

JOHN BROWN AT HARPER'S FERRY.*

THE FIGHT AT THE ENGINE-HOUSE, AS SEEN BY ONE OF HIS PRISONERS.

AS to John Brown and his appearance at Harper's Ferry, probably there is no one now living who can tell more of that affair than myself, as I then lived at Harper's Ferry, and was a prisoner of Brown's until rescued by General Robert E. Lee, then colonel in the United States Army. Prior to Brown's sudden appearance at the Ferry, there had been seen by the neighbors small squads of men with picks and spades moving about the mountain-sides, making small excavations here and there, pretending to be looking for gold, of which they declared the mountains were full.

They went repeatedly to the small property-owners, trying to buy land, until all the neighborhood was much excited, and they had succeeded in diverting the minds of the people from their real object.

These men had rented a house near the Ferry, where they were seen in small parties, but never in such large numbers as to excite suspicion.

Some of them often came to the Ferry, but they excited no suspicion, as strangers were always there viewing the scenery and Government works. Brown himself was said to have been seen there often, but I do not recollect meeting him, and feel sure his appearance would have made an impression on me. When his plans were matured, by the aid of one Cook, who was a citizen of the town, he determined to make his invasion to release the negroes of Virginia from servitude.

His descent upon the town was in this wise: On Sunday night, Oct. 16, 1859, about twelve or one o'clock, the gate-keeper of the bridge over the Potomac leading into Maryland was startled by the steady tramp of many men approaching the gate, having with them wagons, who, upon reaching the gate, ordered it to be opened to them. This the gate-keeper refused to do, saying they were strangers. They, however, while parleying with him, seized him and, presenting a pistol at his head, compelled him to be silent. They then wrenched off the locks and came over, he thinks about sixty strong, though he was evidently frightened and could not speak with accuracy.

Upon getting over, the first building taken possession of was the depot of the Balti-

more and Ohio Railroad, then in charge of a very trusty negro, who slept in the building. Upon Brown's men demanding admittance, he refused to let them come in, saying he was in charge, and his instructions were to let no one in at night. He was then shot down, a negro faithful to his trust being the first victim of those whose mission it was to free the African race from bondage.

Brown's party next proceeded to the hotel, rapped up the landlord, put him under arrest, and placed guards at the doors, so that no one could go out or come in. All this was in perfect quiet at dead of night. They went next to place guards at the arsenal and armories, and fix their pickets at all the streets, so that no one could come or go who was not at once picked up and placed with an armed guard over him and compelled to be silent.

Next they divided their force, sending Cook with some men to seize Colonel Washington and other slaveholders. These gentlemen Brown's party waked from sleep and compelled to go with them as prisoners, at the same time taking all the slaves they could find, carriages, horses, etc.

With the prisoners and property they had collected, they returned to Harper's Ferry before daylight, and thence across the bridge into Maryland and Pennsylvania. The gentlemen arrested were left as prisoners with John Brown. This seems to have been the programme for the night; now as to my introduction to John Brown, and what occurred afterwards.

About daylight one of my servants came to my room door and told me "there was war in the street." I, of course, got up at once, dressed, and went out, my dwelling being immediately on the street. Upon looking round I saw nothing exciting. The only person in view was a man from the country, who was riding rapidly, and I supposed he had lost some of his negroes, who had been stopped at the gate of the bridge and made fight.

I walked towards my office, then just within the armory inclosure, and not more than a hundred yards from my dwelling. As I proceeded I saw a man come out of an alley near me, then another, and another,

* See "The John Brown Raid," illustrated, in *THE CENTURY* for July, 1883. By Alexander R. Boteler and Frank B. Sanborn.— Mr. Daingerfield was Acting Paymaster at the time. He was afterwards in charge of Confederate Armory at Goldsboro, N. C., with rank of Captain.

all coming towards me. When they came up to me I inquired what all this meant; they said, nothing, only they had taken possession of the Government works.

I told them they talked like crazy men. They answered, "Not so crazy as you think, as you will soon see." Up to this time I had not seen any arms; presently, however, the men threw back the short cloaks they wore, and displayed Sharpe's rifles, pistols, and knives. Seeing these, and fearing something serious was going on, I told the men I believed I would return to my quarters. They at once cocked their guns, and told me I was a prisoner. This surprised me, of course, but I could do nothing, being entirely unarmed. I talked with them some little time longer, and again essayed to return to my house; but one of the men stepped before me, presented his gun, and told me if I moved I would be shot down. I then asked them what they intended to do with me. They said I was in no personal danger; they only wanted to carry me to their captain, John Smith. I asked where Captain Smith was. They answered, "At the guard-house, inside of the armory inclosure." I told them I would go there, as that was the point for which I first started. My office was at this place, and I felt uneasy lest the vault might have been broken open.

Upon reaching the gate I saw what, indeed, looked like war—negroes armed with pikes, and sentinels with muskets all around. When I reached the gate I was turned over to "Captain Smith."

He called me by name, and asked if I knew Colonel Washington and others, mentioning familiar names. I said I did, and he then said, "Sir, you will find them there," motioning me towards the engine-room.

We were not kept closely confined, but were allowed to converse with him. I asked him what his object was; he replied, "To free the negroes of Virginia." He added that he was prepared to do it, and by twelve o'clock would have fifteen hundred men with him, ready armed.

Up to this time the citizens had hardly begun to move about, and knew nothing of the raid.

When they learned what was going on, some came out armed with old shot-guns, and were themselves shot by concealed men. All the stores, as well as the arsenal, were in the hands of Brown's men, and it was impossible to get either arms or ammunition, there being hardly any private arms owned by citizens. At last, however, a few weapons were obtained, and a body of citizens crossed the river and advanced from the Maryland side. They made a vigorous attack, and in a few

minutes caused all the invaders who were not killed to retreat to Brown inside of the armory gate. Then he entered the engine-house, carrying his prisoners along, or rather part of them, as he made selections among them.

After getting into the engine-house with his men, he made this speech: "Gentlemen, perhaps you wonder why I have selected you from the others. It is because I believe you to be the most influential, and I have only to say now that you will have to share precisely the same fate that your friends extend to my men." He began at once to bar the doors and windows, and to cut port-holes through the brick wall.

Then commenced a terrible firing from without, from every point from which the windows could be seen, and in a few minutes every window was shattered, and hundreds of balls came through the doors. These shots were answered from within whenever the attacking party could be seen. This was kept up most of the day, and, strange to say, no prisoner was hurt, though thousands of balls were imbedded in the walls, and holes shot in the doors almost large enough for a man to creep through.

At night the firing ceased, for we were in total darkness, and nothing could be seen in the engine-house.

During the day and night I talked much with John Brown, and found him as brave as a man could be, and sensible upon all subjects except slavery. Upon that question he was a religious fanatic, and believed it was his duty to free the slaves, even if in doing so he lost his own life.

During a sharp fight one of Brown's sons was killed. He fell; then trying to raise himself, he said, "It is all over with me," and died instantly.

Brown did not leave his post at the port-hole, but when the fighting ceased he walked to his son's body, straightened out his limbs, took off his trappings, then, turning to me, said, "This is the third son I have lost in this cause." Another son had been shot in the morning and was then dying, having been brought in from the street. While Brown was a murderer, yet I was constrained to think that he was not a vicious man, but was crazed upon the subject of slavery. Often during the affair in the engine-house, when his men would want to fire upon some one who might be seen passing, Brown would stop them, saying, "Don't shoot; that man is unarmed." The firing was kept up by our men all day and until late at night, and during this time several of his men were killed; but, as I said before, none of the prisoners were hurt, though in great danger.

During the day and night many propositions *pro* and *con* were made, looking to Brown's surrender and the release of the prisoners, but without result.

When Colonel Lee came with the Government troops, at one o'clock at night, he at once sent a flag of truce by his aide, J. E. B. Stuart, to notify Brown of his arrival, and in the name of the United States to demand his surrender, advising him to throw himself upon the clemency of the Government.

Brown declined to accept Colonel Lee's terms, and determined to await the attack.

When Stuart was admitted, and a light brought, he exclaimed, "Why, aren't you old Ossawatimie Brown, of Kansas, whom I once had there as my prisoner?" "Yes," was the answer, "but you did not keep me." This was the first intimation we had as to Brown's true name. He had been engaged in the Kansas border war, and had come from there to Harper's Ferry. When Colonel Lee advised Brown to trust to the clemency of the Government, he responded that he knew what that meant,—a rope for his men and himself,—adding, "I prefer to die just here."

Stuart told him he would return at early morning for his final reply, and left him.

When he had gone, Brown at once proceeded to barricade the doors, windows, etc., endeavoring to make the place as strong as possible.

During all this time no one of Brown's men showed the slightest fear, but calmly awaited the attack, selecting the best situations to fire from upon the attacking party, and arranging their guns and pistols so that a fresh one could be taken up as soon as one was discharged. During the night I had a long talk with Brown, and told him that he and his men were committing treason against the State and the United States. Two of his men, hearing the conversation, said to their leader, "Are we committing treason against our country by being here?" Brown answered, "Certainly." Both said, "If that is so, we don't want to fight any more. We thought we came to liberate the slaves, and did not know that was committing treason."

Both of these men were killed in the attack on the engine-house when Brown was taken.

When Lieutenant Stuart came in the morning for the final reply to the demand to surrender, I got up and went to Brown's side to hear his answer.

Stuart asked, "Are you ready to surrender, and trust to the mercy of the Government?"

Brown answered promptly, "No! I prefer to die here."

His manner did not betray the least fear.

Stuart stepped aside and made the signal for the attack, which was instantly begun with sledge-hammers to break down the door.

Finding it would not yield, the soldiers seized a long ladder for a battering-ram, and commenced beating the door with that, the party within firing incessantly. I had assisted in the barricading, fixing the fastenings so that I could remove them upon the first effort to get in. But I was not at the door when the battering began, and could not get to the fastenings until the ladder was used. I then quickly removed the fastenings, and after two or three strokes of the ladder the engine rolled partially back, making a small aperture, through which Lieutenant Green of the marines forced himself, jumped on top of the engine, and stood a second in the midst of a shower of balls, looking for John Brown. When he saw Brown he sprang about twelve feet at him, and gave an under-thrust of his sword, striking him about midway the body and raising him completely from the ground. Brown fell forward with his head between his knees, and Green struck him several times over the head, and, as I then supposed, split his skull at every stroke.

I was not two feet from Brown at that time. Of course I got out of the building as soon as possible, and did not know till some time later that Brown was not killed. It seems that in making the thrust Green's sword struck Brown's belt and did not penetrate the body. The sword was bent double. The reason that Brown was not killed when struck on the head was that Green was holding his sword in the middle, striking with the hilt and making only scalp wounds.

When Governor Wise came and was examining Brown, I heard the questions and answers; and no lawyer could have used more careful reserve, while at the same time he showed no disrespect. Governor Wise was astonished at the answers he received from Brown.

After some controversy between the United States and the State of Virginia as to which had jurisdiction over the prisoners, Brown was carried to the Charlestown jail, and, after a fair trial, was hanged.

Of course I was a witness at the trial, and must say that I have never seen any man display more courage and fortitude than John Brown showed under the trying circumstances in which he was placed. I could not go to see him hanged. He had made me a prisoner, but had spared my life and that of other gentlemen in his power; and when his sons were shot down beside him, almost any other man similarly situated would at least have exacted life for life.

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