

**THE BUILDING OF  
THE SHIP, AND  
OTHER POEMS**

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The Building of the Ship, and Other Poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

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BY

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

*WITH INTRODUCTIONS AND NOTES*



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## INTRODUCTION.

MR. LONGFELLOW'S birthplace was in a sea-port, and his youth and early manhood were passed in intimate association with sea-life. In his half-autobiographical reverie *My Lost Youth* he records something of the effect which these associations had upon his mind. Afterward, when living in Cambridge, he was wont to spend his summers at his cottage in Nahant. One after another there occurred to him poems which had their suggestion in sea-scenes; and in April, 1849, when casting about for a convenient grouping for a volume of his uncollected poems, he found that a natural one was indicated by the double title: *By the Fireside and By the Seaside*. There were hardly enough poems to make a satisfactory volume, and he was dispirited by his apparent inability to write a poem of any importance. He wrote in his diary: "No new thing to start the stagnant current. Oh for 'some great idea to refresh me!' I am pondering on a continuation of *Hyperion*." His wish, as he records it, reminds us of the saying of Herder, a German poet, when lying wearily in sickness: "Give me a great thought, that I may quicken myself with it."

In a few weeks Mr. Longfellow seems to have conceived the plan of *The Building of the Ship*, which he began June 18, 1849. Work upon it, however, was interrupted by the illness and death of his father, which

took him to Portland and detained him there, but not unlikely his stay in the city by the sea gave him opportunity for brooding over the poem. "I prefer the seaside to the country," he once said; "the idea of liberty is stronger there." At any rate, in September he was again engaged upon the poem, and on the 20th noted: "*The Building of the Ship* goes on. It will be rather long. Will it be good?" On the 22d he finished the poem; and as it easily took prominence in the new volume, he changed his proposed title to *The Seaside and the Fireside*, and led off with his new poem.

The form of this poem was clearly suggested by Schiller's *Song of the Bell*, which, tracing the history of a bell from the first finding of the metal to the hanging of the bell in the tower, so mingles the history of human life with it that the bell becomes the symbol of humanity. Schiller's poem introduced a new artistic form which has since been copied more than once, but nowhere so successfully as in *The Building of the Ship*. The changes in the measure mark the quickening or retarding of the thought. The reader will be interested in watching these changes, and observing the fitness with which the short lines express the quicker, more sudden or hurried action, while the longer ones indicate lingering, moderate action or reflection. The oratorical character of the poem, so to speak, has always caught the ear; and it is interesting to read in the poet's diary, shortly after the publication of the book, this entry:—

"February 12, 1850. In the evening Mrs. Kemble read before the Mercantile Library Association, to an audience of more than three thousand, portions of *As You Like It*; then *The Building of the Ship*, standing out upon the platform, book in hand, trembling, palpitat-

ing, and weeping, and giving every word its true weight and emphasis. She prefaced the recital by a few words to this effect: that when she first saw the poem, she desired to read it before a Boston audience; and she hoped she would be able to make every word audible to that great multitude."

By this graceful action Mrs. Kemble may well have thrown into concrete form the lines with which Mr. Longfellow closed the sonnet commemorating her readings from Shakespeare:—

"O happy Poet! . . .  
How must thy listening spirit now rejoice  
To be interpreted by such a voice!"

But it is to be suspected that, while Mr. Longfellow might smilingly have transferred his address to Shakespeare to himself, the vast multitude was stirred to its depths, not so much by the artistic completeness of the rendering as by the impassioned burst with which the poem closes, and which fell upon no listless ears in the deep agitation of the eventful year 1850. Mr. Noah Brooks, in his paper on *Lincoln's Imagination* (*Scribner's Monthly*, August, 1879), mentions that he found the President one day attracted by these closing stanzas, which were quoted in a political speech: "Knowing the whole poem," he adds, "as one of my early exercises in recitation, I began, at his request, with the description of the launch of the ship, and repeated it to the end. As he listened to the last lines [377-398], his eyes were filled with tears, and his cheeks were wet. He did not speak for some minutes, but finally said, with simplicity: 'It is a wonderful gift to be able to stir men like that.'" Dr. William Everett, in his remarks before the *Massachusetts Historical Soci-*

ety, after the death of Mr. Longfellow, called attention to the striking contrast in these spirited, hopeful lines to Horace's timid, tremulous *O navis*. Yet, curiously enough, this impressive close of the poem was an afterthought. He wrote at first a sad ending which left the thought of the poem confined. After he had sent the volume in manuscript to his publisher, he conceived the nobler, more inspiring interpretation of the poetic thought, and substituted the lines for what he had first written. Perhaps he was led to this by the suggestion contained in lines 100-104. The discarded lines will be found in a foot-note at the end of the poem.

In his diary, under date of March 23, 1850, Mr. Longfellow writes: "Cast lead flat-irons for the children, to their great delight, — C. in great and joyous excitement, which he showed by the most voluble speech. F. showed his only in his eyes, and looked on in silence. The casting was to them as grand as the casting of a bell to grown-up children. Why not write for them a *Song of the Lead Flat-iron?*"

What a pity he never did!

## THE BUILDING OF THE SHIP.

“ BUILD me straight, O worthy Master!  
Staunch 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.  
A quiet smile played round his lips,  
10 As the eddies and dimples of the tide  
Play round the bows of ships,  
That steadily at anchor ride.  
And with a voice that was full of glee,  
He answered, “ Ere long we will launch  
15 A vessel as goodly, and strong, and staunch,  
As ever weathered a wintry sea ! ”  
And first with nicest skill and art,  
Perfect and finished in every part,  
A little model the Master wrought,  
20 Which should be to the larger plan  
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.