

Extracts from 'Horatius at the Bridge'

by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859)

[The story so far... The Roman army is defending a town from an enemy force led by Lars Porsena. With the enemy force is Sextus Tarquinius, a man despised by the Romans as a traitor.] The enemy force is about to cross the river, and if it succeeds, the town is lost. The Roman consul sees no option but to destroy the bridge. But can he do it before the enemy crosses?

But the Consul's brow was sad,
And the Consul's speech was low, 210
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, 215
What hope to save the town?"

Then out spake brave Horatius,
The Captain of the gate:
"To every man upon this earth 220
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 225
Who dandled him to rest,
And for the wife who nurses
His baby at her breast,
And for the holy maidens 230
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, 235
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?" 240

Then out spake Spurius Lartius,—
A Ramnian proud was he:
"Lo, I will stand at thy right hand,
And keep the bridge with thee." 245
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," 250
And straight against that great array
Went forth the dauntless three.
For Romans in Rome's quarrel
Spared neither land nor gold,
Nor son nor wife, nor limb nor life, 255
In the brave days of old.

The three men stand on the bridge as the enemy approaches...

Meanwhile the Tuscan army,
Right glorious to behold,
Came flashing back the noonday light,
Rank behind rank, like surges bright 285
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 toward the bridge's head, 290
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; 295
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. 300

The enemy is dismayed to see how bravely the three men fight, and soon they are standing amongst a pile of slain Etruscans. Is there anyone who will take on these three defenders?

But now no sound of laughter 340
Was heard among the foes;
A wild and wrathful clamor
From all the vanguard rose.
Six spears' length from the entrance,
Halted that mighty mass, 345
And for a space no man came forth
To win the narrow pass.

But, hark! the cry is Astur:
And lo! the ranks divide;
And the great lord of Luna 350
Comes with his stately stride.
Upon his ample shoulders
Clangs loud the fourfold shield,
And in his hand he shakes the brand
Which none but he can wield. 355

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 360
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, 365
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; 370
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, 375
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 handbreadth out 380
Behind the Tuscan's head.

And the great lord of Luna
Fell at that deadly stroke,
As falls on Mount Avernus
A thunder-smitten oak. 385
Far o'er the crashing forest
The giant arms lie spread;
And the pale augurs, muttering low
Gaze on the blasted head.

On Astur's throat Horatius 390
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! 395
What noble Lucumo comes next
To taste our Roman cheer?"

But at his haughty challenge
A sullen murmur ran,
Mingled with wrath and shame and dread, 400
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. 405

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, 410
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. 415

Was none who would be foremost
To lead such dire attack;
But those behind cried “Forward!”
And those before cried “Back!” 420
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 425
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: 430
“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; 435
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 440
Where, wallowing in a pool of blood,
The bravest Tuscans lay.

But meanwhile axe and lever
Have manfully been plied: 445
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!” 450

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, 455
And on the farther shore
Saw brave Horatius stand alone,
They would have crossed once more;

But with a crash like thunder
Fell every loosened beam, 460
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 465
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, 470
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. 475

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, 480
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; 485
Naught spake he to Lars Porsena,
To Sextus naught spake he;
But he saw on Palatinus
The white porch of his home;
And he spake to the noble river 490

That rolls by the towers of Rome:

“O Tiber! Father Tiber!
To whom the Romans pray,
A Roman’s life, a Roman’s arms,
Take thou in charge this day!” 495
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 500
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 505
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, 510
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; 515
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 520
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. 525

“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, 530
“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; 535
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, 540
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; 545
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, 550
Plain for all folk to see,—
Horatius in his harness,
Halting upon one knee;
And underneath is written,
In letters all of gold, 555
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 cries to them 560
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. 565

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 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.



Questions for discussion:

1. What view of war is presented in this poem?
2. What words or phrases add to this impression?
3. What is the effect of dialogue in this poem?
4. Why do you think the poet tells us that Lars Porsena wanted Horatius to survive?
5. Sextus hopes his enemy drowns. What are we supposed to think of Sextus when he says this?
6. Why do you think the poet tells us details of all the people who will tell the story of Horatius in years to come?
7. What is the effect of the repetition of 'the brave days of old'?
8. Do you think the rhythm and the rhyme scheme adds to the reader's enjoyment of the poem?

Short Writing Task:

Imagine you are a journalist with 'The RomanTimes' who was present at this battle. Write the article you would submit to your paper about the events of the day.