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The Building
of The Ship.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.



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The Building of the Ship.

BY HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW.

1 "Build me straight, O worthy Master!
Stanch and strong, a goodly vessel,
That shall laugh at all disaster,
And with wave and whirlwind wrestle!

5 The merchant's word
Delighted, the Master heard;
For his heart was in his work and the heart
Giveth grace unto every art.

9 A quiet smile played round his lips,
As the eddies and dimples of the tide
Play round the bows of ships,
That steadily at anchor ride,
13 And with a voice that was full of glee,
He answered, "Ere long we will launch,
A vessel as goodly, and strong, and stanch,
As ever weathered a wintry sea!"

17 And first with nicest skill and art,
Perfect and finish in every part,
A little model the master wrought,
Which should be to the larger plan
21 What the child is to the man,
Its counterpart in miniature;
That with a hand more swift and sure,
The greater labor might be brought
25 To answer to his inward thought.

29 And as he labored his mind ran o'er
The various ships that were built of yore,
And above them all, and strangest of all
Towered the great Harry, crank and tall,

3
Whose picture was hanging on the wall,
With bows and stern raised high in air
And balconies hanging here and there,
And signal lanterns and flags afloat
And eight round towers like those that frown
From some old castle looking down
Upon the drawbridge and the moat.
And he said with a smile: "Our ship I wis
Shall be of another style than this.

It was of another form, indeed;
Built for freight and yet for speed
A beautiful and gallant craft;
Broad in the beam, that the stress of the blast,
Pressing down upon sail and mast,
Might not the sharp bows overwhelm;
Broad in the beam, but sloping aft
With graceful curve and slow degrees,
That she might be docile to the helm,
And that the currents of parted seas,
Closing behind, with mighty force,
Might aid and not impede her course.

In the ship-yard stood the Master,
With the Model of the vessel,
That should laugh at all disaster
And with wave and whirlwind wrestle!

59 Covering many a rood of ground,
Lay the timber piled around,
Timber of chestnut, and elm, oak,
And scattered here and there, with these,
The knarred and crooked cedar knees;
Brought from regions far away,
From Poscagoula's sunny bay,
And the banks of the roaring Roanoke!
Ah! what a wondrous thing it is
To note how many wheels of toil
One thought, one word, can set in motion.
There's not a ship that sails the ocean,
But every climate, every soil,
Must bring its tribute great or small,
And help to build the wooden wall!

The sun was rising o'er the sea,
 And long the level shadows lay,
 As if they, too, the beams would be
 Of some great, airy argosy,
 Framed and launched in a single day.
 That silent architect, the sun,
 Had hewn and laid them every one,
 Ere the work of man was yet begun.
 Beside the Master, when he spoke,
 A youth against an anchor leaning,
 Listened, to catch his slightest meaning.
 Only the long waves, as they broke
 In ripples on the pebbly beach,
 Interrupted the old man's speech.

Beautiful they were, in sooth,
 The old man and the fiery youth!
 The old man, in whose busy brain
 Many a ship that sailed the main
 Was modeled o'er and o'er again;—
 The fiery youth, who was to be
 The heir of his dexterity,
 The heir of his house, and his daughter's
 hand,
 When he had built and launched from land
 What the elder head had planned.

"Thus," said he, "will we build this ship!
 Lay square the blocks upon the slip,
 And follow well this plan of mine.
 Choose the timbers with greatest care;
 Of all that is unsound beware;
 For only what is sound and strong
 To this vessel shall belong.
 Cedar of Maine and Georgia pine
 Here together shall combine.
 A goodly frame, and a goodly fame,
 And the UNION be her name!
 For the day that gives her to the sea
 Shall give my daughter unto thee!"

The Master's word
 Enraptured the young man heard;

And as he turned his face aside,
 With a look of joy and a thrill of pride
 Standing before
 Her father's door,
 He saw the form of his promised bride.
 The sun shone on her golden hair,
 And her cheek was glowing fresh and fair,
 With the breath of morn and the soft sea air.
 Like a beauteous barge was she,
 Still at rest on the sandy beach,
 Just beyond the billows reach;
 But he
 Was the restless, seething, stormy sea!

Ah, how skilful grows the hand
 That obeyeth Love's command!
 It is the heart and not the brain,
 That to the highest doth attain,
 And he who followeth Love's behest
 Far excelleth all the rest!

Thus with the rising of the sun
 Was the noble task begun,
 And soon throughout the ship-yard's bounds
 Were heard the intermingled sounds
 Of axes and of mallets, plied
 With vigorous arms on every side;
 Plied so deftly and so well,
 That, ere the shadows of evening fell,
 The keel of oak for a noble ship,
 Scarfed and bolted, straight and strong,
 Was lying ready, and stretched along
 The blocks, well placed upon the slip.
 Happy, thrice happy, every one
 Who sees his labor well begun,
 And not perplexed and multiplied,
 By idly waiting for time and tide!

And when the hot, long day was o'er,
 The young man at the Master's door
 Sat with the maiden calm and still.
 And within the porch, a little more
 Removed beyond the evening chill,

The father sat and told them tales
 Of wrecks in the great September gales,
 Of pirates coasting the Spanish Main,
 And ships that never came back again,
 The chance and change of a sailor's life,
 Want and plenty, rest and strife,
 His roving fancy, like the wind,
 That nothing can stay and nothing can bind,
 And the magic charm of foreign lands,
 With shadows of palms, and shining sands,
 Where the tumbling surf,
 O'er the coral reefs of Madagascar,
 Washes the feet of the swarthy Lascar,
 As he lies alone and asleep on the turf.
 And the trembling maiden held her breath
 At the tales of that awful, pitiless sea,
 With all its terror and mystery,
 The dim, dark sea, so like unto Death,
 That divides and yet unites mankind!
 And whenever the old man paused, a gleam
 From the bowl of his pipe would awhile illumine
 The silent group in the twilight gloom,
 And thoughtful faces, as in a dream;
 And for a moment one might mark
 What had been hidden by the dark,
 That the head of the maiden lay at rest,
 Tenderly, on the young man's breast!

Day by day the vessel grew,
 With timbers fashioned strong and true,
 Stemson and keelson and sternson knee,
 Till, framed with perfect symmetry,
 A skeleton ship rose up to view!
 And around the bows and along the side
 The heavy hammers and mallets plied,
 Till after many a week, at length,
 Wonderful for form and strength,
 Sublime in its enormous bulk,
 Loomed aloft the shadowy hulk!
 And around it columns of smoke, upwreath-
 ing,
 Rose from the boiling, bubbling, seething
 Caldron, that glowed,

And overflowed
 With the black tar, heated for the sheathing.
 And amid the clamors
 Of clattering hammers,
 He who listened heard now and then
 The song of the Master and his men:—

“Build me straight, O worthy Master,
 Stanch and strong, a goodly vessel,
 That shall laugh at all disaster,
 And with wave and whirlwind wrestle!”

With oaken brace and copper band,
 Lay the rudder on the sand,
 That, like a thought, should have control
 Over the movement of the whole;
 And near it the anchor, whose giant hand
 Would reach down and grapple with the land,
 And immovable and fast
 Hold the great ship against the bellowing
 blast!

And at the bows an image stood,
 By a cunning artist carved in wood,
 With robes of white, that far behind
 Seemed to be fluttering in the wind.
 It was not shaped in a classic mould,
 Not like a Nymph or Goddess of old,
 Or Naiad rising from the water,
 But modeled from the Master's daughter!
 On many a dreary and misty night,
 'Twill be seen by the rays of the signal light,
 Speeding along through the rain and the dark,
 Like a ghost in its snow-white sark,
 The pilot of some phantom bark,
 Guiding the vessel, in its flight,
 By a path none other knows aright!
 Behold, at last,
 Each tall and tapering mast
 Is swung into its place;
 Shrouds and stays
 Holding it firm and fast!

Long ago,
 In the deer-haunted forests of Maine,

When upon mountain and plain
 Lay the snow,
 They fell,—those lordly pines!
 Those grand, majestic pines!
 'Mid shouts and cheers
 The jaded steers,
 Panting beneath the goad,
 Dragged down the weary, winding road
 Those captive kings so straight and tall,
 To be shorn of their streaming hair,
 And, naked and bare,
 To feel the stress and the strain
 Of the wind and the reeling main,
 Whose roar
 Would remind them forevermore
 Of their native forests they should not see
 again.

And everywhere
 The slender, graceful spars
 Poise aloft in the air,
 And at the mast-head,
 White, blue, and red,
 A flag unrolls the stripes and stars.
 Ah! when the wanderer, lonely, friendless,
 In foreign harbors shall behold
 That flag unrolled,
 'T will be as a friendly hand
 Stretched out from his native land,
 Filling his heart with memories sweet and
 endless!

All is finished! and at length
 Has come the bridal day
 Of beauty and of strength.
 To-day the vessel shall be launched!
 With fleecy clouds the sky is blanched,
 And o'er the bay,
 Slowly, in all his splendors dight,
 The great sun rises to behold the sight.

The ocean old,
 Centuries old,

Strong as youth, and as uncontrolled,
 Paces restless to and fro,
 Up and down the sands of gold.
 His beating heart is not at rest;
 And far and wide,
 With ceaseless flow,
 His beard of snow
 Heaves with the heaving of his breast.
 He waits impatient for his bride.
 There she stands,
 With her foot upon the sands,
 Decked with flags and streamers gay,
 In honor of her marriage day,
 Her snow-white signals fluttering, blending,
 Round her like a veil descending,
 Ready to be
 The bride of the gray old sea.✕

On the deck another bride
 Is standing by her lover's side.
 Shadows from the flags and shrouds,
 Like the shadows cast by clouds,
 Broken by many a sunny fleck,
 Fall around them on the deck.

The prayer is said,
 The service read,
 The joyous bridegroom bows his head;
 And in tears the good old Master
 Shakes the brown hand of his son,
 Kisses his daughter's glowing cheek
 In silence, for he cannot speak,
 And ever faster
 Down his own the tears begin to run.
 The worthy pastor—
 The shepherd of that wandering flock,
 That has the ocean for its wold,
 That has the vessel for its fold,
 Leaping ever from rock to rock—
 Spake with accents mild and clear,
 Words of warning, words of cheer,
 But tedious to the bride-groom's ear.
 He knew the chart

Of the sailor's heart,
 All its pleasures and its griefs,
 All its shallows and rocky reefs,
 All those secret currents, that flow
 With such resistless undertow,
 And lift and drift with terrible force,
 The will from its moorings and its course.
 Therefore he spake, and thus said he:—
 "Like unto ships far of at sea,
 Outward or homeward bound, are we.
 Before, behind, and all around,
 Floats and swings the horizon's bound,
 Seems at its distant rim to rise
 And climb the crystal wall of the skies,
 And then again to turn and sink,
 As if we could slide from its outer brink.
 Ah! it is not the sea,
 It is not the sea that sinks and shelves,
 But ourselves
 That rock and rise
 With endless and uneasy motion,
 Now touching the very skies,
 Now sinking into the depths of ocean.
 Ah! if our souls but poise and swing
 Like the compass in its brazen ring,
 Ever level and ever true
 To the toil and the task we have to do,
 We shall sail securely, and safely reach
 The Fortunate Isles, on whose shining beach
 The sights we see, and the sounds we hear,
 Will be those of joy and not of fear!"

Then the Master,
 With a gesture of command,
 Waved his hand;
 And at the word,
 Loud and sudden there was heard,
 All around them and below,
 The sound of hammers, blow on blow,
 Knocking away the shores and spurs.
 And see! she stirs!
 She starts,—she moves,—she seems to feel
 The thrill of life along her keel,

grandeur

And, spurning with her foot the ground,
 With one exulting, joyous bound,
 She leaps into the ocean's arms!

And lo! from the assembled crowd
 There rose a shout, prolonged and loud,
 That to the ocean seemed to say,
 "Take her, O bridegroom, old and gray,
 Take her to thy protecting arms,
 With all her youth and all her charms!"

How beautiful she is! How fair
 She lies within those arms, that press
 Her form with many a soft caress
 Of tenderness and watchful care!
 Sail forth into the sea, O ship!
 Through wind and wave, right onward steer!
 The moistened eye, the trembling lip,
 Are not the signs of doubt or fear.

Sail forth into the sea of life,
 O gentle, loving, trusting wife,
 And safe from all adversity
 Upon the bosom of that sea
 Thy comings and thy goings be!
 For gentleness and love and trust
 Prevail o'er angry wave and gust;
 And in the wreck of noble lives
 Something immortal still survives!

Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!
 Sail on, O UNION, strong and great!
 Humanity with all its fears,
 With all the hopes of future years,
 Is hanging breathless on thy fate!
 We know what master laid thy keel,
 What Workmen wrought thy ribs of steel,
 Who made each mast, and sail, and rope,
 What anvils rang, what hammers beat,
 In what a forge and what a heat
 Were shaped the anchors of thy hope!
 Fear not each sudden sound and shock,
 'Tis of the wave and not the rock;

'Tis but the flapping of the sail,
And not a rent made by the gale!
In spite of rock and tempest's roar,
In spite of false lights on the shore,
Sail on, nor fear to breast the sea!
Our hearts, our hopes, are all with thee,
Our hearts, our hopes, our prayers, our tears,
Our faith triumphant o'er our fears,
Are all with thee,—are all with thee!
