

How Patrick Higgins Met John Brown

HIS STORY OF WHAT HE SAW OF THE RAID ON HARPER'S FERRY, OCTOBER 16, 1859

By Oswald Garrison Villard

PATRICK HIGGINS, for nearly fifty years a watchman of the Shenandoah Bridge at Harper's Ferry, still lives, at an advanced age, in the neighboring village of Sandy Hook, Maryland. He is almost the only survivor of the Raid who witnessed that tragedy from its very beginning until the surrender of the John Brown survivors. Now the owner of a little saloon by the railroad track, Mr. Higgins is a veritable Dooley in looks, in local wisdom, and in humor. Often besought by his neighbors and by every tourist to Harper's Ferry who hears of his existence, he readily tells the story of the wildest night of his life, when he went from his peaceful home to face sudden death at the hands of Northern invaders of whose existence he, like all the other residents of Harper's Ferry and vicinity, had never dreamed.



R. HIGGINS, did you ever know John Brown?"

"Oh yis, I knew him; he used to come by here wid a little pick an' shovel and said he was doing prospectin' loike in the mountains. I was a watchman at the bridge, the old bridge as was. I rented a house on this side of the river, and lived in it wid me woife an' child—we had but the wan thin. He came here in the airly part of June or July; I t'ink 'twas July, 1859, an' he lived up beyant what was called the Mountain Schoolhouse about six miles frim Harper's Ferry. He used to come down ivery day to Harper's Ferry Bridge, and he used to call himself Isaac Smith. In thim days, ye moind, we didn't know he was John Brown, an' we used to call him in fun Captain John Smith, after the man wid de Indians down in Virginia, ye know. He was as noice a mon as iver ye'll see, he was indade; niver did he pass without speaking wid me an' giving me a hand-shake.

"I moind whin two men came inquirin' afther him; he had only about twinty men all towld, ye moind, and they came from different States—some from one part, some from another. Of course Brown himself was from Noo York. I helped to put his body on the train, afther he had been hung, whin his wife took him home.

"He wint to live near the Mountain Schoolhouse on what is called the Kennedy farm. There's quite a big orrehard there now. He used to drive down ivery day to Harper's Ferry an' always took a big box back wid him. I suppose it had in it some of thim sharp-shooting revolvers. He had some fourteen hundred of thim spears ye heard tell of. They came down to Chambersburg, an' they hauled thim over here. Oh yis, I used to see him ivery day, an' he was as foine a mon as iver ye see."

"You must have been surprised, Mr. Higgins, when you afterward found out who he really was?"

"Oh, me, surprised? I guess I was! Ye see, the two of us, me pardner Bill Williams and meself, had six hours ivery day and six hours ivery night to watch the bridge. It was a wooded structure, the ould bridge was. The Sunday evening he came in, it was me week to go on the bridge at twelve o'clock o' night. That night me an' me woife—she's dead now—we'd been to see her folks as lived about two and a half miles from the Ferry. It was on a Sunday evening, an' me an' me woife was coming back across the bridge. Everything was as quiet as usual. We came on home, and I got supper and wint to bed. There was a watchman as always used to call me in toime to go on the bridge before twelve o'clock. He was at the engine-house. It was about twelve minutes to twelve whin I reached the bridge. I had me lamp lit. We burned electral oil in thim days; it was made something loike coal-oil; we had niver had any coal-oil then. Aye, I remember whin we had no matches at all; the people in America don't know what improvements they have. I t'ought I niver would live to see what I see. Will, I wint out on the bridge to the toime-clock—a toime-clock is where ye have to take a pin and stick it in the clock ivery t'irty minutes, to show that ye have been across the bridge—and if we didn't have a pin in this clock for every t'irty minutes of our watch we would get discharged. I wint to the clock and waited for me pardner, but he hadn't come. I t'ought there must be something wrong. I grabbed the pin to put in the clock, and took me lamp in me hand and walked out to the railroad part of the bridge to where, if ye took notice as ye came by, there's a little house. Just about where the little house is there used to be a switch for the railroad. Jist thin I saw by the reflection from me lamp two men standing on the railroad crossing, but separated. There is a wide span if ye took notice on that bridge.

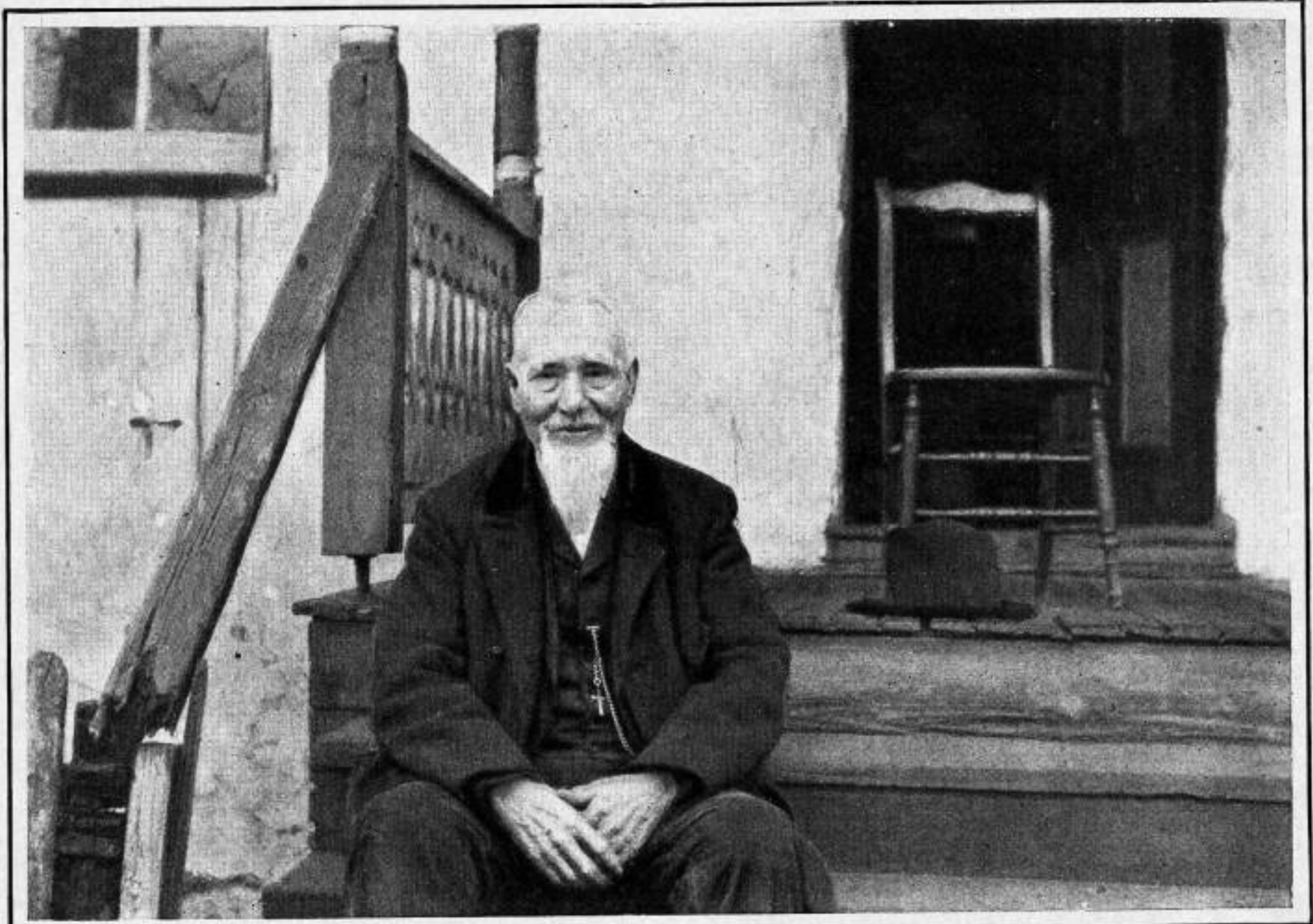
"I walked over, and one of thim called, 'Halt!' Now, I didn't know what 'Halt!' mint then, any more than a hog knows about a holiday. I didn't know what he mint. I learned verry well what 'Halt!' mint in the four years of the warr that followed—but I kept on a-walking, an' pretty soon he 'halts' agln; but I, not knowing at all what he mint, jist kept on a-moving until I was pretty near to him, whin he jabs me wid wan o' thim spikes. In fact, he made me feel a little sick. I said to him, 'I am watchman o' this bridge.' He said: 'That's all roight. Ye come along wid me. I'll watch the bridge.' I heard afterward that this man's name was Thompson; 'twas his brother that married a daughter of John Brown's, and his pardner was the ould man's boy Oliver that

was killed. I noticed that on one side o' the bridge there was some six or eight of these spikes or spears, an' the blades of thim was sticking up. These spikes was like a long-handled shovel or spade, about six feet long, wid a sharp blade, sharp as any butcher's knife. They were a kind of an ancient weepion, and were called spikes or spears. I t'ink his idea was, was he lucky, to place these weepions in the hands o' the slaves. And under the long Scotch shawls these lads wore I saw the barrels o' rifles that hung down from their shoulders.

"At the sight of thim I became frantic. I t'ought sure they had killed me pardner, although they talked verry koind to me; but I could see the loights of the hotel on the other side—they had a verry foine hotel over there—and so whin he said, 'Come along wid me,' an' reached out an' took me lamp, I doubled up me roight fist an' I struck him in the side o' his head an' I staggered him; an' as soon as iver I did that I run for the hotel like all the imps was afther me, an' it was as dark a noight as iver ye saw, and I ran as fast as iver I did across that bridge, and I niver stumbled wance. What did they do? Why, they shouted at me, an' they shot the hat off me head, and

"Thin there was an old gintleman lived about here by the name of Grice; there was a big meetin' goin' on over at Ebenezer Church; him an' his two sons wint over to the meetin', an' coming on the way back they arristed him. This gintleman was put in the engine-house. You took notice where the engine-house used to stand? It's marked there now. 'Twas a verry strong little brick building wid heavy iron bars; it belonged to the Government, ye know. That's where Brown held his prisoners. He had picked some twinty of the tallest, strongest citizens an' had thim prisoners in that engine-house. Col. Lewis Washington was in there, an' me pardner, an' whin I found out this I was sorry I had not gone down wid me pardner.

"The conductor, he t'ought it best not to go on that bridge until ould Brown himsilf came and led the way over for the train. An' thin later, Haywood, the nagur, he wint around the corner o' the hotel, where you see that tall cottage now, an' they shot him roight near the heart; there was a big cut under his left shoulder, and he suffered something awful. This was on the Monday morning about half past wan o'clock; and on Monday morning—of course this was Monday, only 'twas not daylight yit—we had a great



Patrick Higgins, who witnessed the raid on Harper's Ferry fifty years ago

the bullet raised a little mark. D'ye moind the sear there on the top av me head to this verry day? But I didn't know whin I was running that I had got hit at all and what a close call for me loife I'd had.

"Whin I made the hotel, all out o' breath, I gave the people in the bar a desiripshun o' thim spears, an' they saw that I was verry scared, an' that I had no hat on me head; an' while some of thim belaved me, sthll some av thim laughed at me. An' there was a colored man that used to stay in the office by the name av Shepard Haywood. He was a verry noice nagur, and was, too, very well off. He was a free man, an' was worth from fifteen to twinty thousand dollars. Yis, an' the agent, Squire Beckham, t'ought verry hoighly av him. I wint into the office an' they bantered me a good dale about me scare, an' I was troubled about me pardner; an' I t'ought I would go and see for meself if anything was the matter, so I wint to his house an' I knocked on the dure, an' I didn't want to seare his woife, but she said, 'Who's there?' An' I said, 'It's Pat,' an' then I sez, sez I, 'Is Bill home?' She sez 'No,' sez she. 'What's the mather?' I didn't want to seare the woman, so I sez, 'He took the keys to the box, but I guess I'll mate him on the street.' I came back to the hotel, an' it was not long until the express train came in. I towld them there was two men out there on the bridge, an' sez I, 'If ye go it's at your own risk.' An' old Jack Phillips, he was an awful big man, he was the conductor, an' he said, 'Hand me that lamp.' Thin he called to the engineer an' said, 'Go wid me.' So he takes the lamp in his hand, an' they starts for the bridge. They hadn't gone far whin I heard two shots. The conductor stopped right thin. Thin he said: 'What's the mather there? What's the reason of this?' They said: 'Nothin's the matter. We want liberty!' So the conductor he came back an' the express train remained. The hotel was soon filled up, an' was crowded with the passengers, ladies and gentlemen, from all parts av the country, an' everybody has a different story an' no one knew anything at all about it.

toime to get Dr. Sperry for him, but whin he came he could do nothing for him at all.

"Thin there was this John Cook; he was one of Brown's men from Kansas, an' was the man who kep' writing to Brown that brought him here, wid the result following. Now Cook, he married a girl here, Virginia Kennedy; he peddled maps first whin he came here. Thin he 'tended the canal lock up there. He had been teaching school, too, down here in Virginia whin they found out about him, an' people were verry wrahtly against Cook because he had come there and lived amongst thim and thin turned against thim. Of course, whin the arsenal workmen came to work in the morning, Brown's men got thim all an' carried ivery wan of thim down to the engine-house, where they was all kept prisoners. He had probably one hundred prisoners down there. At wan toime of the day, whin I was in the office of the hotel, I could see roight into the fort by looking t'rough the cracks of the dure.

"An' all this time this poor nagur Haywood was lyin' in the station cryin' for wather, wather, for God's sake bring him some wather. Now, there was a pump near by in thim toimes, but I knew thim men on the bridge would shoot me if they could see me, an' yit I didn't like not to go for the wather whin he asked me so pitiful-like. He kep' on an' kep' on at me, an' finally I sez, sez I: 'Haywood, I'm going afther that wather. Likely they will shoot me or take me prisoner, and thin ye would be by yerself entoirley.' He said, 'For God's sake, Mr. Higgins, go an' tell thim me condition, an' surely they will let ye be.' So I took the pitcher in me hand, an' I was getting somewhat posted on military tactics be that toime an' knew what 'halt!' mint, for I knew if wance they said that I would stop, but they niver said a word to me. Whin I passed by Thompson was on the bridge, an' a foine-lookin' fellow he was. Whin I was returning wid the wather he asks me for a drink, and I sez, sez I, 'Hold on a bit an' I'll get ye a glass.' So I wint to the hotel an' got a glass from the agent—they had