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THOMAS JEFFERSON BROWN

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

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THERE are not many who will remember him as Thomas Jefferson Brown. For ten years he had been mildly ashamed of himself, and out of respect for people who were dead, and for a dozen or so who were living, he had the good taste to drop his last name. The fact that it was only Brown didn't matter.

"Tack Thomas Jefferson to Brown," he said, "and you've got a name that sticks!"

It had an aristocratic sound; and Thomas Jefferson, with the Brown cut off, was still aristocratic, when you came to count the red corpuscles in him. In some sort of way he was related to two dead Presidents, three dead army officers, a living college professor, and a few common people. He was legitimately born to the purple, but fate had sent him off on a curious ricochet in a game all of its own, and changed him from Thomas Jefferson Brown into just plain Thomas Jefferson without the Brown.

He was one of those specimens who, when you meet them, somehow make you feel there are a few lost kings of the earth, as well as lost lambs. He was what we called a "first-sighter"—that is, you liked him the instant you looked at him. You knew without further acquaintance that he was a man whom you could trust with your money, your friendship—anything you had. He was big, with a wholesome brown face, blond hair, and gray eyes that seemed always to be laughing and twinkling, even when he was hungry. He carried about with him a load of cheerfulness so big that it was constantly spilling over on other people.

There was a time when Thomas Jefferson Brown had little white cards with his name on them. That was when he went to college, and his lungs weren't so good. It was then that some big doctor told him that if he wanted to live to have grandchildren, the best thing for him to do was to "tramp it" for a time—live out of doors, sleep out of

doors, do nothing but breathe fresh air and walk. That doctor was Fate, playing his game behind a pair of spectacles and a bumpy forehead. He saved Thomas Jefferson Brown, all right; but he turned him into plain Thomas Jefferson.

For Thomas Jefferson Brown never got over taking his medicine. He kept on tramping. He got big and broad and happy. Somewhere, perhaps in a barn, he caught a microbe that made him dislike ordinary work. He would set to and help a farmer saw wood all day, just for company and grub; but you couldn't hire him to go into an office, or settle down to anything steady, for twenty-five dollars a day. He had a scientific name for the thing that was in him—the *wanderlust* bug, I think he called it; and he said it was better than the Chinese lady-bugs that the government imports to save California fruit.

The nearest Thomas Jefferson ever came to going back to Thomas Jefferson Brown was when he took a job at braking on the Southern Pacific. That held him for three days less than two weeks.

"The *wanderlust* bug wouldn't stand for it," he explained.

Right after that he struck a farmer's house where the farmer was sick, almost dying, with three little kids and a frail little woman trying to keep things up. He worked like ten men for more than a month on that farm, and when he went away he wouldn't take a cent. That's the sort of ne'er-do-well Thomas Jefferson was.

He wouldn't beg. He'd go three days without grub, and laugh all the time. It was mostly in the country and in small villages that he made his living. He could play seven different kinds of instruments without any instruments at all. Did it all with his mouth. And the kids—they went wild over him. In return for his entertainment, Thomas Jefferson wasn't ashamed to

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take whatever came to him in the way of odd nickels and dimes.

Once the manager of a vaudeville house heard him on a street corner, and offered him a job at fifty a week if he'd sign a contract for a dozen weeks.

"Good Lord," said Thomas Jefferson, "I wouldn't know what to do with six hundred dollars!"

The next week he was cooking in a lumber-camp for his board. That's Thomas Jefferson—or, rather, that's what he was.

And now we're coming to the girl who killed the bug in Thomas Jefferson—and rescued the king. She was born swell. She has blue eyes—the sort that can light up a dark day, and can make your head turn dizzy when they smile at you. And she's got the right sort of hair to go with 'em—red and gold and brown all mixed up, until you can't tell which is which; the sort that makes you wonder if some big artist hasn't been painting a picture for you, when you see it out in the sunshine.

She comes of a titled family, but she'd want to die to-morrow if Thomas Jefferson Brown didn't worship her from the tips of her little toes to the top of her pretty head. She thinks he's a king. And he is—one of those great, big, healthy kings that nature sometimes grows when it has half a chance.

II

It's curious how the whole thing happened. Thomas Jefferson wandered up to Portland at the time we were fitting out a ship for a whaling cruise. We saw him imitating a banjo for a lot of kids down on the wharf, and the minute our eyes lit on him—Tucker's and mine—we liked him. It isn't necessary to go into the details of what happened after that. Just a week later, when Thomas Jefferson and I were shaking hands for the last time, a queer sort of look came into his eyes, and he said:

"Bobby, you're the first man I ever knew that makes me feel like crying when you leave me."

He said it just like one of the kids he'd tickled half to death on the wharf. There was a little jerking in his throat, and there came into his face a look so gentle that it made me think of a girl.

"Why don't you come along on this cruise with me?" I said.

Thomas Jefferson gave a sudden start, and a queer expression came into his eyes, as if he saw something out on the sea that had

startled him. Then he laughed. You could hear that laugh of Thomas Jefferson's three blocks away, and sunshine in winter couldn't bring more cheer than the sound of it. He looked at me for a moment, and then said:

"Bobby, I'll go!"

It wasn't forty-eight hours before Thomas Jefferson had a first mortgage on every soul aboard the Sleeping Sealer, from the cap'n to the oiler down in the engine-room. He was able, all right, but you couldn't have made an able seaman out of him in a hundred years. For all that, he did the work of three men. The first thing you heard when you woke up in the morning was his whistle, and the last thing you heard at night was his laugh or his song. He did everything, from cooking to telling us why Germany couldn't lick England, and how the United States could clean up the map of the earth if Congress would spend less money on job-making bureaus and a little more on war-ships.

Then we discovered what was in the old alligator-skin valise he carried. It was books. Half the time he didn't have to read to us, but just talked off the stuff he'd learned by heart. We got to know a lot before the trip was half begun, just by associating with Thomas Jefferson Brown—or Thomas Jefferson, as he was then.

We spent three months up about the Spicer Islands, and then came down toward Southampton Land. Thomas Jefferson was the happiest man aboard until we caught sight of a coast, and then the change began. After that he'd get restless whenever land hove in sight.

Six weeks later we came down into Roes Welcome Sound, planning to get out through Hudson Strait before winter set in. The fact that we were almost homeward bound didn't seem to affect Thomas Jefferson. I saw the beginning of the end when he said to me one day:

"Bobby, I've never seen this northern country. It's a big, glorious country, and I'd like to go ashore."

There wasn't any use arguing with him. The cap'n tried it, we all tried it, and at last Thomas Jefferson prepared to take his leave of us at Point Fullerton, just eight hundred miles north of civilization, where there's an Eskimo village and a police station of the Royal Northwest Mounted. He came to me the day before we were going to take him ashore, and said:

"Bobby, why don't you come along? Let's chum it, old man, and see what happens."

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When he went ashore, the next day, I went with him, and we each took three months' supply of grub and our pay. From that hour there began the big change—the change which turned Thomas Jefferson back into Thomas Jefferson Brown, and which it took a girl to finish.

It came first in his eyes, and then in his laugh. After that he seemed to grow an inch or two taller, and he lost that careless, shiftless way which comes of what he called the *wanderlust* bug. There wasn't so much laughter in his eyes, but something better had taken its place—a deeper, grayer, more thoughtful look, and he didn't play those queer things with his mouth any more.

The police at Point Fullerton hardly had a glimpse of him as the big, sunny, loose-jointed giant, Thomas Jefferson. He had become a bronze-bearded god, with the strength of five men in his splendid shoulders, and a port to his head that made you think of a piece of sculpture.

"You can't be anything but a *man* up here, Bobby," he said one day, and I knew what he meant. "It's not the air, it's not the cold, and it's not the fight you make to keep life in your body," he added, "but it's God! That's what it is, Bobby. There's not a sound or a sight up here, outside of that little cabin, that's human. It's all God—there's nothing else—and it makes you think!"

III

It was spring when we came down to Fort Churchill, and it was summer when we struck York Factory. It was the middle of one of those summer days when strawberries ripen even up there, that the last prop fell out from under Thomas Jefferson, and he became Thomas Jefferson Brown. He met Lady Isobel. The title did not really belong to her, for she was only the cousin of Lord Meton; but Thomas Jefferson Brown called her that from the first.

It was down close to the boats, where their launch lay, and the wind had frolicked with Lady Isobel's hair until it rippled about her face and shoulders like a net of spun gold. She was bareheaded, and he was bareheaded, and they stared for a moment, her blue eyes flashing into his gray ones; and then there came into her face a color like rose, and he bowed, as one of the old-time Presidents might have bowed to a hair-powdered beauty in the days when the Capitol was young.

That was the beginning, and to his honor be it said that Thomas Jefferson Brown never revealed that he was a gentleman born, though his heart was stricken with love at that first sight of Lady Isobel's lovely face. Lord Meton wanted a man—one who could handle a canoe and shoulder two hundred pounds of duff; and "Tom" became the man, working like a slave for a month; but always with the pride and bearing of a king.

It wasn't difficult to see what was happening. Lord Meton saw, and understood; but he knew that the proud blood in Lady Isobel was an invulnerable armor that would protect her from indiscretion. And as for Thomas Jefferson Brown—

"Bobby," he said, standing up straight and tall, "if she can only love a gentleman, and not a man, what's the use of playing cards?"

One day, when he had to carry Lady Isobel ashore from a big York boat, something inside him got the best of his arms, and he held her tight—so tight that her eyes came down to his with a frightened look, and he heard a breath come from her that was almost a sob. They gazed at each other for a moment, and it was then that Thomas Jefferson Brown told her that he loved her—not in words, but in a way that she understood.

When he set her down on shore she was as white as death. From that day she treated him a little coolly—up to the last moment, out on the bay.

It was a bright, sunshiny day when the three—Lord Meton, Lady Isobel, and Thomas Jefferson Brown—set off in a big birchbark canoe, bound for Harrison's Island, a dozen miles out from the mainland. But you can't tell much about sunshine and calm on Hudson Bay. They're like a jealous woman's smile, masking something hidden. Four miles out, the wind came up; midway between the island and the mainland, it was a small gale. Even at that, Thomas Jefferson Brown would have made it all right if the beat of the sea hadn't broken a rotten thread under the bow, letting the birch seam part with a suddenness that sent a little spurt of water up into Lady Isobel's face.

What? No, this isn't going to have the regulation hero-act end, in which Thomas Jefferson Brown saves the life of the lady he loves. It's something different—something that Thomas Jefferson Brown never guessed at when the water spurted in, and

Lady Isobel's scream, her body filled with horror.

"Don't be afraid of this jacket and seam. We'll re-

Lady Isobel and Thomas Jefferson Brown jumped into his paddle and took the handle. A little trickle of water about the edge of the canoe back for an instant to bend over.

"Take off your coat, that Lady Isobel swim?"

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"Listen," he said, holding her again when he brought her back. "You'll do as I say, or you won't be afraid."

For an instant Lord Meton, shrinking of the canoe; and the other man's face to leap into her.

"With you—"

She leaned toward him, as the water straight into his face that moment that

Lady Isobel turned to him with a little scream, her beautiful blue eyes wide and filled with horror.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Here, take this jacket and hold it down tight over the seam. We'll reach the island, all right."

Lady Isobel held the jacket over the hole, and Thomas Jefferson Brown put a strength into his paddle that threatened to crack off the handle. After a minute or two, he saw a little trickle of water beginning to ooze in about the edges of the jacket. He leaned back for an instant, and signaled Lord Meton to bend over toward him.

"Take off your clothes," he said, so low that Lady Isobel couldn't hear. "Can you swim?"

"Not a stroke," said Lord Meton, and his face went as white as chalk; but it was no whiter than Thomas Jefferson Brown's.

When a birchbark seam begins to part there's no power on earth that will hold it when the canoe is heavily loaded. A few minutes later, the water was gushing in by the quart about Lady Isobel's feet. She fought hard to hold it back. When at last she saw that it was hopeless, she turned again, to see Lord Meton in his underwear, and Thomas Jefferson Brown stripped of everything but his shirt and his buckskin trousers, which don't water-sog. He laughed straight into her face, as if it was all an amusing joke; and then, suddenly, he began playing that banjo thing with his mouth.

It was all so strange, with the beat of the sea, the wail of the wind, and Thomas Jefferson Brown sitting there as if nothing were happening, that Lady Isobel just stared in astonishment, while the water gushed in about her. At last he put down his paddle, and stretched out both hands; and it seemed the most natural thing in the world that her two hands should come out to meet his.

"Listen," he said, and his eyes were telling her again what they told her on the day when he brought her in from the York boat. "You'll do as I tell you, won't you? And you won't be afraid?"

For an instant Lady Isobel looked at Lord Meton, shrinking and shivering in the stern of the canoe; and then she looked back to the other man's face, and blue fires seemed to leap into her eyes.

"With you—no, I'm not afraid," she said.

She leaned toward him, nearer and nearer, as the water rose about them, looking straight into his eyes. They both knew in that moment that it was the man and the

woman who had triumphed, and that for them the lady and the gentleman were dead. "I'm not afraid—with you," she said again.

Her lips trembled, and her golden hair swept over his breast, and Thomas Jefferson Brown bent down and kissed her once upon the mouth. Then he said, as if he were speaking to a little girl:

"Do not be afraid, and hold to the edge of the canoe when it fills. The wind will carry us to Harrison's Island."

He turned to Lord Meton, and repeated the words; and just then the birchbark began to settle under them. With one hand gripping the side, Thomas Jefferson Brown leaped over into the sea. Lower and lower settled the canoe until, with almost a scream, Lord Meton cried out above the wind:

"Good Lord, it won't hold us up!"

For a few moments Thomas Jefferson Brown relieved the canoe of his weight, and the birchbark rose again, slowly. Then, with a great gasp, he clutched at the side again, and looked into Lady Isobel's drenched face, half hidden in the wet veil of her shining hair.

"The canoe won't hold us all up," he said, trying to smile. "But it will hold two—you two—and the wind is taking it to the island. It's four miles to the island, and I may be able to make it." He knew that he never could make it; that no man could swim so far in the chill waters of Hudson Bay; but he spoke as if his words were truth. "I'm going to let go and try. Isobel, my one love, will you kiss me?"

She threw one arm about his neck. Lord Meton, clutching with frantic terror to the stern, saw nothing of what happened, nor did he hear the sobbing cry of Lady Isobel's heart as she kissed Thomas Jefferson Brown, once, twice, three times, before he dropped back into the sea again.

"Good-by, sweetheart!" he said.

In the eyes that looked up at her, in his face, in the one last look of love that he sent to her, Lady Isobel saw the truth, and stretched out her arm to him.

"Stop! Come back! Take me with you!" she cried. "I want to go with you!"

And there, in the wildness of that sea, four miles from shore, Thomas Jefferson Brown seemed to heave himself up out of the water, as if the strength of a thousand swimmers had suddenly come to him. He let out a cry of triumph, of love, of joy; and he came back and gripped the canoe again,

his gray eyes flashing, his face glowing with a strange flush.

"You want to go with me?" he said. "Come!"

He held up his arms, and with a cry that wasn't fear Lady Isobel went into them, while Thomas Jefferson Brown called to Lord Meton:

"Stick to the canoe! It will take you to the island!"

IV

THE shore was a low, dark streak, four miles away—an appalling distance away; but as she clung lightly to his shoulders, as Thomas Jefferson Brown told her to do, the horror and the fear of the big sea went out of Lady Isobel's brave little heart. She put her face down against his neck, pulled back his wet hair, and kissed him. God, bless all such true hearts, wherever they be!

"We'll make it, Tom—we'll make it!" she told him a hundred times.

He felt the warm caresses of her lips, the thrilling love of her voice, and he knew that she was ready to die with him.

He swam in a strange way—a wonderfully strange way—did Thomas Jefferson Brown. He stood almost erect in the water, his head and shoulders clear; and now and then he stopped to rest, and it seemed no test for him at all to float with the weight of the woman he loved, his face turned up to her in those moments, her glorious blue eyes devouring him, her sweet lips kissing him—still kissing him.

He was doing a thing that she knew no other man in the world could do. She kept telling him so, while the land drew nearer and nearer, until at last she cried out in joy that she could see the little bushes along the shore.

"Another mile, Tom!" she said. "Only another mile, and then—"

"And then—" he said.

"And then—life!" she cried. "Life for you and me!"

He went on, seeming to grow stronger as the shore drew nearer. It was wonderful; but at last, when they came to the beach, he dropped down like a dead man. Lady Isobel caught his head to her dripping breast, and rocked him back and forth, sobbing a pæan of love and pride, while far out she saw the canoe and Lord Meton drifting shoreward.

A few minutes later, Thomas Jefferson Brown went out into the sea again, until he

was not much more than a speck, and brought in the canoe and Lord Meton, while Lady Isobel stood to her knees in the water, praising her God that from riches and splendor she had come out into a wilderness to find such a man as this.

After that, at York Factory, there was nothing left for Thomas Jefferson Brown to do but to reveal himself, and when Lord Meton discovered that there ran as good blood through his rescuer's veins as through his own, he gripped hands with the man who had saved him, and gave his congratulations on the spot. But it made no difference to Isobel. If anything, she was a little disappointed.

Thomas Jefferson Brown arranged to go back with them on their yacht. The wedding would take place in London, a quiet affair. One day Isobel and her lover came along hand in hand, and Thomas Jefferson Brown said to me:

"Bobby, you're going to be best man."

"Not best man," Lady Isobel added, "but second best, Bobby. There's only one best man in the world!"

But I haven't been able to come to the point of this story yet—the remarkable part of it. Two weeks later, when we were up the river and our canoe struck a snag, I discovered that Thomas Jefferson Brown *couldn't swim a stroke!*

"Good Lord!" I said, but waited.

Back at the post, Thomas Jefferson Brown took me into his little room, and said:

"Bobby, you've found that I can't swim, and I'm going to trust you with a great secret. Love can accomplish miracles; and love did—out there. For when I let go of the canoe, Bobby, I knew that I was going straight down to my death. But a wonderful thing happened." He brought a little map from a drawer. "Look at this map, Bobby. See all those little marks off Harrison's Island—figures—twos and threes and fives, and nothing above sixes? That's the depth of water for five miles out from Harrison's Island, at low tide; and it was low tide when I jumped from the canoe. That's all, Bobby. *I waded ashore.* But what would be the good of saying anything about it when it brought me love like hers?"

Yes, what would be the use? For Thomas Jefferson Brown stepped out deliberately to go to his death, and found life. He's a hero and a man, is Thomas Jefferson Brown, even if fate did step in to make heroism a little easy for him at the time!



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