

**EXCERPTS** from: THE LIFE, TRIAL AND EXECUTION OF CAPTAIN JOHN BROWN KNOWN AS "OLD BROWN OF OSSAWATOMIE," WITH A FULL ACCOUNT OF THE ATTEMPTED INSURRECTION AT HARPER'S FERRY.

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<https://www.loc.gov/resource/lst.021/?sp=49>

**Page 44**

One of that ubiquitous class of persevering inquirers known as Reporters visited Harper's Ferry on the 18th and 19th of October, and was present at an interview between Senator Mason, Congressman Vallandigham, and the prisoner, Brown. The Reporter writes as follows: . . .

**Pages 47-49**

**Mr. Vallandigham**--Will you answer this: Did you talk with Giddings about your expedition here?

**Mr. Brown**--No, I won't answer that; because a denial of it I would not make, and to make any affirmation of it I should be a great dunce.

**Mr. Vallandigham**--Have you had any correspondence with parties at the North on the subject of this movement?

**Mr. Brown**--I have had correspondence.

**A Bystander**--Do you consider this a religious movement?

**Mr. Brown**--It is, in my opinion, the greatest service a man can render to God.

**Bystander**--Do you consider yourself an instrument in the hands of Providence?

**Mr. Brown**--I do.

**Bystander**--Upon what principle do you justify your acts?

**Mr. Brown**--Upon the golden rule. I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them; that is why I am here; not to gratify any personal animosity, revenge or vindictive spirit. It is my sympathy with the oppressed and the wronged, that are as good as you and as precious in the sight of God. . . .

**Bystander**--Certainly. But why take the slaves against their will?

**Mr. Brown**--I never did.

**Bystander**--You did in one instance, at least.

[Reporter] Stephens, the other wounded prisoner, here said, in ?rm, clear voice--"You are right. In one case, I know the negro wanted to go back." . . .

**Mr. Vallandigham** (to Mr. Brown)--Who are your advisers in this movement?

**Mr. Brown**--I cannot answer that. I have numerous sympathizers throughout the entire North.

**Mr. Vallandigham**--In northern Ohio?

**Mr. Brown**--No more there than anywhere else; in all the free States.

**Mr. Vallandigham**--But you are not personally acquainted in southern Ohio?

**Mr. Brown**--Not very much.

**Mr. Vallandigham** (to Stephens)--Were you at the Convention last June?

**Stephens**--I was.

**Mr. Vallandigham** (to Brown)--You made a speech there?

**Mr. Brown**--I did.

**A Bystander**--Did you ever live in Washington city?

**Mr. Brown**--I did not. I want you to understand, gentlemen--(and, to the reporter of the "Herald ") you may report that--I want you to understand that I respect the rights of the poorest and weakest of colored people, oppressed by the slave system, just as much as I do those of the most wealthy and powerful. That is the idea that has moved me, and that alone. We expect no reward, except the satisfaction of endeavoring to do for those in distress and greatly oppressed, as we would be done by. The cry of distress of the oppressed is my reason, and the only thing that prompted me to come here.

**A Bystander**--Why did you do it secretly?

**Mr. Brown**--Because I thought that necessary to success; no other reason.

**Bystander**--And you think that honorable? Have you read Gerritt Smith's last letter?

**Mr. Brown**--What letter do you mean?

**Bystander**--The "New York Herald" of yesterday, in speaking of this affair, mentions a letter in this way:--"Apropos of this exciting news, we recollect a very significant passage in one of Gerrit Smith's letters, published a month or two ago, in which he speaks of the folly of attempting to strike the shackles off the slaves by the force of moral suasion or legal agitation, and predicts that the next movement made in the direction of negro emancipation would be an insurrection in the South."

**Mr. Brown**--I have not seen the "New York Herald" for some days past; but I presume, from your remark about the gist of the letter, that I should concur with it. I agree with Mr. Smith that moral suasion is hopeless. I don't think the people of the slave States will ever consider the subject of slavery in its true light till some other argument is resorted to than moral suasion.

**Mr. Vallandigham**--Did you expect a general rising of the slaves in case of your success?

**Mr. Brown**--No, sir; nor did I wish it. I expected to gather them up from time to time and set them free.

**Mr. Vallandigham**--Did you expect to hold possession here till then?

**Mr. Brown**--Well, probably I had quite a different idea. I do not know that I ought to reveal my plans. I am here a prisoner and wounded, because I foolishly allowed myself to be so. You overrate

your strength in supposing I could have been taken if I had not allowed it. I was too tardy after commencing the open attack--in delaying my movements through Monday night, and up to the time I was attacked by the government troops. It was all occasioned by my desire to spare the feelings of my prisoners and their families and the community at large. I had no knowledge of the shooting of the negro (Hayward). . . .

**Reporter of The Herald**--I do not wish to annoy you; but if you have anything further you would like to say I will report it.

**Mr. Brown**--I have nothing to say. only that I claim to be here in carrying out a measure I believe perfectly justifiable, and not to act the part of an incendiary or ruffian, but to aid those suffering great wrong. I wish to say, furthermore, that you had better--all you people at the South--prepare yourselves for a settlement of that question that must come up for settlement sooner than you are prepared for. The sooner you are prepared the better. You may dispose of me very easily; I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled--this negro question I mean--the end of that is not yet. these wounds were inflicted upon me--both sabre cuts on my head and bayonet stabs in different parts of my body--some minutes after I had ceased fighting and had consented to a surrender, for the benefit of others, not for my own. (This statement was vehemently denied by all around.) I believe the major (meaning Lieut. J. B. Stuart, of the United States cavalry), would not have been alive; I could have killed him just as easy as a mosquito when he came in, but I supposed he came in only to receive our surrender. There had been loud and long calls of "surrender" from us--as loud as men could yell--but in the confusion and excitement I suppose we were not heard. I do not think the major, or any one, meant to butcher us after we had surrendered.

[Reporter] An **Officer** here stated that the order to the marines were not to shoot anybody; but when they were fired upon by Brown's men and one of them killed, they were obliged to return the compliment.

[Reporter] **Mr. Brown** insisted that the marines fired first.

**An Officer**--Why did not you surrender before the attack?

**Mr. Brown**--I did not think it was my duty or interest to do so. We assured the prisoners that we did not wish to harm them, and they should be set at liberty. I exercised my best judgment, not believing the people would wantonly sacrifice their own fellow-citizens, when we offered to let them go on condition of being allowed to change our position about a quarter of a mile. The prisoners agreed by vote among themselves to pass across the bridge with us. We wanted them only as a sort of guaranty of our own safety; that we should not be fired into. We took them in the first place as hostages and to

keep them from doing any harm. We did kill some men in defending ourselves, but I saw no one fire except directly in self-defence. Our orders were strict not to harm any one not in arms against us.

**Q.** Brown, suppose you had every nigger in the United States, what would you do with them?

**A.** Set them free.

**Q.** Your intention was to carry them off and free them?

**A.** Not at all.

**A Bystander**--To set them free would sacrifice the life of every man in this community.

**Mr. Brown**--I do not think so.

**Bystander**--I know it. I think you are fanatical.

**Mr. Brown**--And I think you are fanatical. "Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad," and you are mad.

**Q.** Was it your only object to free the negroes?

**A.** Absolutely our only object.

**Q.** But you demanded and took Col. Washington's silver and watch?

**A.** Yes; *we intended freely to appropriate the property of slaveholders to carry out our object.* It was for that, and only that, and with no design to enrich ourselves with any plunder whatever.

**Q.** Did you know Sherrod in Kansas? I understand you killed him.

**A.** I killed no man except in fair fight; I fought at Black Jack Point and Ossawatomie, and if I killed anybody it was at one of those places.

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**EXCERPTS from "A PLEA FOR CAPTAIN JOHN BROWN" BY HENRY D. THOREAU  
DELIVERED IN CONCORD, MASSACHUSETTS, OCTOBER 30, 1859**

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2567/2567-h/2567-h.htm>

I should say that he was an old-fashioned man in his respect for the Constitution, and his faith in the permanence of this Union. Slavery he deemed to be wholly opposed to these, and he was its determined foe.

He was by descent and birth a New England farmer, a man of great common sense, deliberate and practical as that class is, and tenfold more so. He was like the best of those who stood at Concord Bridge once, on Lexington Common, and on Bunker Hill, (3) only he was firmer and higher principled than any that I have chanced to hear of as there. It was no abolition lecturer that converted him. Ethan Allen and Stark, with whom he may in some respects be compared, were rangers in a lower and less important field. They could bravely face their country's foes, but he had the courage to face his country herself, when she was in the wrong. A Western writer says, to account for his escape from so many perils, that he was concealed under a "rural exterior;" as if, in that prairie land, a hero should, by good rights, wear a citizen's dress only.

He did not go to the college called Harvard, good old Alma Mater as she is. (4) He was not fed on the pap that is there furnished. As he phrased it, "I know no more of grammar than one of your calves." But he went to the great university of the West, where he sedulously pursued the study of Liberty, for which he had early betrayed a fondness, and having taken many degrees, he finally commenced the public practice of Humanity in Kansas, as you all know. Such were his humanities, and not any study of grammar. He would have left a Greek accent slanting the wrong way, and righted up a falling man.

As for his recent failure, we do not know the facts about it. (12) It was evidently far from being a wild and desperate attempt. His enemy, Mr. Vallandigham, is compelled to say that "it was among the best planned and executed conspiracies that ever failed."

Not to mention his other successes, was it a failure, or did it show a want of good management, to deliver from bondage a dozen human beings, and walk off with them by broad daylight, for weeks if not months, at a leisurely pace, through one State after another, for half the length of the North, conspicuous to all parties, with a price set upon his head, going into a court-room on his way and telling what he had done, thus convincing Missouri that it was not profitable to try to hold slaves in his neighborhood? — and this, not because the government menials were lenient, but because they were afraid of him.

Yet he did not attribute his success, foolishly, to "his star," or to any magic. He said, truly, that the reason why such greatly superior numbers quailed before him was, as one of his prisoners confessed, because they lacked a cause, a kind of armor which he and his party never lacked. When the time came, few men were found willing to lay down their lives in defense of what they knew to be wrong; they did not like that this should be their last act in this world.

When I think of him, and his six sons, and his son-in-law, not to enumerate the others, enlisted for this fight, proceeding coolly, reverently, humanely to work, for months if not years, sleeping and waking upon it, summering and wintering the thought, without expecting any reward but a good conscience, while almost all America stood ranked on the other side, — I say again that it affects me as a sublime spectacle. If he had had any journal advocating "*his cause*" any organ, as the phrase is, monotonously and wearisomely playing the same old tune, and then passing round the hat, it would have been fatal to his efficiency. If he had acted in any way so as to be let alone by the government, he might have been suspected. It was the fact that the tyrant must give place to him, or he to the tyrant, that distinguished him from all the reformers of the day that I know.

It was his peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him. They who are continually shocked by slavery have some right to be shocked by the violent death of the slaveholder, but no others. Such will be more shocked by his life than by his death. I shall not be forward to think him mistaken in his method who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave. I speak for the slave when I say that I prefer the philanthropy of Captain Brown to that philanthropy which neither shoots me nor liberates me. At any rate, I do not think it is quite sane for one to spend his whole life in talking or writing about this matter, unless he is continuously inspired, and I have not done so. A man may have other affairs to attend to. I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable. We preserve the so-called peace of our community by deeds of petty violence every day. Look at the policeman's billy and handcuffs! Look at the jail! Look at the gallows! Look at the chaplain of the regiment! We are hoping only to live safely on the outskirts of *this* provisional army. So we defend ourselves and our hen-roosts, and maintain slavery. I know that the mass of my countrymen think that the only righteous use that can be made of Sharps rifles and revolvers is to fight duels with them, when we are insulted by other nations, or to hunt Indians, or shoot fugitive slaves with them, or the like. I think that for once the Sharps rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause. The tools were in the hands of one who could use them.

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### **FIFTH DAY: Page 91**

Mr. Hunter closed the argument for the prosecution. He said he proposed to argue this case precisely like any other. . . .

### **Pages 92-3**

. . . As to conspiracy with the slaves to rebel, the law says the prisoners are equally guilty, whether insurrection is made or not. Advice may be given by actions as well as words. When you put pikes in the hands of the slaves, and have their masters captive, that is advice to slaves to rebel, and punishable with death.

The law does not require positive evidence, but only enough to remove every reasonable doubt as to the guilt of the party. Sometimes circumstantial evidence is the strongest kind, for witnesses may perjure themselves or be mistaken.

The defense say we don't know who killed the negro Hayward; that Brown did not do it because there was no object, but that it was dark, and the supposition is that Haywood was killed by mistake.

They say Brown shot no unarmed men, but Beckham was killed when unarmed, and, therefore, he thought the whole case had been proved by the mass of argument.

With regard to malice, the law was, that if the party perpetrating a felony, undesignedly takes life, it is a conclusive proof of malice. If Brown was only intending to steal negroes, and in doing so took life, it was murder with malice prepense. So the law expressly lays down, that killing committed in resisting officers attempting to quell a riot, or arrest the perpetrator of a criminal offence, is murder in the first degree.

Then what need all this delay--the proof that Brown treated all his prisoners with lenity, and did not want to shed blood? Brown was not a madman to shed blood when he knew the penalty for so doing was his own life. In the opening he had sense enough to know better than that, but wanted the citizens of Virginia calmly to hold arms and let him usurp the government, manumit our slaves, confiscate the property of slaveholders, and without drawing a trigger or shedding blood, permit him to take possession of the Commonwealth and make it another Hayti. Such an idea is too abhorrent to pursue.

So too, the idea that Brown shed blood only in self-defence was too absurd to require argument. He glories in coming here to violate our laws, and says, he had counted the cost, knew what he was about, and was ready to abide the consequences, That proves malice.

Thus, admitting everything charged, he knew his life was forfeited if he failed. Then, is not the case made out beyond all reasonable doubt, even beyond any unreasonable doubt indulged in by the wildest fanatic? We therefore, ask his conviction to vindicate the majesty of the law. While we have patiently borne delays, as well here as outside in the community, in preservation of the character of Virginia, that plumes itself on its moral character, as well as physical, and on its loyalty, and its devotion to truth and right, we ask you to discard everything else, and render your verdict as you are sworn to do.

As the administrators of civil jurisdiction, we ask no more than it is your duty to do--no less. Justice is the centre upon which the Deity sits. There is another column which represents its mercy. You have nothing to do with that. It stands firmly on the column of justice. Administer it according to your law--acquit the prisoner if you can--but if justice requires you by your verdict to take his life, stand by that column uprightly, but strongly, and let retributive justice, if he is guilty, send him before that Maker who will settle the question forever and ever.



ADDRESS OF JOHN BROWN TO THE VIRGINIA COURT, WHEN ABOUT TO RECEIVE THE SENTENCE OF DEATH, FOR HIS HEROIC ATTEMPT AT HARPER'S FERRY, TO GIVE DELIVERANCE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND TO LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.06500500/>

[Mr. Brown, upon inquiry whether he had anything to say why sentence should not be pronounced upon him, in a clear, distinct voice, replied:]

I have, may it please the Court, a few words to say.

In the first place, I deny every thing but what I have already admitted, of a design on my part to *free Slaves*. I intended, certainly, to have made a clean thing of that matter, as I did last winter, when I went into Missouri, and there took Slaves, without the snapping of a gun on either side, moving them through the country, and finally leaving them in Canada. I desired to have done the same thing again, on a much larger scale. *That was all I intended*. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite Slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection.

I have another objection, and that is, that it is *unjust* that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner, and which I admit has been fairly proved,--for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of the witnesses who have testified in this case,--had I so interfered in behalf of the Rich, the Powerful, the Intelligent, the so-called Great, or in behalf of any of their friends, either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of *that class*, and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, *it would have been all right*. Every man in this Court would have deemed it an act worthy a reward, rather than a punishment.

This Court acknowledges too, as I suppose, the validity of the Law of God. I saw a book kissed, which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament, which teaches me that, "All things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them." It teaches me further, to "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say I am yet too young to understand that God is any *respector of persons*. I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done, in behalf of his *despised poor*, I have done no wrong, but RIGHT.

Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life, for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and MINGLE MY BLOOD FURTHER WITH THE BLOOD OF MY CHILDREN, and with the blood of millions in this Slave country, whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments,--I say, LET IT BE DONE.

Let me say one word further: I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial. Considering all the circumstances, it has been more generous than I expected; but I feel no consciousness of guilt. I have stated from the first what was my *intention*, and what was not. I never had any design against the liberty of any person, nor any disposition to commit treason, or excite Slaves to rebel, or make any general insurrection. I never encouraged any man to do so, but always discouraged any idea of that kind.

Let me say something, also, in regard to the statements made by some of those who were connected with me. I hear that it has been stated by some of them, that I have induced them to join me; but the contrary is true. I do not say this to injure them, but as regarding their weakness. Not one but joined me of his own accord, and the greater part at their own expense. A number of them I never saw and never had a word of conversation with, till the day they came to me, and that was for the purpose I have stated. Now I have done.

*{Begin handwritten}*John Brown*{End handwritten}*

**EXCERPTS FROM JOHN BROWN: AN ADDRESS BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AT THE FOURTEENTH ANNI-VERSARY OF STORER COLLEGE, HARPER'S FERRY, WEST VIRGINIA, MAY 30, 1881**

<https://www.loc.gov/item/07012896/>

**p. 6**

Such is the story; with no line softened or hardened to my inclining. It certainly is not a story to please, but to pain. It is not a story to increase our sense of social safety and security, but to fill the imagination with wild and troubled fancies of doubt and danger. It was a sudden and startling surprise to the people of Harper's Ferry, and it is not easy to conceive of a situation more abundant in all the elements of horror and consternation.

**p. 7**

Viewed apart and alone, as a transaction separate and distinct from its antecedents and bearings, it takes rank with the most cold-blooded and atrocious wrongs ever perpetrated; but just here is the trouble-this raid on Harper's Ferry, no more than Sherman's march to the sea can consent to be thus viewed alone.

**p. 12**

Despite the hold which slavery had at time on the country, despite the popular prejudice against the Negro, despite the shock which the first alarm occasioned, almost from the first John Brown received a large measure of sympathy and appreciation. New England recognized in him the spirit which brought the pilgrims to Plymouth rock and hailed him as a martyr and saint. True he had broken the law, true he had struck for a despised people, true he had crept upon his foe stealthily, like a wolf upon the fold, and had dealt his blow in the dark whilst his enemy slept, but with all this and more to disturb the moral sense, men discerned in him the greatest and best qualities known to human nature, and pronounced him "good." Many consented to his death, and then went home and taught their children to sing his praise as one whose "soul is marching on" through the realms of endless bliss.

**p. 16**

To the outward eye of men, John Brown was a criminal, but to their inward eye he was a just man and true. His deeds might be disowned, but the spirit which made those deeds possible was worthy highest honor.

**p. 19**

It must be admitted that Brown assumed tremendous responsibility in making war upon the peaceful people of Harper's Ferry, but it must be remembered also that in his eye a slave-holding community could not be peaceable, but was, in the nature of the case, in one incessant state of war. To him such a community was not more sacred than a band of robbers: it was the right of any one to assault it by day or night. He saw no hope that slavery would ever be abolished by moral or political means: "he knew," he said, "the proud and hard hearts of the slave-holders, and that they never would consent to give up their slaves, till they felt a big stick about their heads."

**pp. 27-28**

But the question is, Did John Brown fail? He certainly did fail to get out of Harper's Ferry before being beaten down by United States soldiers; he did fail to save his own life, and to lead a liberating army into the mountains of Virginia. But he did not go to Harper's Ferry to save his life. The true question

is, Did John Brown draw his sword against slavery and thereby lose his life in vain? and to this I answer ten thousand times, No! No man fails, or can fail who so grandly gives himself and all he has to a righteous cause.

. . . John Brown, began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic. Until this blow was struck, the prospect for freedom was dim, shadowy and uncertain. The irrepressible conflict was one of words, votes and compromises. When John Brown stretched forth his arm the sky was cleared. The time for compromises was gone--the armed hosts of freedom stood face to face over the chasm of a broken Union--and the clash of arms was at hand. The South staked all upon getting possession of the Federal Government, and failing to do that, drew the sword of rebellion and thus made her own, and not Brown's, the lost cause of the century.

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Summary: Douglass, in a highly personal speech, praises John Brown as a real hero of the abolitionist cause and seeks to promote a better understanding of the raid upon Harper's Ferry. Ends with a few words about Brown's companions in the raid.

Notes: Presented by the author to Storer College, the proceeds to go to the endowment of a John Brown professorship.