

Horatius at the Bridge

ONCE there was a war between the Roman people and the Etruscans who lived in the towns on the other side of the Tiber River. Porsena, the King of the Etruscans, raised a great army, and marched toward Rome. The city had never been in so great danger.

The Romans did not have many fighting men at that time, and they knew that they were not strong enough to meet the Etruscans in open battle. So they kept themselves inside of their walls, and set guards to watch the roads.

One morning the army of Porsena was seen coming over the hills from the north. There were thousands of horsemen and footmen, and they were marching straight toward the wooden bridge, which spanned the river at Rome.

“What shall we do?” said the white-haired Fathers who made the laws for the Roman people. “If they once gain the bridge, we cannot hinder them from crossing; and then what hope will there be for the town?”

Now, among the guards at the bridge, there was a brave man named Horatius. He was on the farther side of the river, and when he saw that the Etruscans were so near, he called out to the Romans who were behind him.

“Hew down the bridge with all the speed that you can!” he cried. “I, with the two men who stand by me, will keep the foe at bay.”

Then, with their shields before them, and their long spears in their hands, the three brave men stood in the road, and kept back the horsemen whom Porsena had sent to take the bridge.

On the bridge the Romans hewed away at the beams and posts. Their axes rang, the chips flew fast; and soon it trembled, and was ready to fall.

“Come back! Come back, and save your lives!” they cried to Horatius and the two who were with him.

But just then Porsena's horsemen dashed toward them again.

“Run for your lives!” said Horatius to his friends. “I will keep the road.”

They turned, and ran back across the bridge. They had hardly reached the other side when there was a crashing of beams and timbers. The bridge toppled over to one side, and then fell with a great splash into the water.

When Horatius heard the sound, he knew that the city was safe. With his face still toward Porsena's men, he moved slowly backward till he stood on the river's bank.

A dart thrown by one of Porsena’s soldiers put out his left eye; but he did not falter. He cast his spear at the foremost horseman, and then he turned quickly around. He saw the white porch of his own home among the trees on the other side of the stream:

“And he spake to the noble river
That rolls by the walls of Rome:
‘O Tiber! Father Tiber!
To whom the Romans pray,
A Roman's life, a Roman's arms,
Take thou in charge to-day.”

He leaped into the deep, swift stream. He still had his heavy armor on; and when he sank out of sight, no one thought that he would ever be seen again. But he was a strong man, and the best swimmer in Rome. The next minute he rose. He was halfway across the river, and safe from the spears and darts, which Porsena’s soldiers hurled after him.

Soon he reached the farther side, where his friends stood ready to help him. Shout after shout greeted him as he climbed upon the bank. Then Porsena’s men shouted also, for they had never seen a man so brave and strong as Horatius. He had kept them out of Rome, but he had done a deed, which they could not help but praise.

As for the Romans, they were very grateful to Horatius for having saved their city. They called him Horatius Cocles, which meant the “one-eyed Horatius,” because he had lost an eye in defending the bridge; they caused a fine statue of brass to be made in his honor; and they gave him as much land as he could plow around in a day. And for hundreds of years afterwards —

"With weeping and with laughter,
Still was the story told,
How well Horatius kept the bridge
In the brave days of old."

Note: The surname Cocles may be an abbreviation of Cyclops, meaning “one-eyed.”

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