

"The Battle Hymn of the Republic"

By ROBERT D. KALIS

A TALL, slightly stooped, familiar figure entered the House of Representatives in Washington. Many eminent persons had gathered there for a meeting of the Christian Commission already in progress. The tall gentleman quietly took a seat near the rostrum as the President of the Commission finished his remarks and introduced the next speaker, Chaplain McCabe, recently released from Libby Prison in Richmond where he had been held as a prisoner of war.

The chaplain told of a song which he had sung to the other prisoners which greatly lifted their spirits. The song had appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* in February, 1862. As soon as he had seen it, he committed it to memory. The song was *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord* by Julia Ward Howe, sung to the well-known tune of *John Brown's Body*. Chaplain McCabe said that the prisoners had quickly picked up the refrain and joined at each chorus.

With a greeting from those still in prison, the chaplain closed his talk, but the audience called for the song. As McCabe sang, the gathered dignitaries began to join, singing more strongly with each succeeding refrain. The audience cheered as the song ended, but the tall, slightly stooped man was seen hastily writing a note and sending it forward. The note was a request from Lincoln to "sing it again." Needless to say, the request was granted. As the song once again reverberated through the hall, tears were seen coursing down the cheeks of the President of the United States.

The words had been written by Julia Ward Howe who in the autumn of 1861 in company with her husband and with James Freeman Clarke, her Boston pastor, and Governor Andrews of Massachusetts, had travelled to Washington to offer her services in the cause of freedom. The city and its environ were filled with soldiers. The party viewed the area by dusk from a knoll where they saw "the watchfires of a hundred circling camps." A sudden move of the Confederate Army threatened Washington and sent the viewers scurrying back to safety. The streets were clogged with troops, and the party began to sing some of the army songs of the day. When they sang *John Brown's Body*, the soldiers cheered, but Pastor Clarke asked Mrs. Howe, "Why do you not write some good words for that inspiring tune?"

The hour of inspiration had come. In the grey dawn of the next morning, the long lines of the desired poem began to form themselves in her mind. Silently she rose from her cot and, without lighting the lamp lest she wake the baby and almost without looking at the paper, she scrawled the now famous verses.

The third verse, unfortunately, has fallen into disuse, but is worthy of note:

*I have read a fiery Gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:
As ye deal with My contemners, so with you My grace shall deal;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with His heel,
Since God is marching on.*

Back in Boston, Mrs. Howe showed the poem to her friend, James T. Fields, editor of *Atlantic Monthly*. He accepted it, paid her five dollars for it, and gave it the title: *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Neither the editor nor the author had any idea of the future in store for this hymn. It was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1862, from whence Chaplain McCabe memorized it.

Just as many of the Psalms, written to commemorate local Jewish battles and victories, have found their fulfillment in the victories of the cross and resurrection of the New Testament, so this hymn finds its fulfillment — not in "loosing the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword" against a southern brother or an Asian enemy, but rather against the spiritual enemies of our souls: against pride and lust and greed. It is as these enemies are destroyed that we can lift our battle hymn. "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah, Our God is marching on."