

OKO-KAN, THE BULL MOOSE

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

AUTHOR OF "A FIGHT FOR LIFE," ETC.

WITH A DRAWING BY MARTIN JUSTICE

JOHN THORPE, lithe as a cat, brown as an Indian, with his keen, far-seeing gray eyes, would never have been taken for the John Thorpe who had carried off class honors at college five years before, and who, twelve months later, had been given up by physicians as a "hopeless case" of bad lungs.

Only Thorpe himself knew what the big wilderness had done for him. It had given him more than a new pair of lungs. To his oldest friends he had never told the change that it had wrought in him, and so, in the course of time, he was forgotten by the associates he had once possessed a thousand miles away, or more. The wilderness had been his physician. It had become his friend. It was more than that now.

There were few who knew what he had once been. He was known as Jack Thorpe, trapper, guide, prospector, and as good a forest man as there was between Hudson Bay and the Athabasca. The fact that he was a college man he kept to himself, and he told no one that he had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

No dividends reached him. His lawyers attended to all that, charging him handsomely for their guardianship over certain properties down South which had long ago ceased to be a worry to him. The new world had accepted him, had made a man of him, and in the joy of the new life and strength that it had given him he worshiped it with the reverence of the forest-born.

He was sure that he would never return to take up the old routine of things. At heart he had become a savage, with all the savage's love of freedom and of that invisible angel that is called nature. There had been nothing lacking for him—until

Isobel Carrington had come three hundred miles into the wilderness, to disturb, for a time, the splendid mechanism of existence as it had been rearranged for him. He knew that when she went back she would leave for him an emptiness which even the forests could not fill.

He was sorry that Blood, the factor at Nelson House, had asked him to guide the Carrington party in their hunting and canoeing excursions about the post. Blood had called him down from Lac du Brochet, a hundred and fifty miles north, especially for the purpose.

He met Isobel Carrington first of all. She had come down to the edge of the lake early in the morning, before the others were up, and suddenly she came upon Thorpe mending a canoe. Their eyes met in the same instant.

She was bareheaded. Her sleeves were rolled up above the elbows, revealing the splendid beauty of her white arms. The morning breeze rippled and tossed her long, unbound hair in a golden splendor.

When she saw Thorpe looking up at her from his knees a color leaped into her cheeks, which made him cry out, involuntarily and half laughingly, the one word "O-achi," which in Cree means "the flower."

The word was scarcely out of his mouth before he was on his feet.

"I am Jack Thorpe," he said. "Are you Miss Carrington? If you are, I am your guide and all-round man."

"I am," she said, and her blue eyes smiled frankly into his weather-bronzed face as she held out her hand.

For a moment they stood so close that a tress of her shining hair whipped about

his shoulder. At that moment the son started her chest so sudden he must top of it waved

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his shoulder. It must have been in that moment that Isobel Carrington first saw the something in Thorpe's eyes which startled her, for the color grew deeper in her cheeks, and she turned away from him so suddenly that at first he thought that he must have displeased her; but from the top of the slope she looked back at him, and waved her hand.

That same morning Blood introduced him to Colonel Carrington, Tom Blake, and Miss Holcomb, Isobel's cousin. He liked the colonel, who was white-haired and as straight as a reed. He admired the lithe grace of Margaret Holcomb's slender figure, and the almost Spanish beauty of her flashing dark eyes and black hair. About Blake there was something that repelled Thorpe from the start. It was not until the next day that he learned that Blake was to marry Isobel Carrington.

Wild horses could not have kept Thorpe from revealing his love to Isobel, though the revelation came quite unconsciously. In the weeks that they spent together he uttered no word that betrayed him; but he knew that she understood, and that it troubled her.

Once or twice he had caught her looking at him in a way that sent the red blood pounding through his veins until it seemed as if they would burst. Each time he fought himself back into sanity. Isobel belonged to Blake, and even though the eyes she turned upon him possessed strange depths at times, she offered him no encouragement.

With Thorpe she was like a child, questioning him in a thousand ways about the trees, the flowers, and the wild things about them—and always with her pure eyes looking at him steadily, as if within him she saw something that was strange and bewildering to her, which his words might interpret. Thorpe saw in her only purity and beauty, the very spirit of the things that had risen up out of the wilderness for him; and without putting it into words he told her this.

He hated Blake. One day he happened upon the man unexpectedly in the company of Margaret Holcomb; and what Thorpe saw made his muscles twitch with a desire to thrash the fellow, to drag him to Isobel's feet and force him to confess his perfidy.

After this, the dislike of each man for the other was quite apparent. Isobel noted

it; her lips set a little tighter when they met, and she watched their faces.

II

ON this last day of his service with Carrington, Jack Thorpe thought of these things—and many others. It was late in the afternoon. From the crest of a rocky ridge he looked out over a vast reach of forest and swamp and plain, red and gold in the setting sun.

Earlier that day he and Isobel had come to the top of the ridge—alone. A few minutes later Blake had followed, with a suspicious look in his face. Thorpe had told Isobel of his life down South, and why he loved the wilderness. He could not understand why he had revealed himself at the last moment.

He saw the girl's wonderful blue eyes now, as they had looked at him then, a little surprised, a little disappointed. When he told her that the next day he was leaving for Lac du Brochet, and that he had planned to spend the winter on the Arctic coast, he failed to notice that there was less color in her cheeks than he had ever seen there before.

To-night Colonel Carrington would pay him off, as he would pay any other guide, and an amused smile passed over Thorpe's lips. After that—

Suddenly Thorpe's body grew tense. Across the plain at his feet, scarcely more than a rifle-shot away, there slowly trailed a procession that brought him back to cover with the quickness of a cat. In the lead was a cow moose. Behind her followed a yearling calf, and fifty paces in the rear of the calf was a magnificent bull.

It was the bull that held Thorpe's eyes. As the splendid animal stopped to sniff at the danger-signal in the air, he could not repress a low cry of admiration. Not twice in a lifetime would a hunter look upon such a king among its tribe. Its huge palmed horns gleamed a dull gold in the sun. Thorpe could almost see the sensitive quivering of the huge nostrils which sucked in the man-tainted air that drifted down from the top of the ridge.

Such a spectacle he had sought for the eyes of Isobel Carrington, and hitherto had failed to find; and his heart sank heavily to think that she was not with him now to look upon this epic picture of life in the wilderness.

In another moment his hands were grip-

along the edge of the rock behind which he was concealed. The calf was wounded. He could see one crippled leg dragging behind, and even as he waited, holding his breath in suspense, the little animal lay down.

Thorpe sped swiftly down the opposite side of the ridge. Five minutes later he stood panting before Isobel Carrington, Blake, and Miss Holcomb.

"Quick—come with me!" he cried. "Hurry, if you would like to see something that you will never forget as long as you live!"

III

FROM the crest of the ridge they looked down. The old bull had not moved. He stood like a carved thing of stone in the waning red and gold lights of day. Over the wounded calf stood the mother.

"The little one's about done for," whispered Thorpe in Isobel's ear. "Isn't he magnificent—the old bull?"

He was breathing like a man who had passed through a fight. Isobel looked at him. His lips were parted, his nostrils quivering, his face was aflame with triumph. He did not see the wonderful look that came into her eyes. She touched his hand.

"You love—that!" she whispered.

"It is magnificent!" repeated Thorpe.

He seemed to have no eyes even for her. He scarcely felt the touch of her hand. Isobel looked down into the plain again, with a little catch in her breath, and a wonderful sweetness that was almost a smile hovering about her lips.

The bull had discovered them now. He lowered his pinnacled head and swung in a heavy pace toward the cow and the calf. The cow ran about nervously. The calf staggered to its feet and began to drag itself away, but little faster than a man could walk.

"We can follow them—overtake them—if we wish," said Thorpe. "They will not desert the calf."

He led the way down the ridge, and the retreat became a pursuit. At sight of them the three animals laid their ears a-slant, and the mother shouldered in close to her calf in an effort to quicken its pace. Thorpe had guessed what would happen. The old bull stopped and stood broadside to them. He stood unflinching until they had come within a hundred paces.

The triumph in Thorpe's face was now the madness of joy. The old bull was revealing to Isobel Carrington more than he could ever have told her of the wilderness. He stood forth heroic and unafraid in the face of death, greater in his majesty than man, the living spirit of that savage and unsinning world which had claimed Thorpe as its own.

In this moment Thorpe looked at Isobel. Her face was white. Her eyes shone like blue diamonds.

"You understand?" he questioned.

"Yes. He is giving them a chance—to escape. I understand now why you love—that!"

Her eyes swept the plains and the golden ridges.

Close beside them Blake's voice breathed hoarsely:

"Be quiet! I'm going to take a shot! I wouldn't miss that head for a thousand dollars!"

He leveled his rifle. Quick as a flash Thorpe caught the barrel and twisted it skyward.

"And I wouldn't see him killed for ten thousand!" he exclaimed. "You're not going to shoot him, Blake!"

A steady glitter shot into Blake's eyes. Before he could speak, Margaret Holcomb had taken the gun. For the first time Thorpe observed her. She met his eyes squarely, her red lips curling contemptuously. Never had he seen her eyes more flashingly beautiful.

"You need not quarrel over him," she said.

She sprang a step ahead of them, and fired. Only Thorpe knew that the bullet took effect. The old bull finched, and for an instant his defiant head trembled. Then he turned and paced slowly toward the cow and the calf. Fifty yards behind them he stopped again, and once more turned his huge body broadside between them and danger.

Swifter than the others, Margaret Holcomb had followed. As she stopped to poise herself again, Blake's automatic rifle at her shoulder, a thrill of admiration, which even his repugnance for her act could not repress, shot through Thorpe. Never had he seen a woman more dangerously beautiful than this girl in her excitement. The rich coils of her hair had loosened, her cheeks glowed like fire, her slender form swayed like a reed stirred by the wind.

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Blake was close beside her when she fired again. Once more Thorpe saw the old bull finch, and a moment later he went to his knees. He was up in an instant, facing them squarely now, his great head held high—while beyond them, retreating in safety, the cow and her calf were nearing the edge of the timber.

"Shoot for his chest!" cried Blake. "Shoot—before he turns!"

Fairly to the center of that massive breast Margaret Holcomb's third bullet sped with its death-sting. The old bull turned, tottered for a few steps, and plunged down upon his fore-knees.

The cow and the calf had reached the timber in safety. The bull's work was done. With a mighty effort he regained his feet again, and followed, red trails of blood streaming behind him. His pride and strength were almost gone. His regal head drooped to a level with his shoulders, and Thorpe heard the deep, heavy panting which told that a bullet had gone close to his lungs.

An exultant cry rose from Margaret Holcomb's lips, as she saw the effect of her shots. She leveled her gun again, almost pointblank.

"Stop!"

It was a voice such as none of them had ever heard before. Squared in front of the rifle's muzzle stood Isobel Carrington, her small hands clenched, her form bent a little forward, her blue eyes blazing with an anger that startled even her high-blooded cousin. She seized the gun, her bosom panting like that of a creature close run to death.

"And you—you call yourself a woman!" she cried. Her eyes drove in arrows of menace at Blake. "And you—you call yourself a man!"

For ten seconds Thorpe looked on the tableau. Isobel's face was as white as death. Slowly the color faded from Margaret Holcomb's. Blake made no move, spoke no word. They heard the bull crashing through the bushes at the edge of the timber, but no eye turned to see the last of his retreat.

Blake turned a little, and his eyes met Thorpe's. He could no longer repress his hatred as he saw the triumph and the love in Thorpe's face. He advanced a step, an insulting word on his lips, which reached the ears of Isobel Carrington. In his rage he would have struck, but Thorpe met him

first with a terrific blow to the jaw that sent him reeling to the earth.

He staggered to his feet with an oath; but it was Isobel Carrington who faced him now. She pointed over the back trail.

"Go!" she commanded, in a voice that was so low it was scarcely more than a whisper. "Go—and take Margaret with you! And you—!" She turned to Thorpe, and pointed toward the gold-capped ridge that swung toward the setting sun. "You go—that way!"

She saw the adoration in Thorpe's eyes as he bowed his head and turned away. From the foot of the ridge he looked back. Blake and Miss Holcomb were crossing the plain. Where he had left her stood Isobel Carrington. He could see the sun gleaming in her hair. He thought that she was looking in his direction.

He turned once more, and went over the ridge.

IV

FOR a little while Isobel Carrington stood motionless in the open plain. She saw Thorpe disappear. She watched Blake and her cousin until they reached the foot of the ridge. Then, as she noted that Blake had stopped, as if about to return, she moved swiftly along the trail taken by the old bull and his family.

Her little hands were still clenched, and her breath came almost sobbingly. In those few thrilling moments how despicable Margaret and Blake had been! Anger, humiliation, a mad desire to be alone, possessed her. She knew that if Blake came to her now she would say things which she could not recall.

She almost ran when she came to the edge of the low bush. She saw the narrow trail where the moose had turned in, stained with that telltale ribbon of blood, and she followed it blindly. It led over another ridge, crossed other trails beaten down by the hoofs and paws of wild things, growing wilder and wilder as she advanced; but she experienced no sensation of fear.

She came to a second ridge, fully a mile from the plain, and watched the last red glow of the sun as it died away behind forests without end to the west. Her blood cooled, her lips lost their tenseness, the color flowed back into her face. Her hair had fallen half unbound, and now she swept it free so that it flowed in a glory of softly fading gold about her, as she stood

there and looked down upon the day slowly ebbing into night.

At last she understood Thorpe and Thorpe's world. Her heart sang with a strange new note which was half pleasure and half pain—the stingless pain which comes to one with the immeasurable loneliness and sadness of the forest world as it fades away in the silence and awesomeness of night. It was the pain that filled Thorpe's heart at the thought of her going. She, too, would miss something when she went back. She would miss this northern world. The memory of it would haunt her always; for down there, where she looked, things must be very near to God—as God had intended that things should be.

She was a little startled at the gloom below her when she turned to descend the ridge; but she was not frightened. For the first time she was unafraid of the forests.

The trail grew darker. Under the heavy spruce it was almost black, and her breath came quicker as she fancied the danger of losing her way. But that would be impossible, she told herself. She had come up this trail—it would take her back. Then she remembered the cross-trails that she had thoughtlessly passed, and shuddered a little.

Half an hour turned fear into conviction. She had taken one of the wrong trails, and her breath trembled in a little sobbing cry. Still she told herself that she was not afraid—and went on.

A little more, and she came out into an open; but it was not the open of the plain. Huge walls of rock rose on each side of her; ahead there was a mountain of it. She stopped with her hands clutching at her breast.

It was then that she heard a sound—that deep, heavy breathing of the wounded bull!

Human voice could have been scarcely more welcome to her than this evidence of the nearness of the splendid old hero whom she had tried to save from a pitiless death out on the plain. She stared into the gloom ahead of her, ready to cry out that Indian name of Oko-kan, which Thorpe had told her meant the king of northern beasts—the moose; the name to which he once responded, in the days of old, as sheep come to the call of their masters.

"Oko-kan! Oko-kan! Oh, Oko-kan!" Isobel whispered.

The words died in her own ears, and she

reached out gropingly with her hands as she advanced.

She came to a rock, and stopped. It afforded her a rest, and she leaned upon it a little wearily, listening to the sound that was so near. She breathed more easily, and then, with a sudden choking sensation in her throat, she realized the pain of it—the agony of it. It was like a great breath sobbing just beyond her. Her fingers tightened against the edge of the rock as she thought of Margaret Holcomb again.

"Oko-kan! Oko-kan!"

She spoke louder, tremulously, and peered farther over into the gloom, as if an answer might come from there.

"Oko-kan!"

From far away in the night there came another sound—the loud hallooing of a man's voice. In a moment it was followed by a rifle-shot—one, two, three. They were signaling for her. Thorpe had told her what three shots from a rifle meant when one was lost.

She pursed her lips to send forth that shrill feminine coo-ee which carries with the clearness of a nightingale's note—and caught herself. The sobbing breath of the old bull sent surging back into her the fierce rebellion that had conquered her on the plain. Defiantly she closed her lips, and gazed up to where the soft glow of the early moon began to tip the crags. With the moon and heroic old Oko-kan she was safe; she would punish Blake and her cousin by arousing their fears.

Even as she made up her mind, she crept a little higher up the rock. She heard a distant howl that she thought was made by a dog. In a few moments it was answered from a different quarter, and then from another. She shivered, and huddled herself up close; but it was only a part of the wilderness night—the wolf-howl. She had heard it before.

The moon rose swiftly. It crept around the bald cap of the highest ridge, and the flood-lights of the wonderful night lit up the space wherein she had found refuge. So close that she could have tossed a pebble to him lay the old bull. Still beyond, half hidden in a shadow, were the cow and the calf.

Even now, Oko-kan lay stretched with his massive head guarding the narrow trail that led between the rock-ridges. She could see the glow of his eyes. He must have seen the marvelous shimmer of the

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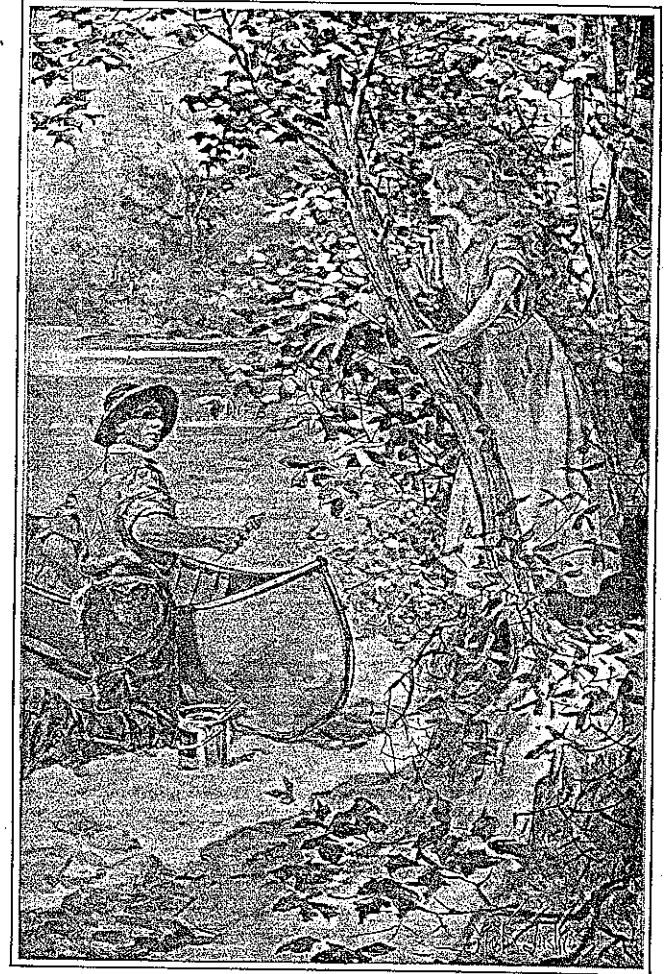
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V

For a long time they remained thus. The firing and shouting were repeated at intervals, approaching until they reached the point where Isobel must have turned from the main trail, and then receding. Half an hour later the sounds were so faint that she could scarcely hear them.

She smiled to herself. After all, there was a certain thrilling pleasure in her little adventure. She had carefully noted the direction traveled by the voice and the shots, and felt sure that she could find the post.

For many minutes she had noticed that the wolf-hoofs were drawing nearer, and that the old bull was beginning to show signs of nervousness. He stirred uneasily. At times he held his sobbing breath. He raised his drooping head until his splendid horns no longer lay along his back, but gleamed erect in the moonlight.

Back in the shadow the cow made strange sounds. She moo-eed softly; and even Isobel knew that she was talking to her mate, and telling him that she was afraid. The old bull responded with a gurgling snort, and the gravel and stones rattled under his hoofs as he clambered to his feet. He straightened himself with a long, deep groan of anguish, and for a few moments he stood with his head down.

The wolf-cry had ceased for a time, but now it came again in a long, wailing chorus, and much nearer. Oko-kan's head shot erect. Majestic—dying—he stepped forth grandly toward that narrow trail between the ridge-walls. The cow scrambled to her feet. Isobel could hear her urging her calf back into the deeper gloom.

A new sense of impending tragedy oppressed her. She crept still higher up the rough face of the rock. She had drawn from Thorpe many stories of the man-killing wolves. She measured the distance down the slope of the rock, and choked a little when she saw how easy of ascent it would be for the fierce beasts closing in on her from out of the white night.

The cry had ceased again, and suddenly old Oko-kan turned and came back until he stood almost beside the rock. She could see his eyes burning like dull coals of fire as he swung his massive head for an instant toward her. Then tense, waiting, he faced the trail.

10

Something drew Isobel's eyes in that direction. She stared, without seeing anything save the white rocks and the trembling moonlight shadows. She could hear her heart swiftly beating off the seconds.

Then, so suddenly and so quietly that the thrill of it seemed to still her heart's beating, she saw strange gray shadows slipping up from out of the chaos beyond. From under her there came a mighty rush, and the bull was among them. She heard the crash of his huge horns among the rocks, and saw his great hulk tossing and tearing where the gray shadows had been. She heard the snapping of jaws, and a sudden yelping howl of pain as Oko-kan's knife-edged forefeet ripped the life from one of his white-fanged foes.

Breathless and erect, clutching her hair back from her face, Isobel Carrington looked down upon the stirring fight. Never in all her life had fear been more thoroughly a stranger to her than in these thrilling moments. Her fingers found a piece of loose rock, and with a shrill cry to Oko-kan she flung it toward that leaping, heaving gray mass.

Yard by yard the struggle drew farther away from her, until she no longer saw it, but could only hear the sounds of it. The snorting of the bull rose more fiercely; his horns crashed; she could hear his thundering rushes, the tearing of the gravel and earth under his feet. And then the sounds ceased as suddenly as they had begun, and back through the white moonlight paced Oko-kan, his head towering in majestic triumph until he seemed taller than the rock itself.

"Oko-kan!" she called down. "Oko-kan, my old hero!"

The bull ran back to the shadows. She heard the sniffing of the frightened calf, the low, moaning monotone of the mother, the snorting encouragement and triumph of Oko-kan.

There came again the shouting of a man's voice to her, and this time she answered it—answered it for Oko-kan as well as for herself.

Startled, she saw again the gray shadows in the open, and again the old bull rushed past her to the battle. It was longer, fiercer, more terrible this time, and from the top of the rock she made a cup of her hands and sent out call after call for help.

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the battle in the moonlight ceased, and Oko-kan came back. He came lamely—staggering. His giant body was bent almost to the earth. His mouth was only a low, gasping gurgle. He fell to the rock he crashed down, and a last terrible moan lay still. "Oko-kan! Oko-kan!"

As the girl went down. "Oko-kan!" The old fear gripped at her heart. The massive body of the old bull lay without movement. She no longer heard the deep thing.

"Oko-kan!" Her feet touched the ground. She took a step, and then another. Her breath came heavily now, and her hands reached out. Suddenly, at last, she stood at the dead man's side.

"Oko-kan!"

VI

A shout came from very near, and she turned to see it. Then, her heart bursting with grief and sobbing grief, she fell upon her knees beside the lifeless head of Oko-kan and flung her arms about the shaggy head that was bowed forever.

It was thus that John Thorpe found Isobel when he came up through the break between the rocky walls. When he saw the golden sheen of Isobel's hair spread like a mantle over the neck of Oko-kan, he thought, at first, that both of them were dead; but Isobel turned her face to him as her name rang in a fearful cry from his lips, and through the glory of her hair she reached up her arms to him.

"Jack!" He could not believe. He stood a step back from her when he had raised her to her feet, and his face was whiter than the white rocks at the look which he saw in her eyes—the glory of love shimmering through tears.

"Jack, he is dead!" Her arms were stretched out toward him. Slowly, as full understanding came to him, he drew her nearer and nearer, until her face was so close that he felt the caress of her sweet breath.

"Isobel! Isobel! You don't mean that I—I—"

"Yes," she whispered, "I do! I mean that I never want to go back again, never, never! I want to live here always—here, with you—and Oko-kan—and God!"

GUITAR SONG

Down the stream the wind and willow
Weave a roundelay divine;
Far at sea the breeze and billow
In a barcarole entwine;
Billow, willow, wind, and breeze
Blend in laugh and sigh;
Harken to my strings' low pleas—
Why not thou and I?

In the forest fay and flower
Chant a canticle of calm;
In the rainbow sun and shower
Blend in perfect, raptured psalm.

"I THOUGHT
lie.
any
an' I've
take it!"
She pulled
and hand
hands as i
"A sea
"For A
signed for
down a he
leg, an' h
him. I've
who you a
a man who
—an' he'll
at Halifax.
next place,
in' to writ
about that.
can tell me
you've gone
"Only a
"Well, t
lars of mi
understand
at five per
If you need