

HORATIUS

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 handbreadth out
Behind the Tuscan's head!

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 arms lie spread;
And the pale augurs, muttering low,
Gazed on the blasted head.

In the meantime the axes had been busily plied; and while the bridge was tottering to its fall, Lartius and Herminius regained the opposite bank in safety. Horatius remained facing the foe until the last timber had fallen, when, weighed down with armour as he was, he "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 beneath 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,