

# 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,  
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,  
Famed 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 caken pail,  
Filled to overflowing.

"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-men'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,  
Skool! to the Northland! skool!"  
Thus the tale ended.