

#### Document 3.4 Mary A. Livermore, *My Story of the War* (1887)

In this excerpt from her memoir, Mary Livermore argues that women experienced the same feelings of patriotism as men and made parallel sacrifices during the war. She describes the work of nursing, supplying hospitals and making uniforms, as well as several occasions where women disguised themselves and joined regiments.

*Who has fully narrated the consecrated and organized work of women, who strengthened the sinews of the nation with their unflagging enthusiasm, and bridged over the chasm between civil and military life, by infusing homogeneousness of feeling into the army and the people, "keeping the men in the field civilians, and making the people at home, of both sexes, half soldiers"? It can never be understood save by those who lived through that period, when one year counted more in the history of noble development than a half-score of ordinary years of buying and selling, building and furnishing, visiting and feasting. If this book shall in any way help to supply the deficiency I have indicated, my purpose will be accomplished....*

*The great uprising among men, who ignored party and politics, and forgot sect and trade, in the fervor of their quickened love of country, was paralleled by a similar uprising among women. The patriotic speech and song, which fired the blood of men, and led them to enter the lists as soldiers, flourished the self-sacrifice of women, and stimulated them to the collection of hospital supplies, and to brave the horrors and hardships of hospital life.*

*If men responded to the call of the country when it demanded soldiers by the hundred thousand, women planned money-making enterprises, whose vastness of conception, and good business management, yielded millions of dollars to be expended in the interest of sick and wounded soldiers. If men faltered not, and went gayly to death, that slavery might be exterminated, and that the United States might remain intact and undivided, women strengthened them by accepting the policy of the government uncomplainingly. When the telegraph recorded for the country, "defeat" instead of "victory," and for their beloved, "death" instead of "life," women continued to give the government their faith, and patiently worked and waited.*

*It is easy to understand how men catch the contagion of war, especially when they feel their quarrel to be just. One can comprehend how, fired with enthusiasm, and inspired by martial music, they march to the cannon's mouth, where the iron hail rains heaviest, and the ranks are mowed down like grain in harvest. But for women to send forth their husbands, sons, brothers and lovers to the fearful chances of the battle-field, knowing well the risks they run,—this involves exquisite suffering, and calls for another kind of heroism. This women did throughout the country, forcing their white lips to utter a cheerful "good-bye," when their hearts were nigh breaking with the fierce struggle.*

*The transition of the country from peace to the tumult and waste of war, was appalling and swift—but the regeneration of its women kept pace with it. They lopped off superfluities, retrenched in expenditures, became deaf to the calls of pleasure, and heeded not the mandates of fashion. The incoming patriotism of the hour swept them to the loftiest height of devotion, and they were eager to do, to bear, or to suffer, for the beloved country. The fetters of caste and conventionalism dropped at their feet, and they sat together, patrician and plebeian, Protestant and Catholic, and scraped lint, and rolled bandages, or made garments for the poorly clad soldiery.*

*An order was sent to Boston for five thousand shirts for the Massachusetts troops at the South. Every church in the city sent a delegation of needlewomen to "Union Hall," heretofore used as a ballroom. The Catholic priests detailed five hundred sewing-girls to the pious work. Suburban towns rang the bells of the town hall to muster the seamstresses. The plebeian Irish Catholic of South Boston ran the sewing-machine, while the patrician Protestant of Beacon Street basted,—and the shirts were made at the rate of a thousand a day. On Thursday, Dorothea Dix sent an order for five hundred shirts for her hospital in Washington. On Friday, they were cut, made, and packed—and were sent on their way that night. Similar events were of constant occurrence in every other city. The zeal and devotion of women no more flagged through the war than did that of the army in the field. They rose to the height of every emergency, and through all discouragements and reverses maintained a sympathetic unity between the soldiers and themselves, that gave to the former a marvellous heroism.*

*At a meeting in Washington during the war, called in the interest of the Sanitary Commission, President Lincoln said: "I am not accustomed to use the language of eulogy. I have never studied the art of paying compliments to women. But I must say that if all that has been said by orators and poets since the creation of the world in praise of women, was applied to the women of America, it would not do them justice for their conduct during this war. I will close by saying, God bless the women of America!"*

*Entirely unacquainted with the requirements of war and the needs of soldiers, it was inevitable that the first movements of women for army relief should be misdirected. They could not manifest more ignorance, however, nor blunder more absurdly, than did the government in its early attempts to build up an effective and disciplined army. Both learned by blundering.*

*It was summer; and the army was to move southward, to be exposed to the torrid heats of the season and climate. A newspaper reminiscence of the good service rendered British troops in India by General Havelock set the ball in motion. He had devised a white linen head-dress to be worn over the caps of his men, which defended them from sunstroke, and in his honor it was named the "Havelock." Our men must, of course, be equipped with this protection, and forthwith inexperienced women, and equally inexperienced men in the army, gave orders for the manufacture of Havelocks. What a furor there was over them! Women who could not attend the "sewing-meeting" where the "Havelocks" were being manufactured, ordered the work sent to their homes, and ran the sewing-machines day and night; till the nondescript headgear was completed. "Havelocks" were turned out by thousands, of all patterns and sizes, and of every conceivable material.*

*In the early inexperience of that time, whenever regiments were in camp awaiting marching orders, it was the custom of many women to pay them visits, laden with indigestible dainties. These they furnished in such profusion, that the "boys" were rarely without the means of obtaining a "permit" to the hospital until they broke up camp. While the Havelock fever was at its height, the Nineteenth Illinois, commanded by Colonel Turchin, was mustered in, and was ordered to rendezvous at Camp Douglas. A detachment of the "cake and pie brigade," as the rollicking fellows called them, paid the regiment an early and were received by the men who were not under drill, en Havelock. As the sturdy fellows emerged from their tents, all wearing "the white nightcaps," as they had irreverently christened the ugly head-dress, their appearance was so ludicrous that a shout went up from officers, soldiers, and lady visitors. They were worn in every imaginable fashion, as nightcaps, turbans, sunbonnets, bandages, sunshades,—and the fate of the "Havelock" was sealed. No more time nor money was wasted in their useless manufacture.*

*En passant, I remember another occurrence of that afternoon when we visited the camp of the Nineteenth Illinois. I was watching companies that were drilling, a good deal amused at their awkwardness and their slow comprehension of the orders given them. One of the captains came to me, with an apology for intrusion, and begged to know if I noticed anything peculiar in the appearance of one of the men, whom he indicated. It was evident at a once that the "man" was a young woman in male attire, and I said so. "That is the rumor, and that is my suspicion," was his reply. The seeming soldier was called from the ranks and informed of the suspicions afloat, and asked the truth of them. There was a scene in an instant. Clutching the officer by the arm, and speaking in tones of passionate entreaty, she begged him not to expose her, but to allow her to retain her disguise. Her husband had enlisted in his company, she said, and it would kill her if he marched without her. "Let me go with you!" I heard her plead. "Oh, sir, let me go with you!" She was quietly conducted outside the camp, when I took her in charge. I wished to take her to my home; but she leaped suddenly from the carriage before we were half way from the camp, and in a moment was lost amid the crowds hastening home from their day's work.*

*That night she leaped into the Chicago river, but was rescued by a policeman, who took her to the Home of the Friendless. Here I found her, a few days later, when I made an official visit to the institution. She was extremely dejected, and could not be comforted. It was impossible to turn her from her purpose to follow her husband. "I have only my husband in all the world," she said, "and when he enlisted he promised that I should go with him; and that was why I put on his clothes and enlisted in the same regiment. And go with him I will, in spite of everybody." The regiment was ordered to Cairo, and the poor woman disappeared from the Home the same night. None of us doubted but she left to carry out her purpose.*

*Madame Turchin, the wife of the Colonel of the Nineteenth Illinois, was the daughter of a Russian officer, and was born and reared in foreign camps, a favorite with the men of her father's command.*

*She followed the fortunes of her husband in the War of the Rebellion, and accompanied him to the field. I met her at Springfield, Ill., where her husband's regiment was waiting marching orders. Fine-looking, but unmistakably for foreign in appearance and manner, she was intensely loyal to the Union, and thoroughly American in her sympathies and interests. She was as popular with the men of her husband's regiment as she had been with the Russian soldiers commanded by her father. They went to her with their illnesses and troubles, and she received them with kindness, a good deal of playful badinage, and very careful nursing when it was needed.*

*In the spring of 1862, when the Nineteenth Illinois was actively engaged in Tennessee, Colonel Turchin was taken seriously ill, and was carried for days in an ambulance. Madame Turchin not only nursed her husband most tenderly, but took his place at the head of the regiment—the men in the ranks, and the subordinate officers, according her implicit and cheerful obedience. She was not one whit behind her husband in courage or military skill. Utterly devoid of fear, and manifesting perfect indifference to shot or shell, or minie-balls, even when they fell thickly around her, she led the troops into action, lacing the hottest fire, and fought bravely at their head. When her husband was able to resume his command, she gave herself again to the care of the sick and wounded, in the field hospital.*

*An attempt was made to drive Colonel Turchin from the army, and on some pretext, ill or well founded, he was court-martialed. His plucky wife hastened to Washington, and not only obtained an order to set aside the court-martial, but her husband's promotion to the rank of Brigadier-General. Dashing back to Tennessee, she entered the court-room triumphantly, just as her husband was being declared "guilty," with the order to abandon his trial in one hand, and his commission in the other. If the young woman who was mustered into her husband's regiment, disguised as a man, appealed to Madame Turchin for permission to accompany her young soldier husband, I know she was not denied. No captain would be allowed to conduct her out of camp a second time. Madame Turchin's permission for her to serve as a soldier would be as effective as one from the Secretary of War.*

*The number of women who actually bore arms and served in the ranks during the war was greater than is supposed. Sometimes they followed the army as nurses, and divided their services between the battle-field and hospital. I remember Annie Etheridge, of Michigan, who was with the Third Michigan in every battle in which it was engaged. When their three years' service was ended, the reenlisted veterans joined the Fifth Michigan, and Annie went with them. Through the whole four years of the war she was found in the field, often in the thickest of the fight, always inspiring the men to deeds of valor, always respected for her correctness of life. Soldiers and officers vied with one another in their devotion to her.*

*Bridget Devens, known as "Michigan Bridget," went to the field with the First Michigan Cavalry, in which her husband was a private, and served through the war. Sometimes when a soldier fell she took his place, fighting in his stead with unquailing courage. Sometimes she rallied retreating troops,—sometimes she brought off the wounded from the field—always fearless and daring, always doing good service as a soldier. Her love of army life continued after the war ended, and with her husband she joined a regiment of the regular army, stationed on the Plains.*

*Mrs. Kady Brownell was, like Madame Turchin, born in camp, her father being attached to the British army. She accompanied the Fifth Rhode Island Infantry to the war, of which regiment her husband was a non-commissioned officer. She was the color-bearer of the regiment, and was a skilful sharpshooter and expert swordsman. She marched with the men, and asked no favors as a woman, but bore the brunt of the battle, on occasion, a fearlessly as her comrades. She was in General Burnside's expedition to Roanoke Island and Newbern, where her husband was severely wounded. When he was pronounced unfit for further service, and discharged, she also sought a discharge, and retired with him to private life and domestic duty.*

*The Plattville, Wis., Witness, of March, 1864, records, as if it were nothing unusual, "the return from the army of Miss Georgianna Peterman." Says the local paragrapher, "Miss Peterman has been for two years a drummer in the*

*Seventh Wisconsin She lives in Ellenboro', Wis., is about twenty years old, wears soldier clothes, and is quiet and reserved." Similar paragraphs appeared occasionally in other Western papers all through the war. These half-soldier heroines generally adopted a semi-military dress, and became expert in the use of the rifle; and skilful shots.*

*Some one has stated the number of women soldiers is known to the service as little less than four hundred. I cannot vouch for the correctness of this estimate, but I am convinced that a larger number of women disguised themselves and enlisted in the service, for one cause or other, than was dreamed of. Entrenched in secrecy, and regarded as men, they were sometimes revealed as women, by accident or casualty. Some startling histories of these military women were current in the gossip of army life; and extravagant and unreal as were many of the narrations, one always felt that they had a foundation in fact.*

*Such service was not the noblest that women rendered the country during its four years' struggle for life, and no one can regret that these soldier women were exceptional and rare. It is better to heal a wound than to make one. And it is to the honor of American women, not that they led hosts to the deadly charge, and battled amid contending armies, but that they confronted the horrid aspects of war with mighty love and earnestness. They kept up their own courage and that of their households. They became ministering angels to their countrymen who perilled health and life for the nation. They sent the love and impulses of home into the extended ranks of the army, through the unceasing correspondence they maintained with "the boys in blue." They planned largely, and toiled untiringly, and, with steady persistence to the end, that the horrors of the battle-field might be mitigated, and the hospitals abound in needed comforts. The men at the front were sure of sympathy from the homes, and knew that the women remembered them with sleepless interest. "This put heroic fibre into their souls," said Dr. Bellows, "and restored us our soldiers with their citizen hearts beating normally under their uniforms, as they dropped them off at the last drum-tap."*

*The decline of the Havelock fever was followed by a "lint and bandage" mania, which set in with great fury. For a time it was the all-absorbing topic. Knowing now how insignificant in value these items of relief proved in the actual experience of the war, one cannot forbear a smile when reading the sapient discussions of the time. "What is the best material for lint?" "How is it best scraped and prepared?" "By what means can it be best gathered, in the largest quantities?" These were the questions of the hour, discussed gravely by professional men. And the "New York Medical Association for furnishing Hospital Supplies," actually held meetings to discuss "the lint question," and finally opened a "lint and bandage depot." Thus stimulated, every household gave its leisure time to scraping lint and rolling bandages, till the mighty accumulations compelled the ordering of a halt. A little later, the making of lint by machine relieved women of any further effort in this direction.*

*So determined were the people that their citizen soldiers should be well cared for, that "Relief Societies" were frequently organized in the interest of regiments, as soon as they were mustered into the service. They proposed to follow the volunteers of their neighborhoods with their benefactions—"to provide them with home comforts when well, and with supplies and nurses when wounded or sick." It would have been an admirable plan if it could have been carried out. But numerous difficulties and failures soon brought these methods into disrepute. The accumulation of perishable freight for the soldiers became fearful. It demanded instant transportation, and the managers of freight trains and expresses were in despair.*

*Women rifled their store-rooms and preserve-closets of canned fruits and pots of jam and marmalade, which they packed with clothing and blankets, books and stationery, photographs and "comfort-bags." Baggage cars were soon flooded with fermenting sweetmeats, and broken pots of jelly, that ought never to have been sent. Decaying fruit and vegetables, pastry and cake in a demoralized condition, badly canned meats and soups, whose fragrance was not that of "Araby the blest," were necessarily thrown away en route. And with them went the clothing and stationery saturated with the effervescing and putrefying compounds which they enfolded.*

*Added to this discouragement was the frequent loss of the packages. For the constant movements of troops rendered it impossible for express agents to forward boxes to special regiments. For a time there was great waste of the lavish outpouring of the people. It did not, however, check their liberality, but compelled wiser methods. For*

*out of this chaos of individual benevolence and abounding patriotism the Sanitary Commission finally emerged, with its carefully elaborated plans, and its marvellous system.*

Source: Mary A. Livermore, *My Story of the War* (Hartford: A.D. Worthington, 1887), 9, 109–122.