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A Letter from Phoebe Carter Woodruff TO MAMA¹

Linda Madsen Sheffield

I had always been young and fires burned red
 On deep white nights that blinding blew in Maine.
 Plaid ribbons, patchwork quilts, fresh gingerbread,
 Your loving songs—These memories remain,
 Now misty as warm breath in frozen air,
 Though days that followed hang so clear and new.
 The faith was full; the Holy Ghost was there.
 Then husband, child, winter, farewell, Nauvoo.
 My daughter first could sing away the cold,
 But when thin hands were still and laughter sighed,
 I gathered all that memory could hold,
 With care she did not see the prayers I cried.
 I would return were this, my faith, not true,
 But neither child nor I can come to you.

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¹Phoebe Carter Woodruff, wife of Wilford Woodruff, records the pain of separation from her family because of her conversion to the gospel:

“In the year 1834, I embraced the Gospel, as revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith, and, about a year after, I left my parents and kindred, and journeyed to Kirtland, Ohio, a distance of one thousand miles, a lone maid, sustained only by my faith and trust in Israel’s God. My friends marvelled at my course, as did I, but something within impelled me on. My mother’s grief at my leaving home was almost more than I could bear; and had it not been for the spirit within I should have faltered at the last. My mother told me she would rather see me buried than going thus alone into the heartless world, and especially was she concerned about my leaving home to cast my lot among the Mormons. ‘Phoebe,’ she said, impressively, ‘will you come back to me if you find Mormonism false?’ I answered thrice, ‘Yes, mother, I will.’ These were my words well remembered to this day; she knew I would keep my promise. My answer relieved her trouble; but it cost us all much sorrow to part. When the time came for my departure I dared not trust myself to say farewell, so I wrote my good-bye to each, and leaving them on my table, ran down stairs and jumped into the carriage. Thus I left my beloved home of childhood to link my life with the Saints of God.” (Augusta Joyce Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret, a Book of Biographical Sketches* [Salt Lake City: J. C. Graham & Co., 1884], pp. 35–36.)

Phoebe Carter married Wilford Woodruff. Their first baby was born in 1838 at her parents’ home while Wilford was in the area on a mission. Her parents pled with her to stay with them for the sake of the child, but she went on to Nauvoo to be with the body of the Saints. The little girl died at Nauvoo in 1840. (Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff, Fourth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, History of His Life and Labors as Recorded in His Daily Journals* [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909], pp. 93–98, 152.)

The poem, Phoebe’s letter to her mother, is to tell the mother that the child had died. Wilford Woodruff was later able to baptize both Phoebe’s mother and father. (Crocheron, *Women of Deseret*, p. 39.)