

The Skeleton in Armor

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"Speak! speak I thou fearful guest
Who, with thy hollow breast
Still in rude armor drest,
 Comest to daunt me!
Wrapt not in Eastern balms,
Bat 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 frightened.

"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.

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"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 armed 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 I was the helmsman's hail,
 Death without quarter!
Mid-ships 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,
Cloud-like we saw the shore
 Stretching to leeward;
There for my lady's bower
Built I the 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,
 O, 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.