

## Battle Hymn of the Republic

By

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Many great songs were born as a result of the Civil War—*Aura Lee, Battle Cry of Freedom, Carry Me Back to Old Virginny, Dixie, Just before the Battle Mother, Vacant Chair, Taps* and *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Next to *Taps*, *Battle Hymn* is more popular today than it has ever been. It is still found in hymnals and used each year to celebrate our country's birthday.

The year was 1861 and the Civil War was in its early stages. Julia Ward Howe, her husband, and her pastor, Dr. James Clark, were visiting Washington D. C. as guests of Governor Andrews of Massachusetts. Mr. Howe was the founder of the Perkins Institution helping the blind in Boston. Both he and Julia were ardent abolitionists.

After a day of visiting wounded troops in makeshift hospitals outside Washington, Julia and company were returning to the Willard Hotel in D. C. As they traveled along, they met a band of soldiers singing *John Brown's Body Lies Amolderin' in the Grave*. Dr. Clark commented the tune deserved a set of better words. Mrs. Howe recounts for us how those better words were written:

"I went to bed that night as usual, and slept, according to my wont, quite soundly. I awoke in the gray of the morning twilight, and as I lay waiting for the dawn, the long lines of the desired poem began to twine themselves in my mind. Having thought out all the stanzas, I said to myself, 'I must get up and write these verses down, lest I fall asleep again and forget them.' So, with a sudden effort, I sprang out of bed, and found in the dimness an old stump of a pencil which I remembered to have used the day before. I scrawled the verses almost without looking at the paper."

Upon returning home to Boston, Julia showed her poem to James Field. He was the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and Julia's neighbor. It would be Mr. Field who gave the poem a title and published it for the first time in the *Atlantic* on February 1862.

As with many poems, music gives flight and preservation to a poem when it becomes a song. The tune to "John Brown's Body" was composed by William Staffe from Richmond, Virginia. Some say this was the music used with the hymn while others say the musical setting came from an obscure camp meeting song, *Say...Brother, Will You Meet Me*. The truth of it is that many tunes have been attached to Julia's poem, but she said she preferred the tune written by Staffe. The hymn is here to say and needed more than ever before.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible, swift sword,  
His truth is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;  
He is sifting out the heart of man before his judgment seat.

Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer him; be jubilant my feet!  
Our God is marching on.

Chorus:

Glory, glory, hallelujah?  
Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
Glory, glory, hallelujah!  
His truth is marching on.