Livy: Horatius at the Bridge
from The Early History of Rome, Book II, Chapter 10, by Titus Livius

This is the story of Horatius, who single-handedly defended a bridge against invading Etruscans in order to buy his city time to prepare a defense.

Questions:
- What danger did the Romans face? What did Horatius do to defend the Romans?
- What qualities does Horatius demonstrate in this passage?
- What is the moral of Livy’s account? What can we infer about Roman values based on this?

The most vulnerable point was the wooden bridge, and the Etruscans would have crossed it and forced an entrance into the city [of Rome], had it not been for the courage of one man, Horatius Cocles—that great soldier whom the fortune of Rome gave to be her shield on that day of peril…. The enemy forces came pouring down the hill, while the Roman troops, throwing away their weapons, were behaving more like an undisciplined rabble than a fighting force. Horatius acted promptly…. Urging [his comrades] with all the power at his command to destroy the bridge by fire or steel, … he offered to hold up the Etruscan advance, so far as was possible, alone. Proudly he took his stand at the outer end of the bridge…. The advancing enemy paused in sheer astonishment at such reckless courage.

Darting glances of defiance around at the Etruscan nobles, he now challenged them in turn to fight, now railed at them collectively as slaves of haughty kings, who, heedless of their own liberty, were come to overthrow the liberty of others. They hesitated for a moment, each looking to his neighbor to begin the fight. Then shame made them attack, and with a shout they threw their javelins from every side against their solitary foe. But he caught them all upon his shield, and, resolute as ever, held his ground. They charged at him, when suddenly, the crash of the bridge falling and the cheer which burst from the throats of the Romans, exulting in the completion of their task, checked them in mid-career with sudden dismay.

Then Horatius sent off a prayer, and, armed as he was, leaped down into the river, and under a shower of arrows swam across unhurt to his comrades, proving a valor which was destined to obtain more fame than credence with posterity.

The state was grateful for so brave a deed: a statue of Horatius was set up, and he was given as much land as he could plough around in one day. In the midst of his official honors, private citizens also showed their gratitude in a striking fashion. Although they had very little themselves, everybody made him some gift of whatever they could.