

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Last of the Sacred Army

WALT WHITMAN

Page | 1

This story by the celebrated poet and essayist, Walt Whitman (1819–92), continues our exploration of the theme of remembrance. Written in 1842, at a time when the longest-living veterans of the War for Independence were fast disappearing, it supports its call for a duty to remember by presenting the narrator’s dream, experienced on one July 4th, of meeting—some 30 years into the future—“the last of the sacred army” of the Revolution. The dream also includes a conversation between the narrator and “a learned philosopher” about the value of honoring and memorializing our national heroes.

Why is the Continental Army called the “Sacred Army,” and why is the old soldier called the “Last of His Witnesses”? Of what, and for whom, is the old soldier a witness? Is it, as the narrator asks the philosopher, healthy for a self-respecting and self-governing democratic people to revere a fellow human being—rather than God? What is the philosopher’s answer? Do you agree with him that one personal model is more important than philosophical treatises in forming good character? How might memory function to preserve freedom and prevent enslavement? What is the connection between dreams and memories of heroes—including stories of dreams and memories of heroes—and human self-understanding or democratic self-rule? What does this imply about the best ways of educating for citizenship?

The memory of the Warriors of our Freedom!—let us guard it with holy care. Let the mighty pulse which throbs responsive in a nation’s heart at utterance of that nation’s names of glory, never lie languid when their deeds are told or their example cited. To him of the Calm Gray Eye,¹ selected by the Leader of the Ranks of Heaven as the instrument for a people’s redemption;—to him, the bright and brave, who fell in the attack at Breed’s;²—to him, the nimble-footed soldier of the swamps of Santee;³—to the young

¹ George Washington.

² Major General Joseph Warren (1741–75), an American doctor who played a leading role in American Patriot organizations in Boston during the American Revolution, eventually serving as president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. He was killed in combat when British troops stormed the redoubt atop Breed’s Hill during the Battle of Bunker Hill.

³ Francis Marion (1732–95), a South Carolina military officer, known as the Swamp Fox, who served in the American Revolutionary War.

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

stranger from the luxuries of his native France;⁴—to all who fought in that long weary fight for disenthralment from arbitrary rule—may our star fade, and our good angel smile upon us no more, if we fail to chamber them in our hearts or forget the method of their dear-won honor!

Page | 2

For the fame of these is not as the fame of common heroes. The mere gaining of battles—the chasing away of an opposing force—wielding the great energies of bodies of military—rising proudly amid the smoke and din of the fight—and marching the haughty march of a conqueror,—all this, spirit-stirring as it may be to the world, would fail to command the applause of the just and discriminating. But such is not the base whereon American warriors found their title to renown. *Our* storied names are those of the Soldiers of Liberty; hardy souls, incased in hardy bodies—untainted with the effeminacy of voluptuous cities, patient, enduring much for principle's sake, and wending on through *blood, disease*, destitution, and prospects of gloom, to attain the Great Treasure.

Years have passed; the sword-clash and the thundering of the guns have died away and all personal knowledge of those events—of the fierce incentives to hate, and the wounds, and scorn, and the curses from the injured, and the wailings from the prisons—lives now but in the memory of a few score gray-haired men; whose number is, season after season, made thinner and thinner by death. Haply, long, long will be the period ere our beloved country shall witness the presence of such or similar scenes again. Haply, too, the time is arriving when War, with all its train of sanguinary horrors, will be a discarded custom among the nations of earth. A newer and better philosophy—teaching how evil it is to hew down and slay ranks of fellow-men, because of some disagreement between their respective rulers—is melting away old prejudices upon this subject, as warmth in spring melts the frigid ground.

The lover of his race—did he not, looking abroad in the world, see millions whose swelling hearts are all crushed into the dust beneath the iron heel of oppression; did he not behold how kingcraft and priestcraft stalk abroad over fair portions of the globe, and forge the chain, and rivet the yoke; and did he not feel that it were better to live in one flaming atmosphere of carnage than slavishly thus—would offer up nightly prayers that this new philosophy might prevail to the utmost, and the reign of peace never more be disturbed among mankind.

⁴ *The Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834), a French aristocrat and general in the Revolutionary War.*

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

On one of the anniversaries of our national independence, I was staying at the house of an old farmer, about a mile from a thriving country town, whose inhabitants were keeping up the spirit of the occasion with great fervor. The old man himself was a thumping patriot. Early in the morning, my slumbers had been broken by the sharp crack of his ancient musket, (I looked upon that musket with reverence, for it had seen service in *the war*), firing salutes in honor of the day. I am free to confess, my military propensities were far from strong enough (appropriate as they might have been considered at such a time) to suppress certain peevish exclamations toward the disturber of my sweet repose. In the course of the forenoon, I attended the ceremonials observed in the village; sat, during the usual patriotic address, on the same bench with a time-worn veteran that had fought in the contest now commemorated; witnessed the evolutions of the uniform company; and returned home with a most excellent appetite for my dinner.

Page | 3

The afternoon was warm and drowsy. I ensconced myself in my easy-chair, near an open window; feeling in that most blissful state of semi-somnolency, which it is now and then, though rarely, given to mortals to enjoy. I was alone, the family of my host having gone on some visit to a neighbor. The bees hummed in the garden, and among the flowers that clustered over the window frame; a sleepy influence seemed to imbue everything around; occasionally the faint sound of some random gunfire from the village would float along, or the just perceptible music of the band, or the tra-a-a-ra of a locust. But these were far from being jars to the quiet spirit I have mentioned.

Insensibly, my consciousness became less and less distinct; my head leaned back; my eyes closed; and my senses relaxed from their waking vigilance. I slept.

. . . How strange a chaos is sometimes the outset to a dream!—There was the pulpit of the rude church, the scene of the oration—and in it a grotesque form whom I had noticed as the drummer in the band, beating away as though calling scattered forces to the rescue. Then the speaker of the day pitched coppers with some unshorn hostler⁵ boys; and the grave personage who had opened the services with prayer was half stripped and running a foot-race with a tavern loafer. The places and the persons familiar to my morning excursion about the country town appeared as in life, but in situations all fantastic and out of the way.

⁵ *Groom or stableman.*

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

After a while, what I beheld began to reduce itself to more method. With the singular characteristic of dreams, I knew—I could not tell how—that thirty years elapsed from the then time, and I was among a new generation. Beings by me never seen before, and some with shrivelled forms, bearing an odd resemblance to men whom I had known in the bloom of manhood, met my eyes.

Page | 4

Methought I stood in a splendid city. It seemed a good day. Crowds of people were swiftly wending along the streets and walks, as if to behold some great spectacle or famous leader.

“Whither do the people go?” said I to a Shape who passed me, hurrying on with the rest.

“Know you not,” answered he, “that the Last of the Sacred Army may be seen to-day.”

And he hastened forward, apparently fearful lest he might be late.

Among the dense ranks I noticed many women, some of them with infants in their arms. Then there were boys, beautiful creatures, struggling on, with a more intense desire even than the men. And as I looked up, I saw at some distance, coming toward the place wherein I stood, a troop of young females, the foremost one bearing a wreath of fresh flowers. The crowd pulled and pushed so violently that this party of girls were sundered from one another, and she who carried the wreath being jostled, her flowers were trampled to the ground.

“O, hapless me!” cried the child; and she began to weep.

At that moment, her companions came up; and they looked frowningly when they saw the wreath torn.

“Do not grieve, gentle one,” said I to the weeping child. “And you,” turning to the others, “blame her not. There bloom more flowers, as fair and fragrant as those which lie rent beneath your feet.”

“No,” said one of the little troop, “it is now too late.”

“What mean you?” I asked.

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The children looked at me in wonder.

“For whom did you intend the wreath?” continued I.

“Heard you not,” rejoined one of them, “that to-day may be seen the Last of His Witnesses? We were on our way to present this lovely wreath—and she who should give it was to say, that fresh and sweet, like it, would ever be His memory in the souls of us, and of our countrymen.”

Page | 5

And the children walked on.

Yielding myself passively to the sway of the current, which yet continued to flow in one huge human stream, I was carried through street after street, and along many a stately passage, the sides of which were lined by palace-like houses. After a time, we came to a large open square, which seemed to be the destination—for there the people stopped. At the further end of this square stood a magnificent building, evidently intended for public purposes; and in front of it a wide marble elevation, half platform and half porch. Upon this elevation were a great many persons, all of them in standing postures, except one, an aged, very aged man, seated in a throne-like chair. His figure and face showed him to be of a length of years seldom vouchsafed to his kind; and his head was thinly covered with hair of a silvery whiteness.

Now, near me stood one whom I knew to be a learned philosopher; and to him I addressed myself for an explanation of these wonderful things.

“Tell me,” said I, “who is the ancient being seated on yonder platform.”

The person to whom I spoke stared in my face surprisedly.

“Are you of this land,” said he, “and have not heard of him—the Last of the Sacred Army?”

“I am ignorant,” answered I, “of whom you speak, or of what Army.”

The philosopher stared a second time; but soon, when I assured him I was not jesting, he began telling me of former times, and how it came to be that this white-haired remnant

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

of a past age was the object of so much honor. Nor was the story new to me—as may it never be to any son of America.

We edged our way close to the platform. Immediately around the seat of the ancient soldier stood many noble-looking gentlemen, evidently of dignified character and exalted station. As I came near, I heard them mention *a name*—that name which is dearest to our memories as patriots.

Page | 6

“And you saw the Chief with your own eyes?” said one of the gentlemen.

“I did,” answered the old warrior.

And the crowd were hushed, and bent reverently, as if in a holy presence.

“I would,” said another gentleman, “I would you had some relic which might be as a chain leading from our hearts to his.”

“I have such a relic,” replied the aged creature; and with trembling fingers he took from his bosom a rude medal, suspended round his neck by a string. “This the Chief gave me,” continued he, “to mark his good-will for some slight service I did the Cause.”

“And has it been in *his* hands?” asked the crowd, eagerly.

“Himself hung it around my neck,” said the veteran.

Then the mighty mass was hushed again, and there was no noise—but a straining of fixed eyes, and a throbbing of hearts, and cheeks pale with excitement—such excitement as might be caused in a man’s soul by some sacred memorial of one he honored and loved deeply.

Upon the medal were the letters “G. W.”

“Speak to us of him, and of his time,” said the crowd.

A few words the old man uttered; but few and rambling as they were, the people listened as to the accents of an oracle.

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Then it was time for him to stay there no longer. So he rose, assisted by such of the bystanders whose rank and reputation gave them a right to the honor, and slowly descended. The mass divided, to form a passage for him and his escort, and they passed forward. And as he passed, the young boys struggled to him, that they might take his hand, or touch his garments. The women, too, brought their infants, to be placed for a moment in his arms; and every head was uncovered.

Page | 7

I noticed that there was little shouting, or clapping of hands—but a deep-felt sentiment of veneration seemed to pervade them, far more honorable to its object than the loudest acclamations.

In a short time, as the white-haired ancient was out of sight, the square was cleared, and I stood in it with no companion but the philosopher.

“Is it well,” said I, “that such reverence be bestowed by a great people on a creature like themselves? The self-respect each one has for his own nature might run the risk of effacement were such things often seen. Besides, it is not allowed that man pay worship to his fellow.”

“Fear not,” answered the philosopher; “the occurrences you have just witnessed spring from the fairest and manliest traits in the soul. Nothing more becomes a nation than paying its choicest honors to the memory of those who have fought for it, or labored for its good. By thus often bringing up their examples before the eyes of the living, others are incited to follow in the same glorious path. Do not suppose, young man, that it is by sermons and oft-repeated precepts we form a disposition great or good. The model of one pure, upright character, living as a beacon in history, does more benefit than the lumbering tomes of a thousand theorists.

“No: it is well that the benefactors of a state be so kept alive in memory and in song, when their bodies are moldering. Then will it be impossible for a people to become enslaved; for though the strong arm of their old defender come not as formerly to the battle, his spirit is there, through the power of remembrance, and wields a better sway even than if it were of fleshly substance.”

. . . The words of the philosopher sounded indistinctly to my ears—and his features faded, as in a mist. I awoke and looking through the window, saw that the sun had just

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

sunk in the west—two hours having passed away since the commencement of my afternoon slumber.

Page | 8



www.whatsoproudlywehail.org