

# VOYAGE OF MIDNIGHT

*Being the true story of my, Philip Arthur Higgins', misfortunate childhood, of my subsequent voyage from Africa with a cargo of slaves, of the frightful sufferings endured during that middle passage, and of what happened afterward.*

## CHAPTER ONE

I never saw my father. He was a seafaring man and died before I was born, lost overboard in the middle of an Atlantic gale.

My mother and I lived together for four and a half years at our cottage in Magford, England, before she fell ill and breathed her last, leaving me with nothing but her cold hand pressed against my cheek and the pound of rain against the shutters.

Thus, in the year 1811, I became an orphan and a ward of the parish.

I needn't relate in detail my life in the Magford workhouse—the watery gruel and hard bread; the scowling face and long cane of Master Crump; the nights, the years, spent shivering beneath my moth-eaten blanket—no, for it's the story of many an orphan and so holds no uniqueness other than that it happened to me. It's enough to say that I was miserable, praying each night to God Almighty that I might join my father and mother in heaven. For what, indeed, was the purpose of living if I was only to suffer?

When I reached the age of ten, I was sent to work for a cushion maker. I'd have thought it impossible for my suffering to increase, but increase it did. Already I was a sickly lad, pale, scrawny, no larger than a child of seven or eight years old. I was placed in a confined, hot shed where it was my task to pick the sticks from piled moss before feeding it into enormous, clattery, steam-powered rollers with teeth that looked as if they'd fancy nothing better than to devour the arm of an orphan. Clouds of dust constantly swirled about the room, into my nostrils, my mouth, my lungs. My eyes swelled and smarted, red and itchy. Each evening, I was let off from work to eat my supper of black bread and thin beer, after which I curled up in the shed loft on a pile of dirty cushions stuffed with moss.

*Oh, Father in heaven, I'd ask, coughing, already knowing the answer, does nobody love me? Me, Philip Arthur Higgins, who once had a mother who kissed his cheek and a father who promised to return from the sea to see his first son born? Does nobody love me anymore?*

After endless months of working for the cushion maker, one day my hand caught in the roller. Pain raced up my arm, and I shrieked and fainted as the rollers mercifully shuddered to a halt.

“Philip Higgins? Come, lad, wake up. Look sharp, I say. There's someone here to see you.”

I opened my eyes, my hand smarting, my body raging with fever. I lay in a bed in the workhouse infirmary. Master Crump towered over me, scowling, reeking of camphor. He poked my ribs with his cane. Once he saw I'd awakened, he stepped aside and another man took his place. A stranger whose blue eyes glittered with curiosity as he peered at me and I at him.

I blinked the sleep away and sat up.

He was handsome, about thirty years of age, swarthy, his skin weathered and darkened by

the sun, his hair dark brown and curly. Two gold hoops dangled from his ears. His shirt was striped red and white, his trousers made of tarred canvas, wide-legged and chopped off just below the knee. Stockings covered his muscular calves, silver-buckled shoes his feet.

I made a pitiful object compared to him.

“I’m your uncle,” he growled, not unkindly. “Your mother’s elder brother. Isaac Smythe is my name.” He smiled then, his teeth glinting of gold, shining, to my eyes, like heaven’s glory.

I burst into tears.

*I’m no longer alone. I’ve an uncle. . . . Dear God, an uncle . . .*

“Come now, lad, stop your blubbering and dry your eyes.” Uncle produced a handkerchief and I blew heartily into it, wiping my eyes and staring at him as if he’d disappear were I to blink.

“But how . . . but why . . . ?” The words twisted in my throat and I blubbered again, the pain of so many years of hardship making it impossible for me to speak.

Uncle laid a hand upon my shoulder, a strong hand that near collapsed me with its weight. “When I was your age, or a bit older perhaps, I ran away to sea. I’ve only just come home to find my sister long dead, with her child living like a pauper.” He fell silent then while I blubbered on and my head clogged with happiness.

*An uncle! An uncle!*

When I finally composed myself enough to dry my eyes again, Uncle dropped a few halfpence into my uninjured hand. They clinked together, making a jolly sound. “See that you’re a good lad, Philip, and that you get well. Pray, try to be a man, and maybe you’ll find your tongue.”

I’d always believed the thin-lipped scowl upon Master Crump’s face to be a permanent fixture, but when Uncle placed two quid into his hand, the scowl vanished. “I’ll be sending money for his upkeep. Mind his hand and his health or it’ll go poorly for you.” Turning to me, he said, “Take care, Nephew, for I shall return someday.”

And with a wave, Uncle was gone.

The next few months were the happiest of my life, at least since before the day my mother had died. My hand healed—though I’d carry the mark of the accident to my grave—and my health improved. But more than that, I knew somebody loved me and that I was no longer alone.

Scarce a moment went by when I didn’t recall Uncle’s kindness, his glinting teeth of gold, his jaunty air of adventure, his dropping the coins into my hand, and, best of all, his warning Master Crump to look after me or it’d go poorly for him. I knew that someday Uncle would return as he’d promised and we’d live together as a family, and I’d never have to smell the moldy stench of the workhouse nor eat pauper gruel again. I imagined a home, warm and smelling of meat pies, with a roaring hearth and real beds with posts and pillows. I imagined attending a regular school, for though I’d received some basic reading and writing, and of course my catechism, from the parish fathers, they seemed more interested in how fast and long I could work before I fell ill once again.

Six months passed, and my memory of Uncle’s face began to dim.

I was certain too that Master Crump was pocketing Uncle’s money without any benefit to me. The one time I dared to ask Master Crump about it—and couldn’t he afford to feed me more than gruel?—I felt the sting of his cane and was told that impertinence was a sin. I was then locked in a dark cupboard until the next evening, a frequent punishment in which Master Crump

took pleasure and which I feared more than death.

On nights when the wind rattled the roof and rainwater sluiced down the windows, nights when I shivered under my blanket, staring at the single burning candle that the night warden secretly allowed me, I worried for Uncle. Perhaps, like my father, he'd been lost at sea, swallowed by an Atlantic gale.

After a year, to my bitter disappointment, I was let out to work once again. Upon my leaving, Master Crump presented me with a catechism in blue paper covers. It smelled of camphor. "Mind your catechism, lad," Master Crump pronounced. "You're not long for this world anyhow, but while you are spared, you must work sharp and mind your catechism."

As usual, I cowered under his presence, wishing that I'd my uncle's strength and force of character. "Th-thank you," I muttered, wondering if it was a sin to thank someone for making your life a misery.

Finally, standing on the stoop with my hand on the latch, I summoned the courage to speak. "Master Crump, please, m-must I truly go out to work? Is—isn't my uncle providing for my welfare?"

I hardly took another breath before he grabbed my arm. I heard the whoosh of the cane. Felt it crack against my back.

"Why, you ungrateful wretch!" Master Crump was yelling, loud enough for everyone in the workhouse to hear.

*Whack!*

"There are necessary evils—"

*Whack!*

"—in this life—"

*Whack!*

*Whack!*

"—and we must all do—"

*Whack!*

"—our part—"

*Whack!*

"—by enduring what—"

*Whack!*

"—must be—"

*Whack!*

"—endured!"

*Whack!*

*Whack!*

This time I worked in the cotton mill. I was forced to stand on a crate for sixteen to eighteen hours every day, and if I sagged from exhaustion, I was quickly roused by a sharp box on the ears or a savage kick on my backside. It was difficult to tie up the threads while my eyes were blinded by tears, while I breathed in lint dust, and while my head swirled with dizziness. Finally my legs gave way and I collapsed into such a state that no amount of kicking could rouse me. Back I went to the workhouse, where I nearly died of fever.

By the time I recovered, I'd reach my twelfth year and it was time that the parish authorities were relieved of my charge. Unfortunately, no one wanted me. I was known among the townsfolk as a "luckless lad," not very useful and so chronically ill that I'd soon be at

heaven's gate. I was summoned before the parish board, where three stout, red-faced, bewigged gentlemen peered at me over their spectacles.

“Do you wish to go live with your uncle?” one of them asked me.

I gasped. “He's alive?”

“Of course he's alive, lad.”

“Oh yes! Please, I want to live with my uncle!”

And so, to my profound relief and joy, it was arranged. I, Philip Arthur Higgins, would board a ship in Liverpool and sail to a city called New Orleans, in America, where my uncle lived.

Compiled by Michele Torrey, author of VOYAGE OF MIDNIGHT.

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