

THE GREAT SHIP

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I

THE BUILDING

THE great ship was first an idea in the brain of William Lawrence. Of sound Ulster stock, born near the river Bann in County Down, he came to Maitland with his parents as a babe in arms. There he grew up and learned the ancient craft of the shipwright, and he taught himself to play the violin. For nearly thirteen hours a day, he swung the broad-axe in Lyle & Campbell's yard at Dartmouth. He was enrolled in the classes of the newly opened Dalhousie College in 1838. And he learned drafting in East Boston under Donald MacKay, the Scot from Shelburne, who gave the world the clipper ship. Then, having served his apprenticeship and fulfilled his wander-years, he came back to the beautiful hamlet of Maitland to build vessels on his own account. He hewed and fitted his way through life.

He began in a small way. His total capital for his first venture was no more than thirty pounds. Tradition says he cut the frames for his first vessel in the woods and carried them out on his shoulder, for he was a tall and powerful man. This was the brigantine *St. Lawrence*. She was lucky and made money. Then followed the sloop *Architect*, the *Persia*, the *W. G. Putnam*, the *Mary*, named for Mrs. Lawrence, and then the *Pegasus*, known of course to sailors as the *Pegashious*, which was launched in 1867. She was famous for sailing, but also for quick passages and making money. Captain Jim Ellis from Shubenacadie sailed her; he married the owner's eldest daughter, who went to sea with him as was the wont of Nova Scotia girls who married sea-captains. William Lawrence prospered and was respected in his community. He represented Hants in the House of Assembly and gave his voice and vote against Confederation.

The great idea of William Lawrence was simple enough. One big vessel with one crew would do the work of two smaller vessels with two crews, to an immense saving in operating costs. It is the same idea which went to the building of the *Titanic* and the other steel leviathans. Lawrence had thirty-four years of experience in his craft, and from that experience he conceived his grandiose plan. He did not proceed by rule of thumb. First, he drafted

his dream-ship,—hull plan, spar plan, profile, section, streamlines, everything to accurate scale. He then made his half model, which is preserved in the provincial museum. Then, the layers of wood were taken apart for the actual moulding, and the huge frames, or ribs, were drafted in strict accordance with the little model. Then, like the true artist, he turned his dream into a concrete reality.

In September, 1872, a little to the south of Maitland, in front of his own house, William Lawrence laid the keel of the giant ship to be. No such keel had ever been laid in Nova Scotia; it extended two hundred and forty-four feet, nine inches, on the grass. John M. Blaikie showed me where he and his partners built their first vessel in Great Village. She measured a hundred tons. "And we thought her a whale of a ship." But this Maitland venture was designed to be bigger than twenty of Blaikie's "whales". It was a daring conception; but all the winter of '72/'73, little work was done upon it.

In April, 1873, Lawrence's plans were ripe, and work began in earnest. He engaged a force of seventy-five men. His brother Lockhart was the master-builder, and John Lawrence, his son, moulded the timber. He himself was in the yard from morning till night, and saw to every detail. First and last, this vessel was a family affair. The keel is the spine of the ship, and it behooves it to be strong. This was of spruce, seventeen by thirty-one inches square. Keel and kelson together were eight feet through, bolted with $1\frac{1}{2}$ and $1\frac{3}{8}$ inch iron, hammered out in Isaac Douglass's smithy. The stem was forty-seven feet long. Towering in the air, it showed plainly how huge the new ship was to be. The frames were set in their places; from the keel to the rail they measured fifty-five feet; the breadth of beam was forty-eight feet. Never was seen so huge a skeleton of a ship in a Maritime ship-yard.

Lawrence built for strength as well as beauty. No trenails for him. All was metal fastened. Two hundred tons of bolts were put into her. There were three decks, each nine feet in height, and the beams of the two lower decks were reinforced by one hundred and sixty iron knees, some of them weighing eighteen hundred pounds apiece. In all they weighed sixty-two tons. There were double waterways around each deck, the inside one being dovetailed into the beams, and fastened with $1\frac{1}{4}$ and $1\frac{3}{8}$ metal. In reviewing her career, Lawrence noted with pride that she never damaged a cargo. So the vessel grew deck by deck and plank by plank, "Lock" Lawrence working at the outside, and John, within. The long bowsprit was set in place, projecting above the roof of the

Lawrence mansion. It was of yellow Southern pine, as were the three lower masts. Now MacDonald's riggers came on and set up the shrouds, and chains of thirty-three tons weight, and stays, like the timbers, all of unusual strength. The topmasts grew on the lower masts, fore, main and mizzen; and then the top-gallant masts on the topmasts. Then, the yards were swung across, with their trusses, halliards and braces. Above the royal yards were swayed up the three skysail yards, which marked the final development of the full-rigged ship in Nova Scotia. The main-yard was ninety feet long; the truss that held it weighed five hundred pounds. From kelson to truck, the main-mast measured two hundred feet, eight inches. The lower shrouds and topmast back-stays were of $5\frac{1}{2}$ inch iron wire, made to order in England. Her rigging has been described as "massive"; and the official figures support the term. Finally, the sails were bent on the yards, 8,000 yards of them. For eighteen months, the yard rang with the cheerful clamour of broad-axe and saw, ten hours a day, but not more, for Lawrence was the first to break the universal custom of working his men from daylight to dark.

In a hut by himself, J. S. Shaw, carver and gilder, worked at a gigantic figurehead. It represented a forward-looking, square-headed, bearded man, attired in a flowing cloak. He bore a scroll with the piously aggressive motto, "God defend the Right." It may seem strange, but Lawrence had to stand on the defensive all the time his ship was building. Few believed that he would succeed, fault-finders were many.

A busy shipyard is a spectacle to draw and hold all eyes, the activities are so many and so diverse. Visitors came to see the new venture from idle curiosity; and they were, for the most part, hostile critics. Let her builder and maker testify as to what happened, in his own vigorous English. "The ship *W. D. Lawrence*, from the time her keel was laid up to the time she was sold, seemed to be an eyesore to a certain class of men, who could see nothing about the ship that was right or speak a favourable word about her. During the time I was building her I had visitors from the United States, Saint John, all parts of Nova Scotia, England and even from the Continent, who with very few exceptions were fault-finders. One would say, 'Don't you think, Mr. Lawrence, she is too large?' Another would say, 'Don't you think it would have been better to have her in two ships?' Again, another would say, 'I'm afraid you will not be able to make her strong enough out of pine and spruce; I would not trust myself in her at sea in a heavy gale.' Another would say, 'Don't you think, old man, she will be unwieldy

and labour hard at sea?' And so on. I generally passed it all off in good humour. . . . But on one occasion I had to act differently. A certain man came into my shipyard and before bidding good-day began to find fault with the ship. He said everything about the ship was wrong. It would be impossible to make her sea-worthy. She would ruin me and everyone else who had anything to do with her. I tried to reason with him but to no purpose. At last I said to him, 'Friend, do you know the way you came into this yard?' He said, 'I think I do.' 'Then, sir, please take your back tracks, and if you need any assistance it is handy.' He took his departure and never came into the yard again."

Lawrence worked on, and at last the end was in sight.

II

THE LAUNCHING

Launchings marked gala days in old Nova Scotia. From far and near people flocked to see the impressive sight. The thing of wood, built on land, would take the water in a splendid dramatic rush. It was a critical moment, big with fate; for the launch might fail. The vessel might not leave the ways; she might even capsize; or stick ingloriously in the mud. Hence the announcement that Mr. Lawrence's "notorious and much abused ship" was to be launched on Tuesday, October 27, drew four thousand persons to Maitland. From Windsor, from Parrsboro', from Londonderry, from Truro, from both banks of the Shubenacadie they came, and a goodly number from the capital itself. Mr. John Stairs and Mr. Adam Burns made a special trip from Halifax, to see the sight. Early on the Monday morning every boarding-house in the village was filled, and crowds poured in on Tuesday morning.

Two of the visitors were not well received. They were slick, well-dressed, high-hatted gentlemen who came over by the ferry from Truro, with a barrel of whiskey for the benefit of the thirsty. But Lawrence heard of the enterprising strangers, and had no desire to see the holiday disgraced by drunken riots. He was a magistrate, as was Alfred Putnam, his friend; and both were tall and formidable men. By virtue of their office, they apprehended the two gentlemen from Truro, marched them through the village to the ferry and shipped them back whence they came. That little procession of the crest-fallen pair, wheeling their stock-in-trade on a barrow through the street, the two stalwart magistrates

marching behind and the bearded Presbyterian minister showing the way, was long remembered in Maitland.

All Maitland kept that Tuesday as a holiday, and did no work. Round the ship and into the ship pressed the curious crowds, peering, examining her all over from the patent rudder which weighed seven tons, to the patent double action metal pumps and the patent windlass which was to work by steam. They inspected the clean, big deck-house, fifty feet by twenty-six, with accommodation for twenty-four seamen, sail-room, carpenter's shop, galley, boatswain's store-room, engine-room, and rooms for the boatswain, carpenter and boys. Even more admirable were the cabins for the after-guard, fifty feet long by thirty broad, more roomy than many a Maitland dwelling. There she stood, as strong as wood and iron could make her. The carpenters' measurements made her 2858½ tons; her nett tonnage was 2459; and she was rated AI at Lloyd's for seven years. Would she ever leave the ways? Would the prophets of evil see their predictions fulfilled?

At one o'clock the workmen began to wedge up the ship for launching and to split the keel-blocks. This last was no easy task, for the vessel, with 400 tons of stone ballast in the hold to steady her, weighed 3800 tons, and the great weight split the supporting keel-blocks. For nearly an hour the carpenters laboured, and, about ten minutes before two, all but the forward block had been worked out. Then the ship began to move, slowly at first as the clutch of gravitation laid hold of her; soon her speed increased, and, amidst the crash of falling shores and the cheers of four thousand throats, she glided majestically into the orange coloured Fundy tide. "She went off like a row-boat," said an eye-witness. It was William Lawrence's great hour. After long months of labour and anxiety, aggravated by hostile criticism, he stood justified by the work of his hands and received the congratulations of his friends.

Out on the Bay, proud and tall, rode the Great Ship. Two tugs were in readiness. They made fast their hawsers, the crew of Maitland boys on board loosed the lower topsails, and away she went with a fair wind and tide for Saint John. The crowds gazed and approved. In spite of her immense size, she was a thing of beauty, and made a picture on the waters as she passed from sight. Suddenly there fell a hush. On shore there was a great wait, filled a few moments before by her rich and mighty symmetry. Only the black-greased parallel timbers, a confusion of planks and a thick carpet of chips betokened her presence. And the place that had known her once knew her again no more for ever.

III

ROUND THE WORLD AWAY

Building a ship without a rival on the five oceans was not the only great idea cherished in the brain of William Lawrence. "For years past," he writes, "I had a desire to make a voyage around the world." It was this same romantic desire which sent Drake from Plymouth in the *Pelican*. It was a royal thought. Voyages hither and yon, however long and adventurous, do not appeal to the imagination like an entire circumnavigation. Putting a girdle round the globe, tracing a single furrow with a single keel through all the Seven Seas and home again, is an exploit in the realm of romance. William Lawrence was able to convert his thought into action.

"I now set about to make arrangements for the voyage, settling up the ship's accounts and paying off the carpenters."

Having done so, he left Maitland on November 15th for Saint John, taking with him his fiddle and his Bible. His daughter, Mrs. Ellis, and three grandchildren were also on the passenger list. The *Lawrence* loaded a thousand standard of deals, filling her three-fold hold and piling up her deck. Then, on December 4th, with a crew of runners and Captain Ellis in command, the great ship towed down past Partridge Island. Instead of the usual course by Brier Island and Digby Neck, Captain Ellis chose to take her between Grand Manan and the mainland, with a leading breeze. It was no easy navigation, but the great ship proved her capacity at once. Captain Ellis worked her "as easily as a pilot boat and handled her like a yacht," records the delighted owner. No king could have been prouder on his throne than William Lawrence on the deck of the ship he built, as with all her span-new canvas set, and every sheet taut, she walked down the Bay to the open Atlantic. Twenty-three days later she was in Liverpool, filling up the Mersey.

After discharging her cargo of deals the *Lawrence* went into dry dock to be coppered, and ship a donkey-engine for hoisting the heavy yards. Then she signed on a crew of negroes, loaded coals at Birkenhead, and set sail for Aden on April 10th. On June 7th, at five in the morning, she had an accident. Carrying all sail proudly, even her three skysails, and plowing along at fourteen knots, with the wind on the starboard quarter, she met with a sudden gust which carried away her mizzen top-gallant mast. Over the side it went, taking with it the main top-gallant mast, with the main topmast head at the hounds. The crew made repairs, of course, as the

Lawrence scudded before a strong gale, and covered some three hundred miles in the next twenty-four hours, but her glory was diminished. Crippled by the loss of her spars, she did not make Aden until August 1st. Here the owner left her to discharge her coal, and took a steamer to Bombay in order to purchase the necessary spars. *Lawrence* stayed a week in Bombay, seeing all that was to be seen, including the modestly managed mixed bathing of the natives. He brought his spars back in the *S. S. Pekin*. Captain Ellis met the steamer with part of the crew, and towed the timbers to the ship, where they were soon fitted.

"The carpenter and sailors went to work in good earnest and in a few days all was aloft, and the ship ready for sea."

On September 13th, the *Lawrence* left Aden for Callao. In "a fair and pleasant passage of eighty days", the great ship traversed the Indian Ocean, passed through Timor and Torres Straits, skirted Australia and crossed the breadth of the South Pacific. On December 3rd, she came to anchor in the port of Callao, all well on board, exactly a year since she towed out of Saint John. Here, as always, *Lawrence* used his eyes and saw what was to be seen, the hoods and pretty feet of the cigar-smoking Peruvian belles, and a bull-fight in which seven bulls were slain. On January 20th, 1876, the *Lawrence* sailed for Pabellon de Pica, a small guano-loading port at the south of Peru, where a strange fortune awaited her.

Two weeks before the great ship slid off the ways at Maitland, William *Lawrence* obtained a charter to carry a cargo of guano from Peru to Havre. For ages, myriads of sea birds inhabited mindless portions of South America, and their droppings formed great dust deposits of a complete and valuable fertilizer. Since 1840, this precious compost had been carried to Europe in ship-loads. By 1876 a new fertilizer was discovered,—nitrate of soda. Consequently the price of guano was falling, and the French firm did not want to ship it at a loss. A dozen other vessels were anchored off Pabellon de Pica, also waiting for cargo.

"It is a wild, lonesome-looking place, with lofty cliffs and mountains on one side and the great Pacific Ocean on the other. The landing of boats is nearly always attended with danger, on account of the dreadful surf," *Lawrence* notes in his narrative.

Ship after ship got tired of being put off, and went elsewhere for cargo, but *Lawrence* doggedly held on. Ulster blood is obstinate blood. A charter is a charter; and there is a penalty for keeping a vessel waiting for her load, which is called demurrage. *Lawrence* waited for eleven months, nearly all the year 1876. At last, Captain James Flavel Scott of the *Antoinette* (1100 tons) got his load, proving

that the French company had the guano to sell, and then Lawrence's turn came.

This long time of waiting was not spent unimproved by such a born traveller as William Lawrence. After two idle months on board, he took passage in a steamer to Mollendo, 300 miles to the northward. Here he stayed one night, then went by rail 107 miles up through the mountains, and across a white sandy plain to the city of Arequipa, 8000 feet above the sea. Pizarro founded it about the time Jacques Cartier discovered Hochelaga. Lawrence liked the climate and the towering snow-clad mountains. He spent six days in Arequipa, observing everything. He then proceeded by train to the city of Puno, 217 miles farther on, and 7000 feet higher up. The journey occupied two days, for the train was forced to crawl. Now our man from Maitland saw with his own eyes Lake Titicaca, whereabouts was the centre of the strange civilisation of the mysterious Inca race. As everywhere, he saw what was to be seen, the snow-capped mountains, as it were on fire at the going down of the sun, wheat in the fields ready for the sickle, the condor circling the sky, the llama the vicuna and the alpaca. When he got back to the ship he remained on board for five weeks; then, once more tiring of his enforced idleness, he made a trip south to Valparaiso where he spent two months. He witnessed the celebration of the independence of Chile, a *festa* "which was kept up with great spirit for seven days, accompanied with music and dancing, and ending with a grand display of fireworks."

All things come to him who waits. At long last, the *Lawrence* was full to the hatches with her odoriferous dust. On December 11th, she sailed from Pabellon de Pica, bound for Havre. Good weather favored her for a month. She rounded Cape Horn with all three skysails set, and reached Havre about the end of March, all well. The *St. Stephen* of New York raced her one April day, overtook her and left her astern. From the *St. Stephen's* deck, the first mate, D. A. Macleod, watched her storming along in a smother of foam. Ellis mastheaded his main top-gallant sail and drove his ship, but the speedy American clipper passed him. Eleven months at anchor in tropical waters had furred the hull of the *Lawrence* with clogging weed. Later, Captain William Lawrence drove her three hundred and four miles under foresail and lower topsails in twenty hours off the Cape of Good Hope; and, when freshly coppered, she had done her fourteen knots, as noted in the owner's book of travels.

IV

TRIUMPH

At Havre, the Great Ship discharged her cargo undamaged, and paid off her negro crew. Their wages came to something between £1500 and £2000. Lawrence notes how soon and how foolishly the Africans spent it all, but that is the sailor's way. He collected the freight and secured a portion of the demurrage he claimed for the long detention of his vessel at Pabellon de Pica. Cannily he accepted, under protest, what the charterers were willing to pay, and he placed his claims to the whole amount in the hands of a French attorney. The case was tried at a High Court of Rouen, and Dreyfus Frères et Cie had to pay the full demurrage claimed with interest, amounting to £10,620 stg. Added to the freight on the cargo of guano, this made up the tidy sum of £23,000. Thus did the *W. D. Lawrence* in one voyage lay the foundation of the Lawrence fortune. In the eight years that Lawrence operated her, she made a return of twenty-two per cent on the original investment.

All this business took time, and again the man from Maitland had to wait. But with the instinct of the true traveller, he knew how to profit by his enforced leisure. He saw whatever was to be seen. He spent three hours at a masqued ball in Havre and enjoyed watching the "gay crowd rustling in silks and satins." Then he spent several days in Paris, noting how empty were the churches on Sunday and how thronged the opera and the circus. He visited Versailles, he visited Rouen, he admired "the French forests, the admirable roads, clean and hard, unfenced, on either side, apple trees and grain fields, sheep-pastures... a pastoral landscape. The roadside, the grass, and green grain were sprinkled with the festive poppies and the faithful bluies... I went my way over the road stimulated by so much color... Everything made a vivid and glad picture to my eye." In the end, sight-seeing became wearisome, and the sated traveller longed for the little Nova Scotia village which was his home.

When the *Lawrence* was chartered and ready for sea, the owner left Havre in a Cunard steamer for Liverpool, waited there a few days and took an Allan Line steamer for Halifax. By June 25, 1877, he was again in Nova Scotia. He is remembered going about Halifax in his shirt-sleeves with a red bandanna handkerchief full of guineas paying his just debts. For the *Lawrence* had sailed with a debt of twenty-seven thousand dollars on her. T. Forhan had trusted him for the eight thousand yards of canvas which made

her spread of sail; and now the claims were met. Four days later, he was home again in Maitland "after a roving voyage of two years, seven months and twelve days." He had traced his single furrow through all the seas engirdling the planet. Of him it might be truly said that he had seen the world.

The designing, building and operating of the Great Ship by William Lawrence of Maitland must be reckoned as the most impressive single chapter in the long and splendid story of wooden ships in Nova Scotia. His faith in his great idea, whilst all men scoffed, his gamester's confidence in putting all his means, and more, into one venture, his daring and his caution, his North Country tenacity and strong business sense, make a rare combination of qualities. Add to these the deep vein of poetry in his nature, prompting him to visit strange cities and see with his own eyes governments of men all round the globe, as well as the traveller's joy in all he looked upon, and the sum total represents an original man of strong character. He knew the satisfactions of the artist, the craftsman, the merchant, the traveller. Rarely is it given to mortals to drink more deeply of the cup of success.