

Real Life Stories I Heard The Bells

In March of 1863, 18-year-old Charles Appleton Longfellow walked out of his family's house on Brattle Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and—unbeknownst to his family—boarded a train bound for Washington, D.C., traveling over 400 miles across the eastern seaboard in order to join President Lincoln's Union army to fight in the Civil War.

Charles (b. June 9, 1844) was the oldest of six children born to Fannie Elizabeth Appleton and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the celebrated literary critic and poet. Charles had five younger siblings: a brother (aged 17) and three sisters (ages 13, 10, 8—another one had died as an infant).



Less than two years earlier, Charles's mother Fannie had tragically died after her dress caught on fire. Her husband, awoken from a nap, tried to extinguish the flames as best he could, first with a rug and then his own body, but she had already suffered severe burns. She died the next morning (July 10, 1861), and Henry Longfellow's facial burns were severe enough that he was unable even to attend his own wife's funeral. He would grow a beard to hide his burned face and at times feared that he would be sent to an asylum on account of his grief.

When Charley (as he was called) arrived in Washington D.C., he sought to enlist as a private with the 1st Massachusetts Artillery. Captain W. H. McCartney, commander of Battery A, wrote to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow for written permission for Charley to become a soldier. HWL (as his son referred to him) granted the permission.

Longfellow later wrote to his friends Charles Sumner (senator from Massachusetts), John Andrew (governor of Massachusetts), and Edward Dalton (medical inspector of the Sixth Army Corps) to lobby for his son to become an officer. But Charley had already impressed his fellow soldiers and superiors with his skills, and on March 27, 1863, he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the 1st Massachusetts Cavalry, assigned to Company "G."

After participating on the fringe of the Battle of Chancellorsville in Virginia (April 30-May 6, 1863), Charley fell ill with typhoid fever and was sent home to recover. He rejoined his unit on August 15, 1863, having missed the Battle of Gettysburg (July 1-3, 1863).

While dining at home on December 1, 1863, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow received a telegram that his son had been severely wounded four days earlier. On November 27, 1863, while involved in a skirmish during a battle of the Mine Run Campaign, Charley was shot through the left shoulder, with the bullet exiting under his right shoulder blade. It had traveled across his back and skimmed his spine. Charley avoided being paralyzed by less than an inch.

He was carried into New Hope Church (Orange County, Virginia) and then transported to the Rapidan River. Charley's father and younger brother, Ernest, immediately set out for Washington, D.C., arriving on December 3. Charley arrived by train on December 5. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was alarmed when informed by the army surgeon that his son's wound "was very serious" and that "paralysis might ensue." Three surgeons gave a more favorable report that evening, suggesting a recovery that would require him to be "long in healing," at least six months.

On Christmas day, 1863, Longfellow—a 57-year-old widowed father of six children, the oldest of which had been nearly paralyzed as his country fought a war against itself—wrote a poem seeking to capture the dynamic and dissonance in his own heart and the world he observes around him. He heard the Christmas bells that December day and the singing of "peace on earth" (Luke 2:14), but he observed the world of injustice and violence that seemed to mock the truthfulness of this optimistic outlook. The theme of *listening* recurred throughout the poem, eventually leading to a settledness of confident hope even in the midst of bleak despair.

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I Heard The Bells

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And mild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.”