

## MOTHERHOOD

A speech by William Perkins Black before veterans at the 1899 convention of the Society of The Army of Tennessee.

**(Editor's note: William's selection of this topic before a meeting of Civil War veterans in 1899 is illustrative of his own deep relationship with his mother, Josephine, and particularly evidenced by the fondness for her found his letters with her during the Civil War, over three decades before this speech. Josephine died twelve years before this speech, but William's ability to intertwine the values of motherhood, patriotism, and the evolution of our country provides a useful insight into his own perspectives and remembrances.)**

To all that sit at this banquet, the sentiment to which I am to respond is one that mightily thrills by its suggestion of superb patriotism of the free mothers of free men, who have not withheld their richest treasures from the altar in every hour of their country's need; and yet in most of us at the mention of that word the heart is set a-throb by the tender and gracious memories which flood our souls, like the afterglow of the perfect sunset, when the west wind rolls back the gates of crimson, and purple and gold, through which we seem at times to catch a glimpse of "The Land of Far Distances," where they await our coming.

In every period of our country's history, the sacrificial love of her motherhood consecrated to the welfare of their sons and daughters, ready for privation, toil and peril to help upbuild for them in the wilderness homes of security, rest and peace, has illumined the page with the beautiful record of heroic endurance and gentle triumph.

Starting with those mothers who, in order that their children might find a place where the soul should be free to follow untrammelled its highest aspirations, with supreme faith in the final triumph of truth, set their faces westward across the sounding seas, and there, upon the coastline of an unexplored continent, made the forests and the hillsides vocal with hymns of praise, and rocked their children asleep with lullabys that sang of duty, and liberty and God; through all the later eras of the growth of the scattered colonists into peoples, and there into a people and a Nation, our land has been distinguished for a womanhood of unsurpassed courage, of rarest conscientiousness, of reverend regard for every duty, and of the most exalted quality of patriotism, which grows out of the love of God and the love of man. And from this matchless womanhood there have passed to the manhood of our Nation, as a priceless heritage, the qualities which have secured for us as a people the place we hold among the nations of the earth.

Never in the development of any people was there furnished to the world a more glorious example of the triumph of these qualities over the artificial conditions of the times, than was furnished by the dames of the revolutionary struggle. As a result of the conditions and the traditions of that time, there was among the women of the colonies an almost passionate regard for the mother country, a beautiful sentiment of loyalty for the established order and the crown.

Their tenderness of affection makes them naturally averse to strife, the supreme strife of war, with its torrents of blood, its holocaust of priceless lives; and their very affection for their offspring causes them to desire peace, and its bloodless triumphs and sweet advancements. But above all other women they, our revolutionary motherhood, shine resplendent in the sacrifice of ease, the renunciation of peace, the refusal of advancement for themselves and their beloved, where these were to be purchased at the price of the silencing of the voice of patriotic resolve, and the abandonment of the liberty and the right of the opportunities for honorable life. And so, when our fathers assembled together in the solemn conclave of 1776, and thundered in the ears of the startled kingdoms of the earth the supreme enunciation of the truths upon which they laid the foundations of the new state, "That all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed;" and when they, in token of their unalterable consecration to this new scheme of government, declared, "For the maintenance of this declaration, with a firm reliance on divine providence, we pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor;" the women of our land gathered around the altar, whereon was laid the new-born government for the mighty baptism of blood and treasure which all foresaw, and with high and holy consecration stood God-mothers to the Nation which drew its life from their lives and the lives of their beloved!

Through the long years of struggle that followed, there were times when "the love of many waxed cold;" but it was never in the heart of American womanhood that the flame of patriotic passion burned low or turned to ashes. There were times when resolved faltered and hope was almost quenched; but her devotion to the cause and country renewed the faltering resolve, and fanned the trembling flame of hope into a steady blaze again, a beacon light to the watching world, evidencing the deathlessness of her devotion to the holy cause, and the unconquerableness of her confidence in the triumph of right, and of liberty because *forever* right. There were times when avarice and ambition lured souls to the death of infamy and the malignant activities of treason; but it was not *her* name that passed into eclipse, nor was the blush forced to her cheek, save for the shame of some of her false sons, who, forgetting her teaching that "devotion to country and to duty is a higher purpose than the struggle of a selfish ambition, or the accumulation of superfluous wealth." Stretched out the itching pain, ready, for base preferment, to do to death the leaguered land.

So down the line, as the long roll call of American mothers proceeds, each name is answered, and to none comes the response, sometimes returned in the roll-call of their sons---dead to the fields of honor! God bless them all!

But in the fullness of the days there came a time of mighty struggle in our land. "The war between the states." On either side of that struggle men sprang to arms, cheered by the mothers of America, who gave their best to champion the cause that each held sacred. Each host believed it fought for freedom and the right; and while men fought the titanic struggle out, the mothers, whether from the houses that were destined to be destroyed, or those that were emptied of their treasures, sent forth their sons to illustrate that devotion to country and to duty which had been so faithfully instilled in those homes---South and North.

Because in that struggle we had some part, we are here; and here to attest the debt we owe, for whatever in ourselves and our work we recognize as highest and worthiest, to her whose sweet insistence and instruction made steadfast the purpose, and easy the confidence, of the achievement of high things for the land and the people of our loyalty and love. For upon the roster that we head "The true American mother," are writ the names we reverence and love.

But to nearly all of the gray-haired veterans gathered here, the name of Mother has become a sacred memory. Somewhere along the line of march of the nearly two score years that have elapsed since those old days, a headstone has been planted and a name inscribed thereon that stands to us as a synonym for all human faithfulness and unselfish human love, and royal devotion, and unfaltering faith, they have gone forward to their reward, leaving to us a heritage of the quenchless tenderness of unutterable memories. In the gloaming of the evening of the day and of our lives, we turn at times from the hurry of our occupations and the engrossment of our responsibilities, and we remember! And as memory sweeps the cords of the harp of the soul, there will rise at times, unbidden to our lips, the utterance of the longing---

“ Backward, turn backward, oh time in your flight  
Make me a child again, just for tonight:  
Mother, come back from the echoless shore  
Take me again to your heart as of yore!

Over my life in the days that are flown  
No love like Mother-love ever has shone  
No other worship abides and endures,  
Patient, unselfish, and faithful, like yours.”

And in the gloaming of the evening of the day and of our lives, we look afar through those great gates that cross the way of loftiest life, and within the glory that floods the land beyond we see a form and face that sets our hearts a quiver with a great yearning----a form, the restful enfolding of whose loving arms we knew in the far days of youth: a face whose gracious tenderness made it to us the type of beatific vision. But with a change! When last we saw that face, it was furrowed with the plow share of time and mirrored the anxieties endured for us. That form, when we last saw it, as bent with years of labor and the fond cares of motherhood! But now, now! That form stands grandly erect, touched to a wondrous transformation, clothed with strength and crowned with the grace of eternal youth. The face has lost its furrows; the eyes, shining and radiant with divine love, have ceased to be "fountains of tears;" the hair that last we saw turned gray, has become an aureole above the brow of a saint! Her lips move, and we seem to hear again her teachings of devotion to duty and country, which is but another expression of loyalty to God and man. And as our ears drink in the old familiar lesson that has been an inspiration to our lives, if we have in any measure proved worthy of that dear mother and her deathless love, the vision passes, and we sit again within the gloaming of the evening of the day of our lives; we sit and wait! And into our hearts comes the longing that when, at the end of our march, we shall pitch our tents within the last camp, and shall hear "Taps", and the lights of this life shall be extinguished, we may pass through the gates and be found worthy to place our hand

in her hand, and be helped by her into the more perfect light of love triumphant, even as of old she led our unfolding minds toward the light and filled them with those teachings of truth and made duty a delight and the hope of reaching the heights where God is an inspiration for this mortal life.