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LIVY

*The Early History  
of Rome*

Books I-V of  
*The History of Rome from Its Foundations*

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PENGUIN BOOKS

there were three brothers – triplets – all equally young and active, belonging to the families of the **Horatii** and **Curiatii**. That these **were** their names **has** never been in **doubt**, and the **story** is one of the **great** stories of ancient times; yet in **spite** of its **celebrity** historians **have** disagreed about which name belonged to which set of brothers. The majority, I find, say that the Horatii were Roman, and I am willing to follow their lead.

*Start* To these young men the two rival commanders made their proposal, that they should fight, three against three, as the champions of their countries, the victorious to have dominion over the vanquished: the proposal was accepted; the time and place for the contest were arranged and a solemn agreement entered into by the Romans and Albans to the effect that whichever of the two peoples should prove victorious through the prowess of its champions should be undisputed master of the other. The terms of treaties of course vary according to circumstance, but the form remains constant; on the present occasion, that of the oldest treaty on record, the procedure, we read, was as follows: the 'fetial' (priest) approached Tullus, the king. 'My lord,' he asked, 'do you bid me make this compact with the representative of the Alban people?'

'I do.'

'Then I demand of you, my lord, the holy herb.'

'Go and pluck it untainted.'

The priest brought from the sacred enclosure a fresh green plant, and said: 'My lord, do you grant me, with my emblems and companions, the king's sanction to speak for the people of Rome?'

'I grant it,' the king replied, 'without prejudice to myself and the people of Rome.'

The priest was Marcus Valerius, and he appointed Spurius Fusius, touching his head and hair with the ceremonial leaves, as *pater patratus*, or 'spokesman', whose duty is to pronounce the oath and thus to solemnize the compact. This he does in a long metrical formula, which is not worth the trouble of quoting here. Finally, the terms of the treaty having been read out, 'Hear me, Jupiter,' Fusius cried; 'hear me, Alba, and you who speak on her behalf: from the terms of this compact, as they have been publicly and openly read from these

tablets today and clearly understood by us assembled here, the Roman people will never be the first to depart. Should they do so treacherously, and by public consent, then, great Jove, I pray that thou mayst strike them even as I strike this pig, and the more fiercely in that thy power and might are greater than mine.' He then dispatched the pig with a flint knife. The Albans, on their side, took a similar oath according to their own formula, and the treaty was made.

The six champions now made ready for battle. As they stepped forward into the lists between the two armies their hearts were high, and ringing in their ears were the voices of friends, bidding them remember that their parents, their country, and their country's gods, their fellow-soldiers and all they loved at home, would be watching their prowess and that all eyes were on their swords. The rival armies were still in position; danger there was none, but every man present was tense with anxiety. The stakes were high; upon the luck or valour of three men hung empire or slavery. In an agony of suspense the onlookers prepared for the spectacle.

The trumpet blared. The brothers drew their swords, and with all the pride of embattled armies advanced to the combat. Careless of death and danger, each thought only of his country's fate, of the grim choice between lordship and ignominy, which they themselves, and they only, were about to decide. They met. At the flash of steel and the clang of shield on shield a thrill ran through the massed spectators, breathless and speechless while as yet neither side had the advantage. Soon the combatants were locked in a deadly grapple; bodies writhed and twisted, the leaping blades parried and thrust, and blood began to flow. Alba's three champions were wounded; a Roman fell, then another, stretched across his body and both at the point of death. A cheer burst from the Alban army, as the two Romans went down, while from their adversaries all hope was gone; life seemed to drain from them, as they contemplated the dreadful predicament of their one survivor, surrounded by the three Curiatii.

The young man, though alone, was unhurt. No match for his three opponents together, he was yet confident of his ability to face them singly, and, with this purpose in mind, he took to his heels, sure that they would be after him with such speed as their wounds allowed.

Not far from the scene of the first fight he looked back. His three enemies were coming, strung out one behind the other, the foremost almost upon him. He turned and attacked him furiously. A cry rose from the Alban army: 'Your brother! Save him!' But it was too late, Horatius had already killed his man and, flushed with triumph, was looking for his next victim. The Romans' cheer for their young soldier was like the roar of the crowd at the race when luck turns defeat into victory. Horatius pressed on to make an end. He killed his second man before the last, near though he was, could come to his aid.

Now it was one against one; but the two antagonists were far from equally matched in all else that **makes for victory**. Horatius was unhurt, and elated by his double **success; his opponent, exhausted by running and loss of blood, could hardly drag himself along; his brothers had been killed before his eyes; he was a beaten man facing a victorious enemy**. What followed cannot be called a fight. 'I have killed two already,' the Roman cried, 'to avenge my brothers' ghosts. I offer the last to settle our quarrel, that Rome may be mistress of Alba.' With these proud words he plunged his sword with a downward stroke into the throat of his enemy, now too weak to sustain his shield, and then stripped him where he lay.

The cheering ranks of the Roman army, whose joy was the keener by the narrow escape from disaster, welcomed back their champion. The two sides then buried their dead, a common task but performed with very different feelings by victors and vanquished. Alba was subject now to her Roman mistress. **The graves are still to be seen at the place where each man fell: those of the two Romans together, in the direction of Alba; those of the three Albans nearer Rome and at some distance from each other.**

Before the troops left their stations, Mettius asked Tullus what, by the terms of the **agreement**, he now required him to do, and Tullus instructed him to **keep his men under arms** as they would be a useful reinforcement if Rome should find herself at war with Veii.

**At the head of the Roman army on its return to the city marched Horatius, carrying his triple spoils, and it so happened that outside the Capena gate he met his sister, a young girl who had been betrothed**

to one of the Curiatii. Slung across her brother's shoulders was a cloak, and she recognized it as the cloak she had made with her own hands for her lover. The sight overcame her: she loosed her hair and, in a voice choked with tears, called her dead lover's name. That his sister should dare to grieve at the very moment of his own triumph and in the midst of national rejoicing filled Horatius with such uncontrollable rage that he drew his sword and stabbed her to the heart. 'Take your girl's love,' he shouted, 'and give it to your lover in hell. What is Rome to such as you, or your brothers, living or dead? So perish all Roman women who mourn for an enemy!'

There were none who did not feel the horror of this deed. Horatius, in spite of the great service he had just rendered to his country, was arrested and brought for trial before the king. Tullus shrank from the responsibility of passing the death sentence, which must, in the circumstances, have proved unpopular, so he summoned a mass meeting and informed the populace of his intention to appoint the special officers known as *duumvirs*, to convict Horatius of treason according to the regular law. The wording of the law was solemn and awe-inspiring: 'Let the duumvirs,' it ran, 'pass judgement for treason. If the prisoner should appeal, let the appeal be weighed. If the conviction is maintained, let the officer of the law veil the prisoner's head, hang him with a rope on a barren tree, and scourge his body within or without the city walls.' The duumvirs were duly appointed, and, on the supposition that by the letter of the law they were bound to convict even an innocent man, one of them addressed the prisoner with the words: 'Publius Horatius, I find you guilty of treason. Lictor, bind his arms.' The lictor stepped forward and was about to pinion him when Tullus intervened. Tullus was anxious to temper the severity of the law and urged the prisoner to appeal. Horatius did so, and his appeal was submitted to the judgement of the people. In the course of the hearing the decisive factor was the statement of Horatius's father, to the effect that his daughter deserved her death. Had it been otherwise, he declared, he would have exercised his right to punish his son himself. He then appealed to the people to remember the fine family of children he so recently possessed, and begged them not to leave him wholly bereft. 'Men of Rome,' he cried, embracing

his son and pointing to the spoils of war set up in the place now known as the 'Horatian Spears', 'have you the heart to see this young soldier, fresh from the joy and pride of victory, bound and beaten and tortured and forced to bend his neck under the yoke? Even the men of Alba might shudder at a sight so shameful. Do your work, lictor! Bind the hands whose sword but yesterday gave Rome dominion! Blindfold our liberator's eyes – hang him on the barren tree – scourge him within the walls, yes, in sight of the spears he took from the dead hands of his enemies or outside, if you will, amongst the tombs where those same enemies lie! For wherever you take him, the visible reminder of his noble service will surely save him from so foul a punishment.'

The young man's courage, in the face of this peril as of all others, no less than his father's moving appeal, had its due effect. Though he was guilty in law, popular admiration of his quality obtained his acquittal. It was felt none the less that something, at any rate, should be done to mitigate the stain of so notorious a murder, so the father was bidden to perform, at the public cost, certain ceremonies which would expiate the crime. These ceremonies, which were duly gone through, became from that day traditional in the Horatian family. After their performance a piece of timber was slung across the roadway and the young Horatius was made to pass beneath it with covered head, as under the 'yoke' of submission. The timber is still to be seen – replaced from time to time at the state's expense – and is known as the Sister's Beam. The tomb of the murdered girl was built of hewn stone and stands on the spot where she was struck down.

Peace with Alba was not of long duration. Mettius, a man of weak character, was unable to deal with the resentment of his people at what they felt to have been the folly of entrusting the nation's future to three men. The policy, in itself a good one, had failed, and, in the hope of regaining his popularity, Mettius now had recourse to dubious methods. In war he had wanted peace; now, in peace, he wanted war. Accordingly, as he knew his people, despite their courage, had little military strength, he proceeded to tamper with the neighbouring tribes; these he urged to declare war openly on Rome, intending that his own people, nominally Rome's allies, should in due course betray her.

The people of Fidenae, a colony of Rome, were induced in concert with Veii to declare war by a promise that Alba would join them. Tullus, at the secession of Fidenae, sent an order to Mettius to join him with his troops, and promptly took the field. Crossing the Anio, he halted at the confluence of the rivers; somewhere between him and Fidenae the Veientian troops had crossed the Tiber, and formed the right wing resting on the river, while the men of Fidenae formed the left, nearer the hills. Tullus stationed his own troops so as to confront the Veientians, and sent the Alban contingent to deal with the Fidenates. Mettius, however, the Alban commander, proved as much coward as traitor: not daring either to stand his ground or openly to desert, he began a cautious withdrawal to the hills. At what he thought to be a sufficient distance he brought up his whole force and deployed it, simply as a ruse for gaining time, until events should make up his mind for him; for his intention was to join the victors.

The Roman troops who had been in touch with the Albans and now found their flank exposed were at a loss to account for their withdrawal; then a messenger galloped up to the king with the report that the Alban army was deserting. It was a critical situation: Tullus (having vowed to create twelve Salian priests and to dedicate shrines to Pallor and Panic) promptly ordered the messenger back into the line. He spoke at the top of his voice so that everything he said might be heard by the enemy, and added that there was no need for alarm as the Albans were obeying his own orders to envelop the Fidenates and attack their unprotected rear. At the same time he ordered the cavalry to raise their spears vertically to form a screen which prevented most of the Roman infantry from seeing the Albans moving off; those who did see them were encouraged by what Tullus had said to fight with greater vigour. It was now the enemy's turn to be alarmed; Tullus's loud assertion had been audible enough, and most of the Fidenates understood Latin as emigrants from Rome had settled amongst them in the past. They accordingly beat a retreat, to obviate the danger of being cut off from home by a sudden descent of the Albans from the hills. Tullus attacked, made short work of the Fidenates on the wing, and then turned with increased fury on the Veientians, who were already shaken by their friends' discomfiture. Their