

# THE LITERARY DIGEST.

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## PERSONAL IMPRESSIONS OF JOHN BROWN.

COL. THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON, as is well known, played an active part in the anti-slavery struggle and was brought into personal contact with John Brown upon several occasions. In his "Cheerful Yesterdays," running in *The Atlantic Monthly*, he gives us the benefit of his personal impressions about the man and an insight into his purposes when he began to plan his raid upon Virginia. We quote from *The Atlantic* for May Colonel Higginson's description of Brown as he appeared in March, 1858:

"I saw before me a man whose mere appearance and bearing refuted in advance some of the strange perversions which have found their way into many books, and which have often wholly missed the type to which he belonged. In his thin, worn, resolute face there were the signs of a fire which might wear him out, and practically did so, but nothing of pettiness or baseness; and his talk was calm, persuasive, and coherent. He was simply a high-minded, unselfish, belated Covenanter; a man whom Sir Walter Scott might have drawn, but whom such writers as Nicolay and Hay, for instance, have utterly failed to delineate. To describe him in their words as 'clean but coarse' is curiously wide of the mark; he had no more of coarseness than was to be found in Habakkuk Mucklewrath or in George Eliot's Adam Bede; he had, on the contrary, that religious elevation which is itself a kind of refinement—the quality one may see expressed in many a venerable Quaker face at yearly meeting. Coarseness absolutely repelled him; he was so strict as to the demeanor of his men that his band was always kept small, while that of Lane was large; he had little humor, and none of the humorist's temptation toward questionable conversation. Again, to call him 'ambitious to irritation,' in the words of the same authors, is equally wide of the mark. I saw him afterward deeply disappointed and thwarted, and this long before his final failure, but never could find in him a trace of mere ambition; he lived, as he finally died, absolutely absorbed in one idea; and it is as a pure

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enthusiast—fanatic, if you please—that he is to be judged. His belief was that an all-seeing God created the Alleghany Mountains from all eternity as the predestined refuge for a body of fugitive slaves. He had traversed those mountains in his youth, as a surveyor, and knew points which could be held by a hundred men against a thousand; he showed me rough charts of some of those localities and plans of connected mountain fortresses which he had devised.

"Of grand tactics and strategy Brown knew as little as Garibaldi; but he had studied guerrilla warfare for himself in books, as well as in Europe, and had for a preceptor Hugh Forbes, an Englishman who had been a Garibaldian soldier. Brown's plan was simply to penetrate Virginia with a few comrades, to keep utterly clear of all attempt to create slave insurrection, but to get together bands and families of fugitive slaves, and then be guided by events. If he could establish them permanently in those fastnesses, like the Maroons of Jamaica and Surinam, so much the better; if not, he would make a break from time to time, and take parties to Canada, by paths already familiar to him. All this he explained to me and others, plainly and calmly, and there was nothing in it that we considered either objectionable or impracticable; so that his friends in Boston—Theodore Parker, Howe, Stearns, Sanborn, and myself—were ready to cooperate in his plan as thus limited. Of the wider organization and membership afterward formed by him in Canada we of course knew nothing, nor could we foresee the imprudence which finally perverted the attack into a defeat."

Concerning Brown's wife Colonel Higginson says:

"I have never in my life been in contact with a nature more dignified and noble; a Roman matron touched with the finer element of Christianity. She told me that this plan [the Virginia raid] had occupied her husband's thoughts and prayers for twenty years. . . . When, the next day, I had to put into her hands, in the railway-car, the newspaper containing his death-warrant, she bent her head for a few moments on the back of the seat before us, and then lifted it again unchanged."

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