HISTORIC POEMS AND BALLADS

Charge of the Scotch Greys at Waterloo

HISTORIC POEMS AND BALLADS

described by

RUPERT S. HOLLAND

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NOTE

The object of this book is to tell the story of many of the stirring scenes of history through famous poems and ballads and short descriptions of each event. A glossary of the more unusual words used in the poems, and an explanation of the names of persons and places, are included at the end of the volume.

CONTENTS

I

The Destruction of Sennacherib

Sennacherib was King of Assyria from 705 B.C. to 681 B.C. He was a very proud and warlike ruler, but also a great builder, and during his reign Assyria became famous for her art and architecture. He seized and destroyed Babylon, conquered Chaldea, and marched into Egypt. City after city of Judah fell before his arms, and Hezekiah, Prince of Judah, was forced to retreat into Jerusalem. The Assyrian king pursued, wasting the land with fire and sword, and taking the people for slaves. As Sennacherib swept up to Jerusalem the Prince of Judah tried to ransom his city with gold, but the invader would not listen to his offer, and prepared to attack the walls. Then suddenly a plague fell upon the great Assyrian host. It is said that 185,000 men died in a single night. The rest, terrified at what seemed retribution for their destruction of Babylon, fled in a panic, pursued by their enemies. The king himself escaped, but was killed in 681 B.C. in the temple at Nineveh by two of his sons.

Byron wrote a number of poems dealing with Hebrew history, and this is one of the most spirited of them. It describes how the great Assyrian army, flushed with scores of victories, came to Jerusalem, ready to conquer on the morrow. That night came the plague, and the army melted away before its breath. The widows of Ashur, which means Assyria, bewailed the lost soldiers, and the priests who tended the altars of the god Baal broke the idols in despair, for the Gentiles, or

heathens, who had been so powerful before, had fallen, not by men's swords, but at the will of the God of Jerusalem.

THE DESTRUCTION OF SENNACHERIB

by George Gordon Noel, Lord Byron

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen;
Like the leaves of the forest when autumn hath flown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the angel of death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow and the rust on his mail;
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail;
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

II

Horatius

THIS poem gives such a true picture of the patriotic spirit of a citizen of early Rome, and follows the metre of many Latin poets so closely that it might well have been what Macaulay pretended it was, a lay actually written about three hundred and sixty years after the founding of Rome, or in 393 B.C.

At that time the most powerful chief in Italy was Lars Porsena, of Etruria, whose capital city was Clusium, which was some ninety miles to the northwest of Rome. Etruria was the home of the twelve Etruscan tribes, and lay to the north and west of Rome, separated from that city by the river Tiber. Among the Etruscans the word *Lars* meant *lord* or *chief.* Like the Romans the Etruscans had a number of gods, to each of whom they ascribed different attributes, as the Romans did to Jupiter, Minerva, Mars, and their other deities.

Rome had been a kingdom at one time, and its kings had come from the house of Tarquin. But Tarquin the Proud had ruled so tyrannously, and his son, "false Sextus," had committed so vile a crime, that the people had overthrown his power and driven Tarquin from the city in 505 B.C. He had sought aid from Lars Porsena, and that chief, already jealous of Rome's prosperity, determined to raise a great army and replace Tarquin on his throne.

The Etruscan chieftain sent out his messengers, and soon had gathered allies from the twelve tribes. They came from all

central Italy, from the fastnesses of the Apennine Mountains, from the city of Volaterræ whose citadel was made of huge uncemented boulders, from Populonia, opposite the island of Sardinia, from the busy city of Pisa, in whose harbor were triremes, or ships with triple-banks of oars, belonging to the colony of Massilia in Gaul, from the country watered by the river Clanis, and from the many-towered city of Cortona. The woodmen left the forests that lay along the river Auser, the hunters deserted the stags of the Ciminian hill in Etruria, the herdsmen forsook the milk-white cattle that browsed on the banks of the stream Clitumnus. The Volsinian lake was left in peace to its water fowl, old men reaped the harvests in Arretium, young boys cared for the sheep-shearing along the Umbro, and in the city of Luna girls pressed the grapes in the wine-vats while their fathers joined the march to Rome.

Meantime Lars Porsena took counsel with his soothsayers, and they consulted the books, in which was supposed to be written, from right to left, according to the Etruscan fashion, the future of that nation. The thirty wise men assured him that he would conquer and bring back to his own capital the shields of Rome.

The great army of Etruscans, 80,000 footmen and 10,000 horsemen, gathered before the gates of Sutrium. Enemies of Rome, men who had been banished from that city, and Mamilius, Prince of Latium, a country south of Rome, came to join the soldiers of Etruria.

In Rome there was great dismay. The farmers who lived in the open country drove their cattle, and carried their household goods, inside the city walls. From the high Tarpeian Rock the people could see the blazing towns fired by Lars Porsena on his march. The Senate of the city sat night and day, and every hour new messengers arrived with word of the

enemy's advance. As they advanced the Etruscans destroyed all hostile settlements, they leveled Crustumerium, a town in the Sabine country that belonged to Rome; Verbenna, one of their generals, swept across to the port of Ostia, at the mouth of the Tiber; and Astur, another leader, captured the fortified hill of Janiculum that lay across the Tiber to the west of Rome. That hill commanded the only bridge that spanned the river, and if the Etruscans should seize it they would probably soon break a way into the city.

The Consul, who was one of the chief officers of Rome, ordered the bridge destroyed, but at the same moment a messenger brought word that Lars Porsena was in sight. The Consul looked and saw the glittering line of spears and helmets, the banners of the twelve chief cities of Etruria, and the leaders themselves.

The Consul saw that the enemy were so close that their vanguard would prevent the Romans destroying the bridge in time. But even as he said this Horatius, the Captain of the Gate, stepped forward, and volunteered to hold the enemy in check, if two others would fight beside him. Instantly two brave men offered to go forth, the one Spurius Lartius, and the other Herminius.

The three Romans armed and stepped forward to the other bank of the Tiber, while the Consul, the City Fathers, and citizens seized hatchets and crowbars, and began to loosen the supports of the bridge.

The Etruscan army saw the three Romans standing at the head of the bridge, and thought it would be a simple matter to overcome them. Three chiefs rushed forward, only to fall before the swords of Horatius and his allies. More tried it, and more, but each in turn met the same fate before the Romans.

Horatius at the Bridge

At last the great Etruscan army stood at bay.

Time had been gained for the people to destroy the props of the bridge. As it began to fall, the Romans called to their three defenders. Spurius Lartius and Herminius dashed back, but Horatius was left on the other shore when the bridge crashed into the river.

Horatius would not yield, but with a prayer to Father Tiber plunged into the stream. While all eyes watched him he swam to the Roman bank. There the people raised him on their shoulders and carried him in triumph through the city gates.

Rome gave its hero a section of the public lands, and built a statue of him in the Forum. The story of how Horatius held the bridge became one of the great chronicles of Rome.

Macaulay's greatest work was his "History of England." His poems were written as recreation from heavier work, but in "Horatius" he composed one of the most vivid and stirring historical poems in the English language. It is a remarkable example of the power of direct narrative, and gains much of its force from the short, simple words and plain recital of events as if seen by the narrator.

HORATIUS

by Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay

(A Lay made about the Year of the City CCCLX.)

I

Lars Porsena of Clusium
    By the Nine Gods he swore
That the great house of Tarquin
    Should suffer wrong no more.
By the Nine Gods he swore it,
    And named a trysting day,
And bade his messengers ride forth,
East and west and south and north,
    To summon his array.

II

East and west and south and north
    The messengers ride fast,
And tower and town and cottage
    Have heard the trumpet's blast.
Shame on the false Etruscan
    Who lingers in his home
When Porsena of Clusium
    Is on the march for Rome.

III

The horsemen and the footmen
    Are pouring in amain,
From many a stately market-place;
    From many a fruitful plain;
From many a lonely hamlet,
    Which, hid by beech and pine,
Like an eagle's nest, hangs on the crest
    Of purple Apennine;

IV

From lordly Volaterræ,
    Where scowls the far-famed hold
Piled by the hands of giants
    For godlike kings of old;
From sea-girt Populonia,
    Whose sentinels descry
Sardinia's snowy mountain-tops
    Fringing the southern sky;

V

From the proud mart of Pisæ,
    Queen of the western waves,
Where ride Massilia's triremes
    Heavy with fair-haired slaves;
From where sweet Clanis wanders
    Through corn and vines and flowers;
From where Cortona lifts to heaven
    Her diadem of towers.

VI

Tall are the oaks whose acorns
    Drop in dark Auser's rill;
Fat are the stags that champ the boughs
    Of the Ciminian hill;
Beyond all streams Clitumnus
    Is to the herdsman dear;
Best of all pools the fowler loves
    The great Volsinian mere.

VII

But now no stroke of woodman
    Is heard by Auser's rill;
No hunter tracks the stag's green path
    Up the Ciminian hill;

Unwatched along Clitumnus
Grazes the milk-white steer;
Unharmed the water fowl may dip
In the Volsinian mere.

VIII

The harvests of Arretium,
This year, old men shall reap,
This year, young boys in Umbro
Shall plunge the struggling sheep;
And in the vats of Luna,
This year, the must shall foam
Round the white feet of laughing girls
Whose sires have marched to Rome.

IX

There be thirty chosen prophets,
The wisest of the land,
Who alway by Lars Porsena
Both morn and evening stand:
Evening and morn the Thirty
Have turned the verses o'er;
Traced from the right on linen white
By mighty seers of yore.

X

And with one voice the Thirty
Have their glad answer given;
"Go forth, go forth, Lars Porsena;
Go forth, beloved of Heaven;
Go, and return in glory
To Clusium's royal dome;
And hang round Nursia's altars
The golden shields of Rome."

XI

And now hath every city
Sent up her tale of men;
The foot are fourscore thousand,
The horse are thousands ten.
Before the gates of Sutrium
Is met the great array.
A proud man was Lars Porsena
Upon the trysting day.

XII

For all the Etruscan armies
Were ranged beneath his eye,
And many a banished Roman,
And many a stout ally;
And with a mighty following
To join the muster came
The Tusculan Mamilius,
Prince of the Latian name.

XIII

But by the yellow Tiber
Was tumult and affright:
From all the spacious champaign
To Rome men took their flight.
A mile around the city,
The throng stopped up the ways;
A fearful sight it was to see
Through two long nights and days.

XIV

For droves of mules and asses
Laden with skins of wine,
And endless flocks of goats and sheep,
And endless herds of kine,

And endless trains of wagons
That creaked beneath the weight
Of corn-sacks and of household goods,
Choked every roaring gate.

XV

Now, from the rock Tarpeian,
Could the wan burghers spy
The line of blazing villages
Red in the midnight sky.
The Fathers of the City,
They sat all night and day,
For every hour some horseman came
With tidings of dismay.

XVI

To eastward and to westward
Have spread the Tuscan bands;
Nor house, nor fence, nor dovecot
In Crustumerium stands.
Verbenna down to Ostia
Hath wasted all the plain;
Astur hath stormed Janiculum,
And the stout guards are slain.

XVII

I wis, in all the Senate,
There was no heart so bold,
But sore it ached, and fast it beat,
When that ill news was told.
Forthwith up rose the Consul,
Up rose the Fathers all;
In haste they girded up their gowns,
And hied them to the wall.

XVIII

They held a council standing
Before the River-Gate;
Short time was there, ye well may guess,
For musing or debate.
Out spake the Consul roundly:
"The bridge must straight go down;
For, since Janiculum is lost,
Naught else can save the town."

XIX

Just then a scout came flying,
All wild with haste and fear:
"To arms! to arms! Sir Consul:
Lars Porsena is here."
On the low hills to westward
The Consul fixed his eye,
And saw the swarthy storm of dust
Rise fast along the sky.

XX

And nearer fast and nearer
Doth the red whirlwind come;
And louder still and still more loud,
From underneath that rolling cloud,
Is heard the trumpet's war-note proud,
The trampling, and the hum.
And plainly and more plainly
Now through the gloom appears,
Far to left and far to right,
In broken gleams of dark-blue light,
The long array of helmets bright,
The long array of spears.

XXI

And plainly and more plainly,
Above that glimmering line,
Now might ye see the banners
Of twelve fair cities shine;
But the banner of proud Clusium
Was highest of them all,
The terror of the Umbrian,
The terror of the Gaul.

XXII

And plainly and more plainly
Now might the burghers know,
By port and vest, by horse and crest,
Each warlike Lucumo.
There Cilnius of Arretium
On his fleet roan was seen;
And Astur of the four-fold shield,
Girt with the brand none else may wield,
Tolumnius with the belt of gold,
And dark Verbenna from the hold
By reedy Thrasymene.

XXIII

Fast by the royal standard,
O'erlooking all the war,
Lars Porsena of Clusium
Sat in his ivory car.
By the right wheel rode Mamilius,
Prince of the Latian name;
And by the left false Sextus,
That wrought the deed of shame.

XXIV

But when the face of Sextus
Was seen among the foes,
A yell that rent the firmament
From all the town arose.
On the housetops was no woman
But spat towards him and hissed,
No child but screamed out curses,
And shook its little fist.

XXV

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

XXVI

Then out spake brave Horatius,
The Captain of the gate:
"To every man upon this earth
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,

XXVII

"And for the tender mother
Who dandled him to rest,
And for the wife who nurses
His baby at her breast,

And for the holy maidens
Who feed the eternal flame,
To save them from false Sextus
That wrought the deed of shame?

XXVIII

"Hew down the bridge, Sir Consul,
With all the speed ye may;
I, with two more to help me,
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?"

XXIX

Then out spake Spurius Lartius;
A Ramnian proud was he:
"Lo, I will stand at thy right hand,
And keep the bridge with thee."
And out spake strong Herminius;
Of Titian blood was he:
"I will abide on thy left side,
And keep the bridge with thee."

XXX

"Horatius," quoth the Consul,
"As thou sayest, so let it be."
And straight against that great array
Forth went the dauntless Three.
For Romans in Rome's quarrel
Spared neither land nor gold,
Nor son nor wife, nor limb nor life,
In the brave days of old.

XXXI

Then none was for a party;
Then all were for the state;
Then the great man helped the poor,
And the poor man loved the great:
Then lands were fairly portioned;
Then spoils were fairly sold:
The Romans were like brothers
In the brave days of old.

XXXII

Now Roman is to Roman
More hateful than a foe,
And the Tribunes beard the high,
And the Fathers grind the low.
As we wax hot in faction,
In battle we wax cold:
Wherefore men fight not as they fought
In the brave days of old.

XXXIII

Now while the Three were tightening
Their harness on their backs,
The Consul was the foremost man
To take in hand an axe:
And Fathers mixed with Commons,
Seized hatchet, bar, and crow,
And smote upon the planks above,
And loosed the props below.

XXXIV

Meanwhile the Tuscan army,
Right glorious to behold,
Came flashing back the noonday light,
Rank behind rank, like surges bright

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 towards the bridge's head,
Where stood the dauntless Three.

XXXV

The Three stood calm and silent,
And looked upon the foes,
And a great shout of laughter
From all the vanguard rose:
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;

XXXVI

Aunus from green Tifernum,
Lord of the Hill of Vines;
And Seius, whose eight hundred slaves
Sicken in Ilva's mines;
And Picus, long to Clusium
Vassal in peace and war,
Who led to fight his Umbrian powers
From that grey crag where, girt with towers,
The fortress of Nequinum lowers
O'er the pale waves of Nar.

XXXVII

Stout Lartius hurled down Aunus
Into the stream beneath:
Herminius struck at Seius,
And clove him to the teeth:

At Picus brave Horatius
    Darted one fiery thrust;
And the proud Umbrian's gilded arms
    Clashed in the bloody dust.

XXXVIII

Then Ocnus of Falerii
    Rushed on the Roman Three;
And Lausulus of Urgo,
    The Rover of the sea;
And Aruns of Volsinium,
    Who slew the great wild boar,
The great wild boar that had his den
Amidst the reeds of Cosa's fen,
And wasted fields, and slaughtered men,
    Along Albinia's shore.

XXXIX

Herminius smote down Aruns:
    Lartius laid Ocnus low:
Right to the heart of Lausulus
    Horatius sent a blow.
"Lie there," he cried, "fell pirate!
    No more, aghast and pale,
From Ostia's walls the crowd shall mark
The track of thy destroying bark.
No more Campania's hinds shall fly
To woods and caverns when they spy
    Thy thrice accursed sail."

XL

But now no sound of laughter
    Was heard among the foes.
A wild and wrathful clamor
    From all the vanguard rose.

Six spears' lengths from the entrance
Halted that deep array,
And for a space no man came forth
To win the narrow way.

XLI

But hark! the cry is Astur:
And lo! the ranks divide;
And the great Lord of Luna
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.

XLII

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
Stand savagely at bay:
But will ye dare to follow,
If Astur clears the way?"

XLIII

Then, whirling up his broadsword
With both hands to the height,
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;
It missed his helm, but gashed his thigh:
The Tuscans raised a joyful cry
To see the red blood flow.

XLIV

He reeled, and on Herminius
    He leaned one breathing-space;
Then, like a wildcat 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 hand-breadth out
    Behind the Tuscan's head.

XLV

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,
    Gaze on the blasted head.

XLVI

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

XLVII

But at this haughty challenge
    A sullen murmur ran,
Mingled of wrath, and shame, and dread,
    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.

XLVIII

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
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.

XLIX

Was none who would be foremost
To lead such dire attack:
But those behind cried "Forward!"
And those before cried "Back!"
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
Dies fitfully away.

L

Yet one man for one moment
Stood out before the crowd;
Well known was he to all the Three,
And they gave him greeting loud,

"Now welcome, welcome, Sextus!
Now welcome to thy home!
Why dost thou stay, and turn away?
Here lies the road to Rome."

LI

Thrice looked he at the city;
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
Where, wallowing in a pool of blood,
The bravest Tuscans lay.

LII

But meanwhile axe and lever
Have manfully been plied;
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!"

LIII

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

LIV

But with a crash like thunder
Fell every loosened beam,
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
Was splashed the yellow foam.

LV

And, like a horse unbroken
When first he feels the rein,
The furious river struggled hard,
And tossed his tawny mane,
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.

LVI

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,
With a smile on his pale face.
"Now yield thee," cried Lars Porsena,
"Now yield thee to our grace."

LVII

Round turned he, as not deigning
Those craven ranks to see;
Nought spake he to Lars Porsena,
To Sextus nought spake he;

But he saw on Palatinus
    The white porch of his home;
And he spake to the noble river
    That rolls by the towers of Rome.

LVIII

"Oh, Tiber! Father Tiber!
    To whom the Romans pray,
A Roman's life, a Roman's arms,
    Take thou in charge this day!"
So he spake, and speaking sheathed
    The good sword by his side,
And with his harness on his back,
    Plunged headlong in the tide.

LIX

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 above 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.

LX

But fiercely ran the current,
    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:
And oft they thought him sinking,
    But still again he rose.

LXI

Never, I ween, did swimmer,
In such an evil case,
Struggle through such a raging flood
Safe to the landing place:
But his limbs were borne up bravely
By the brave heart within,
And our good father Tiber
Bore bravely up his chin.

LXII

"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,
"And bring him safe to shore;
For such a gallant feat of arms
Was never seen before."

LXIII

And now he feels the bottom;
Now on dry earth he stands;
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,
Borne by the joyous crowd.

LXIV

They gave him of the corn-land,
That was of public right,
As much as two strong oxen
Could plough from morn till night;

And they made a molten image,
And set it up on high,
And there it stands unto this day
To witness if I lie.

LXV

It stands in the Comitium,
Plain for all folk to see;
Horatius in his harness,
Halting upon one knee:
And underneath is written,
In letters all of gold,
How valiantly he kept the bridge
In the brave days of old.

LXVI

And still his name sounds stirring
Unto the men of Rome,
As the trumpet-blast that cries to them
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.

LXVII

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;

LXVIII

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;

LXIX

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.

III

The Skeleton in Armor

Longfellow was always greatly interested in the legends and poetry of Northern Europe, and in this poem he tells the story of such a Viking as might well have crossed the sea with Leif, son of Eric. According to history Bjarni, the son of Herjulf, sailing west from Iceland in 986, bound for Greenland, met with dense fogs and had to steer by guesswork. After many days he came to land, but realizing it was not Greenland, he turned north and finally reached his goal. The tale of his voyage came in time to Leif, son of red Eric, and he set out in the year 1000, with thirty-five men, to find the strange land to the south. He reached the coast of Labrador, and named it "Helluland," or "slate-land." Farther south he came to densely wooded shores that he called "Markland," or "woodland," and afterwards to a country full of grapes which he christened "Vinland."

Leif and his men spent the winter in Vinland, and in the spring carried news of their discovery back to their home. But later parties of Norsemen were attacked by the native Indians when they tried to explore the new country, and in 1012 the Vikings gave up their voyages thither.

A skeleton clad in armor was discovered near Fall River, Massachusetts, in 1835, and doubtless furnished the idea for this poem, although it was later declared to be the skeleton of an Indian, and not of a Norseman.

The lofty tower built by the Viking in the poem might have been the old stone tower which still stands at Newport,

Rhode Island, and which was for a long time believed to have been built by Norsemen. Historians now claim that it was erected by Benedict Arnold, governor of Newport about 1676, who used it for a windmill. This Benedict Arnold was, of course, not the man of the same name who figured in the American Revolution.

The rhythm and flow of the poem are splendid, and the story of the young Viking who loved the blue-eyed daughter of the old Prince Hildebrand, and carried her across seas to the new Western land is as stirring as any of the hero-tales of the Scandinavian sagas.

THE SKELETON IN ARMOR

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"Speak! speak! thou fearful guest!
Who, with thy hollow breast
Still in rude armor drest,
    Comest to daunt me!
Wrapt not in Eastern balms,
But with thy fleshless palms
Stretched, as if asking alms,
    Why dost thou haunt me?"

Then, from those cavernous eyes
Pale flashes seemed to rise,
As when the Northern skies
    Gleam in December;
And, like the water's flow
Under December's snow,
Came a dull voice of woe
    From the heart's chamber.

"I was a Viking old!
My deeds, though manifold,
No Skald in song has told,
No Saga taught thee!
Take heed, that in thy verse
Thou dost the tale rehearse,
Else dread a dead man's curse;
For this I sought thee.

"Far in the Northern Land,
By the wild Baltic's strand,
I, with my childish hand,
Tamed the gerfalcon;
And, with my skates fast-bound,
Skimmed the half-frozen Sound,
That the poor whimpering hound
Trembled to walk on.

"Oft to his frozen lair
Tracked I the grisly bear,
While from my path the hare
Fled like a shadow;
Oft through the forest dark
Followed the were-wolf's bark,
Until the soaring lark
Sang from the meadow.

"But when I older grew,
Joining a corsair's crew,
O'er the dark sea I flew
With the marauders.
Wild was the life we led;
Many the souls that sped,
Many the hearts that bled,
By our stern orders.

"Many a wassail-bout
Wore the long winter out;
Often our midnight shout
Set the cocks crowing.
As we the Berserk's tale
Measured in cups of ale,
Draining the oaken pail,
Filled to o'erflowing.

"Once as I told in glee
Tales of the stormy sea,
Soft eyes did gaze on me,
Burning yet tender;
And as the white stars shine
On the dark Norway pine,
On that dark heart of mine
Fell their soft splendor.

"I wooed the blue-eyed maid,
Yielding, yet half afraid,
And in the forest's shade
Our vows were plighted.
Under its loosened vest
Fluttered her little breast,
Like birds within their nest
By the hawk frighted.

"Bright in her father's hall
Shields gleamed upon the wall,
Loud sang the minstrels all,
Chanting his glory;
When of old Hildebrand
I asked his daughter's hand,
Mute did the minstrels stand
To hear my story.

"While the brown ale he quaffed,
Loud then the champion laughed,
And as the wind-gusts waft
The sea-foam brightly,
So the loud laugh of scorn,
Out of those lips unshorn,
From the deep drinking-horn
Blew the foam lightly.

"She was a Prince's child,
I but a Viking wild,
And though she blushed and smiled,
I was discarded!
Should not the dove so white
Follow the sea mew's flight,
Why did they leave that night
Her nest unguarded?

"Scarce had I put to sea,
Bearing the maid with me,
Fairest of all was she
Among the Norsemen!
When on the white sea strand,
Waving his arméd hand,
Saw we old Hildebrand,
With twenty horsemen.

"Then launched they to the blast,
Bent like a reed each mast,
Yet we were gaining fast,
When the wind failed us;
And with a sudden flaw
Came round the gusty Skaw,
So that our foe we saw
Laugh as he hailed us.

"And as to catch the gale
Round veered the flapping sail,
'Death!' was the helmsman's hail,
'Death without quarter!'
Midships with iron keel,
Struck we her ribs of steel;
Down her black hulk did reel
Through the black water!

"As with his wings aslant,
Sails the fierce cormorant,
Seeking some rocky haunt,
With his prey laden,
So toward the open main,
Beating to sea again,
Through the wild hurricane,
Bore I the maiden.

"Three weeks we westward bore,
And when the storm was o'er,
Cloudlike we saw the shore
Stretching to leeward;
There for my lady's bower
Built I a lofty tower,
Which, to this very hour,
Stands looking seaward.

"There lived we many years;
Time dried the maiden's tears;
She had forgot her fears,
She was a mother;
Death closed her mild blue eyes,
Under that tower she lies;
Ne'er shall the sun arise
On such another!

"Still grew my bosom then,
Still as a stagnant fen!
Hateful to me were men,
The sunlight hateful!
In the vast forest here,
Clad in my warlike gear,
Fell I upon my spear,
Oh, death was grateful!

"Thus, seamed with many scars,
Bursting these prison bars,
Up to its native stars
My soul ascended!
There from the flowing bowl
Deep drinks the warrior's soul,
Skoal! to the Northland! *skoal!*"
—Thus the tale ended.

IV

The Sea-King's Burial

This poem, written by a Scotchman, describes a strange custom of the old Norse Vikings. The kings of that northern country, when they felt that they were soon to die, had their servants lift them from bed and place them on their battle-ship. They clad the king in his armor, set his crown upon his head, and his sword in his hand. A fire was lighted in the hold of the ship. The sails were set, and the vessel headed out to sea. When the ship was far from land the flames would reach the deck, and the king would die, sword unsheathed, the winds of the ocean about him. His spirit would then go straight to the halls of Valhalla, where dwelt all the former heroes and warriors of Scandinavia.

So King Balder went out to sea in his battle-ship, and called aloud to the great All-Father, to the Norse gods Odin and Thor, and to the Vikings waiting for him.

The metre fits the story perfectly. It has the swing of the ocean waves, and the long and short lines at the end of each stanza give a strong dramatic effect. It is interesting to compare it with that other Viking poem by Longfellow, "The Skeleton in Armor."

THE SEA-KING'S BURIAL

by Charles Mackay

"My strength is failing fast,"
Said the sea-king to his men;—
"I shall never sail the seas
Like a conqueror again.
But while yet a drop remains
Of the life-blood in my veins,
Raise, oh, raise me from the bed;
Put the crown upon my head;
Put my good sword in my hand;
And so lead me to the strand,
Where my ship at anchor rides
Steadily;
If I cannot end my life
In the bloody battle-strife,
Let me die as I have lived,
On the sea."

They have raised King Balder up,
Put his crown upon his head;
They have sheathed his limbs in mail,
And the purple o'er him spread;
And amid the greeting rude
Of a gathering multitude,
Borne him slowly to the shore—
All the energy of yore
From his dim eyes flashing forth—
Old sea-lion of the north—
As he looked upon his ship
Riding free,
And on his forehead pale
Felt the cold refreshing gale,
And heard the welcome sound
Of the sea.

They have borne him to the ship
With a slow and solemn tread;
They have placed him on the deck
With his crown upon his head,
Where he sat as on a throne;
And have left him there alone,
With his anchor ready weighed,
And the snowy sails displayed
To the favoring wind, once more
Blowing freshly from the shore;
And have bidden him farewell
Tenderly,
Saying, "King of mighty men,
We shall meet thee yet again,
In Valhalla, with the monarchs
Of the sea."

Underneath him in the hold
They have placed the lighted brand;
And the fire was burning slow
As the vessel from the land,
Like a stag-hound from the slips,
Darted forth from out the ships.
There was music in her sail
As it swelled before the gale,
And a dashing at her prow
As it cleft the waves below,
And the good ship sped along,
Scudding free;
As on many a battle morn
In her time she had been borne,
To struggle, and to conquer
On the sea.

And the king with sudden strength
Started up, and paced the deck,

With his good sword for his staff,
And his robe around his neck:
Once alone, he raised his hand
To the people on the land;
And with shout and joyous cry
Once again they made reply,
Till the loud exulting cheer
Sounded faintly on his ear;
For the gale was o'er him blowing
Fresh and free;
And ere yet an hour had passed,
He was driven before the blast,
And a storm was on his path,
On the sea.

And still upon the deck,
While the storm about him rent,
King Balder paced about
Till his failing strength was spent.
Then he stopped awhile to rest—
Crossed his hands upon his breast,
And looked upward to the sky
With a dim but dauntless eye;
And heard the tall mast creak,
And the fitful tempest speak
Shrill and fierce, to the billows
Rushing free;
And within himself he said:
"I am coming, O ye dead!
To join you in Valhalla,
O'er the sea.

"So blow, ye tempests, blow,
And my spirit shall not quail;
I have fought with many a foe;
I have weathered many a gale;

And in this hour of death,
Ere I yield my fleeting breath—
Ere the fire now burning slow
Shall come rushing from below,
And this worn and wasted frame
Be devoted to the flame—
I will raise my voice in triumph,
Singing free;—
To the great All-Father's home
I am driving through the foam,
I am sailing to Valhalla,
O'er the sea.

"So blow, ye stormy winds—
And ye flames ascend on high;—
In the easy, idle bed
Let the slave and coward die!
But give me the driving keel,
Clang of shields and flashing steel;—
Or my foot on foreign ground,
With my enemies around!
Happy, happy, thus I'd yield,
On the deck, or in the field,
My last breath, shouting 'On
To victory.'
But since this has been denied,
They shall say that I have died
Without flinching, like a monarch
Of the sea."

And Balder spoke no more,
And no sound escaped his lip;—
And he looked, yet scarcely saw
The destruction of his ship,
Nor the fleet sparks mounting high,
Nor the glare upon the sky;—

Scarcely heard the billows dash,
Nor the burning timber crash;—
Scarcely felt the scorching heat
That was gathering at his feet,
Nor the fierce flames mounting o'er him
Greedily.
But the life was in him yet,
And the courage to forget
All his pain, in his triumph
On the sea.

Once alone a cry arose,
Half of anguish, half of pride,
As he sprang upon his feet,
With the flames on every side.
"I am coming!" said the king,
"Where the swords and bucklers ring—
Where the warrior lives again
With the souls of mighty men—
Where the weary find repose,
And the red wine ever flows;—
I am coming, great All-Father,
Unto thee!
Unto Odin, unto Thor,
And the strong, true hearts of yore—
I am coming to Valhalla,
O'er the sea."

V

Bruce and the Spider

This poem tells the legendary story of how "The Bruce," Robert I, King of Scotland, after six successive defeats by the english armies, was a fugitive in a lonely hut, and there saw a spider try six times to cast his thread from one beam to another and succeed on the seventh try. Bruce took courage from the spider's perseverance, fought a seventh time, and won.

Robert Bruce was a great leader of his people, and from early youth fought against the tyranny of the English kings. The battle of Bannockburn in 1314 won freedom for Scotland and at the same time assured the crown to Bruce. Before that time he had had many rivals for the throne of Scotland, but after the battle his power over his people became so great that the parliament of the land unanimously proclaimed him king.

BRUCE AND THE SPIDER

by Bernard Barton

For Scotland's and for freedom's right
    The Bruce his part has played;—
In five successive fields of fight
    Been conquered and dismayed:
Once more against the English host
His band he led, and once more lost
    The meed for which he fought;
And now from battle, faint and worn,
The homeless fugitive, forlorn,
    A hut's lone shelter sought.

And cheerless was that resting-place
    For him who claimed a throne;—
His canopy, devoid of grace,
    The rude, rough beams alone;
The heather couch his only bed—
Yet well I ween had slumber fled
    From couch of eider down!
Through darksome night till dawn of day,
Absorbed in wakeful thought he lay
    Of Scotland and her crown.

The sun rose brightly, and its gleam
    Fell on that hapless bed,
And tinged with light each shapeless beam
    Which roofed the lowly shed;
When, looking up with wistful eye,
The Bruce beheld a spider try
    His filmy thread to fling
From beam to beam of that rude cot—
And well the insect's toilsome lot
    Taught Scotland's future king.

Six times the gossamery thread
    The wary spider threw;—
In vain the filmy line was sped,
    For powerless or untrue
Each aim appeared, and back recoiled
The patient insect, six times foiled,
    And yet unconquered still;
And soon the Bruce, with eager eye,
Saw him prepare once more to try
    His courage, strength, and skill.

One effort more, his seventh and last!—
    The hero hailed the sign!—
And on the wished-for beam hung fast
    That slender silken line!
Slight as it was, his spirit caught
The more than omen; for his thought
    The lesson well could trace,
Which even "he who runs may read,"
That Perseverance gains its meed,
    And Patience wins the race.

VI

Bannockburn

The Scotch poet, Robert Burns, pictured to himself the national hero of Scotland, Robert Bruce, addressing his soldiers before the battle of Bannockburn, and wrote what he imagined Bruce might have said. The battle was fought near Sterling in 1314, between the Scotch and the army of Edward II of England. Bruce reminds his men of their history, of how they had bled with Wallace, a Scotch leader of the thirteenth century who had risen against the English when that people invaded the Highlands, and of how they had followed Bruce himself in many a battle. It is a fine appeal to the always ardent patriotism of his countrymen.

The English army greatly outnumbered the Scotch, but were decisively beaten, and Edward II narrowly escaped being taken prisoner.

BANNOCKBURN

by Robert Burns

At Bannockburn the English lay,—
The Scots they were na far away,
But waited for the break o' day
That glinted in the east.

But soon the sun broke through the heath
And lighted up that field of death,
When Bruce, wi' saul-inspiring breath,
His heralds thus addressed:—

"Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled—
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led—
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victorie!

"Now's the day, and now's the hour;
See the front o' battle lower;
See approach proud Edward's power—
Chains and slaverie!

"Wha will be a traitor knave?
Wha can fill a coward's grave?
Wha sae base as be a slave?
Let him turn and flee!

"Wha for Scotland's king and law
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,
Freeman stand or freeman fa'—
Let him follow me!

"By oppression's woes and pains!
By your sons in servile chains!
We will drain our dearest veins,
But they shall be free!

"Lay the proud usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
Liberty's in every blow!
Let us do or die!"