



Publius Horatius Cocles was an officer in the Roman Army who famously defended the only bridge into Rome against an attack by Lars Porsena and King Tarquin, as recounted in Plutarch's Life of Publicola. There is a very famous poem about this event called "Horatius at the Bridge" by Thomas Babington Macauley. It was published in Macauley's book *Lays of Ancient Rome* in 1842.

HORATIUS AT THE BRIDGE

By Thomas Babington Macauley

I

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.

II

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.

III

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;

IV

From lordly Volaterrae,
Where scowls the far-famed hold
Piled by the hands of giants
For godlike kings of old;
From seagirt Populonia,
Whose sentinels descry
Sardinia's snowy mountain-tops
Fringing the southern sky;

V

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.

VI

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.

VII

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;
Unharmed the water fowl may dip
In the Volsinian mere.

VIII

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.

IX

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 verse o'er,
Traced from the right on linen white
By mighty seers of yore.

X

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 royal dome;
And hang round Nurscia's altars
The golden shields of Rome.'

XI

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.

XII

For all the Etruscan 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.

XIII

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.

XIV
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,

XV
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 waggons
That creaked beneath the weight
Of corn-sacks and of household goods,
Choked every roaring gate.

XVI
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.

XVII
To eastward and to westward
Have spread the Tuscan bands;
Nor house, nor fence, nor dovecote
In Crustumerium stands.
Verbenna down to Ostia
Hath wasted all the plain;

Astur hath stormed Janiculum,
And the stout guards are slain.

XVIII

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.

XIX

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,
Nought else can save the town.'

XX

Just then a scout came flying,
All wild with haste and fear:
'To arms! to arms! Sir Consul:
Lars Porsena is here.'
On the lows hills to westward
The Consul fixed his eye,
And saw the swarthy storm of dust
Rise fast along the sky.

XXI

And nearer fast and nearer
Doth the red whirlwind come;
And louder still and still more loud,
From underneath that rolling 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.

XXII

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.

XXIII

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.

XXIV

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,
 That wrought the deed of shame.

XXV

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 towards him and hissed,
No child but screamed out curses,
 And shook its little fist.

XXVI

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 may win the bridge,
What hope to save the town?'

XXVII

Then out spake 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,

XXVIII

'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?'

XXIX

'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?'

XXX

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.'

XXXI

'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.

XXXII

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.

XXXIII

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.

XXXIV

Now while the Three were tightening
 Their harnesses 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.

XXXV

Meanwhile the Tuscan army,
 Right glorious to behold,
Come 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.

XXXVI

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;

XXXVII

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 Nequinum lowers
O'er the pale waves of Nar.

XXXVIII

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 gilded arms
Clashed in the bloody dust.

XXXIX

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.

XL

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.'

XLI

But now no sound of laughter
 Was heard among the foes.
A wild and wrathful clamor
 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.

XLII

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.

XLIII

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?'

XLIV

Then, whirling up his broadsword
 With both hands to the heights
He rushed against Horatius,
 And smote with all his might,
With shield and blade Horatius
 Right deftly turned the blow.
The blow, though 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.

XLV

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.

XLVI

And the great Lord of Luna
 Fell at that deadly stroke,
As falls on Mount Alvernus
 A thunder smitten oak.
Far o'er the crashing forest
 The giant's arms lie spread;
And the pale augurs, muttering low,
 Gaze on the blasted head.

XLVII

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?'

XLVIII

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.

XLIX

But all Etruria's noblest
Felt their hearts sink to see
On the earth the bloody corpses,
In the 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 the dark lair
Where, growling low, a fierce old bear
Lies amidst bones and blood.

L

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.

LI

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.'

LII

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.

LIII

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!'

LIV

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 farther shore
Saw brave Horatius stand alone,
They would have crossed once more.

LV

But with a crash like thunder
Fell every loosened beam,
And, like a dam, the mighty wreck
Lay right athwart the stream:
And a long shout of triumph
Rose from the walls of Rome,
As to the highest turret-tops
Was splashed the yellow foam.

LVI

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.

LVII

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!'

LVIII

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 Palatins
The white porch of his home;
And he spake to the noble river
That rolls by the towers of Rome.

LIX

'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.

LX

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.

LXI

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 armor,

And spent with changing blows:
And oft they thought him sinking,
But still again he rose.

LXII

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.

LXIII

'Curse on him!' quoth false Sextus;
'Will not the villain drown?
But for this stay, ere close of day
We should 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.'

LXIV

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.

LXV

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.

LXVI

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.

LXVII

And still his name sounds stirring
 Unto the men of Rome,
As the trumpet-blast that cries 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.

LXVIII

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;

LXIX

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;

LXX

When the goodman mends his armor,
 And trims his helmet's plume;
When 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.