatius darted one fiery thrust;
And the proud Umbrian's golden arms clashed in the bloody dust.

Then Ocnus of Falerii rushed on the Roman Three;
And Lausulus of Urgo, the rover of the sea,
And Aruns of Volsinium, who slew the great wild boar,
The great wild boar that had his den amidst the reeds of Cosa's fen,
And wasted fields, and slaughtered men, along Albinia's shore.

Herminius smote down Aruns; Lartius laid Ocnus low:
Right to the heart of Lausulus Horatius sent a blow.

"Lie there," he cried, "fell pirate! No more, aghast and pale,
From Ostia's walls the crowd shall mark the track of thy destroying
bark.
No more Campania's hinds shall fly to woods and caverns when they
spy
Thy thrice-accursed sail."

But now no sound of laughter was heard among the foes.
A wild and wrathful clamour from all the vanguard rose.
Six spears' lengths from the entrance halted that deep array,
And for a space no man came forth to win the narrow way.

But hark! the cry is Astur, and lo! the ranks divide;
And the great Lord of Luna comes with his stately stride.
Upon his ample shoulders clangs loud the four-fold shield,
And in his hand he shakes the brand which none but he can wield.

He smiled on those bold Romans a smile serene and high;
He eyed the flinching Tuscans, and scorn was in his eye.
Quoth he, "The she-wolf's litter stand savagely at bay:
But will ye dare to follow, if Astur clears the way?"

Then, whirling up his broadsword with both hands to the height,
He rushed against Horatius and smote with all his might.
With shield and blade Horatius right deftly turned the blow.
The blow, yet turned, came yet too nigh;
It missed his helm, but gashed his thigh:
The Tuscans raised a joyful cry to see the red blood flow.

He reeled, and on Herminius he leaned one breathing-space;
Then, like a wild-cat mad with wounds, sprang right at Astur's face.
Through teeth, and skull, and helmet so fierce a thrust he sped,
The good sword stood a hand-breadth out behind the Tuscan's head.

And the great Lord of Luna fell at that deadly stroke,
As falls on Mount Alvernus a thunder-smited oak.
Far o'er the crashing forest the giant arms lay spread;
And the pale augurs, muttering low, gaze on the blasted head.

On Astur's throat Horatius right firmly pressed his heel,
And thrice and four times tugged amain, ere he wrenched out the
steel.
"And see," he cried, "the welcome, fair guests, that waits you here!
What noble Lucumo comes next to taste our Roman cheer?"

But at his haughty challenge a sullen murmur ran,
Mingled of wrath, and shame, and dread, along that glittering van.
There lacked not men of prowess, nor men of lordly race;
For all Etruria's noblest were round the fatal place.

But all Etruria's noblest felt their hearts sink to see
On the earth the bloody corpses; in their path the dauntless Three;
And, from the ghastly entrance where those bold Romans stood,
All shrank, like boys who unaware, ranging the woods to start a hare,

Come to the mouth of a dark lair where, growling low, a fierce old bear
Lies amidst bones and blood.

Was none who would be foremost to lead such dire attack?
But those behind cried "Forward!", and those before cried "Back!"
And backward now and forward wavers the deep array;
And on the tossing sea of steel, to and fro the standards reel;
And the victorious trumpet-peal dies fitfully away.

Yet one man for one moment strode out before the crowd;
Well known was he to all the Three, and they gave him greeting loud.
"Now welcome, welcome, Sextus! Now welcome to thy home!
Why dost thou stay, and turn away? Here lies the road to Rome."

Thrice looked he at the city; thrice looked he at the dead;
And thrice came on in fury, and thrice turned back in dread:
And, white with fear and hatred, scowled at the narrow way
Where, wallowing in a pool of blood, the bravest Tuscans lay.

But meanwhile axe and lever have manfully been plied;
And now the bridge hangs tottering above the boiling tide.
"Come back, come back, Horatius!" loud cried the Fathers all.
"Back, Lartius! Back, Herminius! Back, ere the ruin fall!"

Back darted Spurius Lartius; Herminius darted back:
And as they passed, beneath their feet they felt the timbers crack.
But when they turned their faces, and on the further shore
Saw brave Horatius stand alone, they would have crossed once more.

But with a crash like thunder fell every loosened beam,
And, like a dam, the mighty wreck lay right athwart the stream:
And a loud shout of triumph rose from the walls of Rome,
As to the highest turret-tops was splashed the yellow foam.

And, like a horse unbroken, when first he feels the rein,
The furious river struggled hard, and tossed his tawny mane,
And burst the curb, and bounded, rejoicing to be free,
And whirling down, in fierce career, battlement, and plank, and pier
Rushed headlong to the sea.

Alone stood brave Horatius, but constant still in mind;
Thrice thirty thousand foes before, and the broad flood behind.
"Down with him!" cried false Sextus, with a smile on his pale face.
"Now yield thee", cried Lars Porsena, "now yield thee to our grace!"

Round turned he, as not deigning those craven ranks to see;
Nought spake he to Lars Porsena, to Sextus nought spake he;
But he saw on Palatinus the white porch of his home;
And he spake to the noble river that rolls by the towers of Rome.

"Oh Tiber, father Tiber, to whom the Romans pray,
A Roman's life, a Roman's arms, take thou in charge this day!"
So he spake and, speaking, sheathed the good sword by his side,
And, with his harness on his back, plunged headlong in the tide.

No sound of joy or sorrow was heard from either bank;
But friends and foes in dumb surprise, with parted lips and straining
eyes,
Stood gazing where he sank;
And when above the surges they saw his crest appear,
All Rome sent forth a rapturous cry, and even the ranks of Tuscany
Could scarce forbear to cheer.

But fiercely ran the current, swollen high by months of rain:
And fast his blood was flowing; and he was sore in pain,
And heavy with his armour, and spent with changing blows:
And oft they thought him sinking, but still again he rose.

Never, I ween, did swimmer, in such an evil case,
Struggle through such a raging flood safe to the landing place:
But his limbs were borne up bravely by the brave heart within,
And our good father Tiber bare bravely up his chin.

"Curse on him!" quoth false Sextus, "will not the villain drown?
But for this stay, ere close of day, we would have sacked the town!"
"Heaven help him!" quoth Lars Porsena, "and bring him safe to shore;
For such a gallant feat of arms was never seen before."

And now he feels the bottom: now on dry earth he stands;
Now round him throng the Fathers, to press his gory hands;
And now, with shouts and clapping, and noise of weeping loud,
He enters through the River-Gate, borne by the joyous crowd.

They gave him of the corn-land, that was of public right,
As much as two strong oxen could plough from morn till night;
And they made a molten image, and set it up on high,
And there it stands unto this day to witness if I lie.

It stands in the Comitium, plain for all folk to see;
Horatius in his harness, halting upon one knee:
And underneath is written, in letters all of gold,
How valiantly he kept the bridge in the brave days of old.

And still his name sounds stirring unto the men of Rome,
As the trumpet-blast that calls to them to charge the Volscian home;
And wives still pray to Juno for boys with hearts as bold
As his who kept the bridge so well in the brave days of old.

And in the nights of winter, when the cold north winds blow,
And the long howling of the wolves is heard amidst the snow;
When round the lonely cottage roars loud the tempest's din,
And the good logs of Algidus roar louder yet within;

When the oldest cask is opened, and the largest lamp is lit;
When the chestnuts glow in the embers, and the kid turns on the spit;
When young and old in circle around the firebrands close;
When the girls are weaving baskets and the lads are shaping bows

When the goodman mends his armour, and trims his helmet's plume,
And the goodwife's shuttle merrily goes flashing through the loom;
With weeping and with laughter still is the story told,
How well Horatius kept the bridge in the brave days of old.