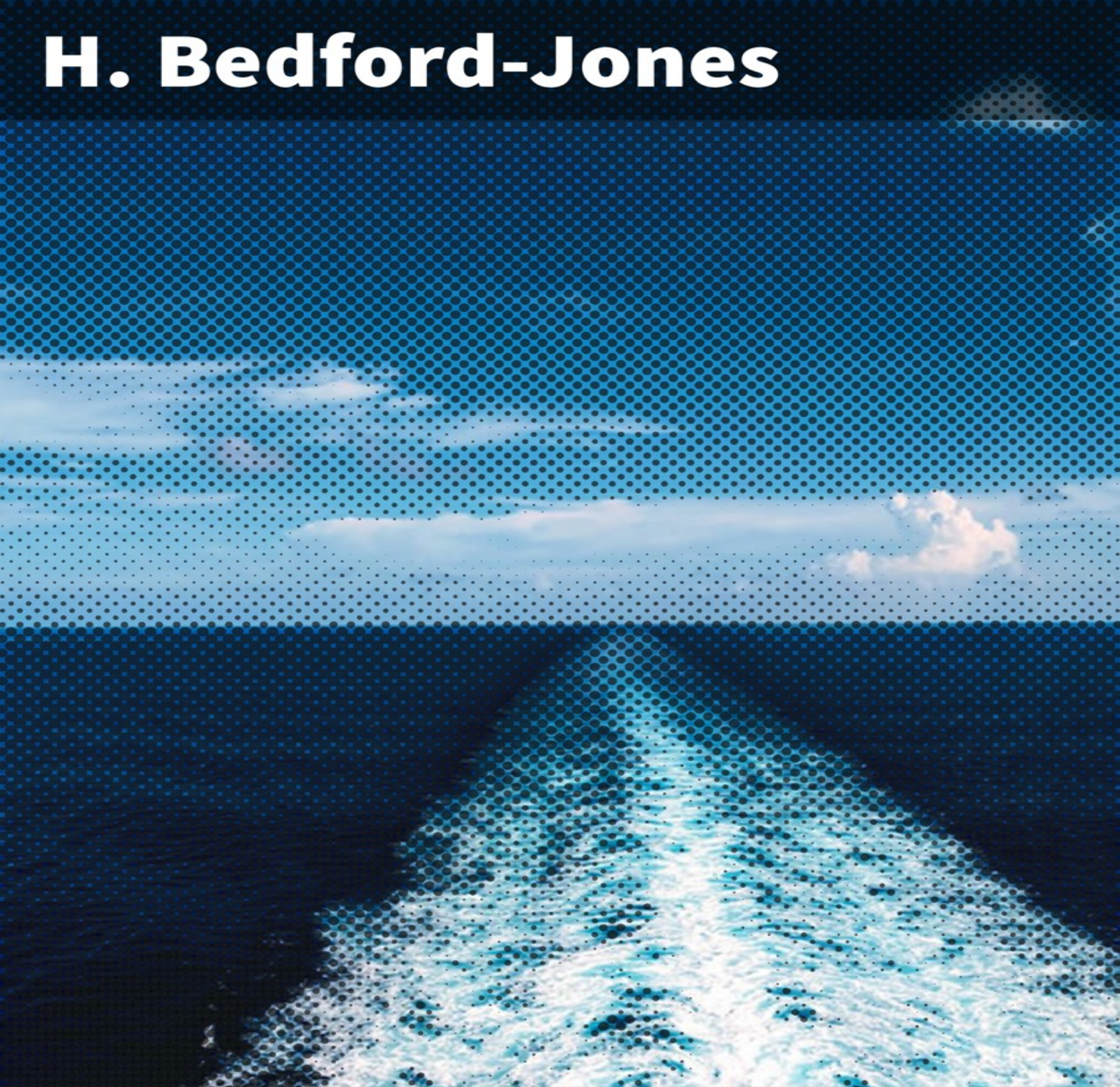


H. Bedford-Jones



*The Cruise
of the Pelican*

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CHAPTER I

BOATSWAIN JOE

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Tom Dennis sat on a printer's stool beside a very dirty window which dimly illumined his figure, and stared at the gloom surrounding him. His rawboned face was dejected; his angular body slumped despondently. In his hand was a little sheaf of papers.

It was five-thirty in the afternoon. Long since, the grist of evening papers had gone through the big press; the rollers had been washed and retired; the men had gone home. It was Saturday night, and the week's work was done. So was *The Marshville Clarion*, as Tom Dennis cheerlessly admitted to himself.

The high-school lad who assisted Dennis in gathering local items and filling the columns of *The Clarion* had not returned as usual from the Saturday baseball game to write up his notes from a fresh memory. Dennis had instructed him not to return until Monday—and not to return then unless sent for.

Silence and the darkness of departing day lay funereally upon the big back room. Presses and stones and type-racks filled the floor. Always dingy and dark, this room now seemed to feel the approach of dissolution. The smell of printing-ink hung upon the air like incense strewn by dead hands. *The Clarion* had issued its own obituary.

Tom Dennis suddenly moved. To the dim light of the unwashed window he held the papers in his hand. They were bills. Each of them was stamped "Paid". As he looked at them, Tom Dennis uttered a mirthless bitter laugh.

"Paid!" he said, his voice ringing hollowly in the emptiness of the big back room. "Paid, by heavens—and not a cent to spare! And the bank holds a mortgage on this plant! I can sell the typewriters for fifty dollars; I'll have to do it to get out of town!"

The outer door, the door of the front office, banged, and there was a heavy tread that ceased abruptly. Tom Dennis paid no heed to it; he sensed that someone had entered, but it was of no concern to him what passed in the outer office.

"Done!" he said morosely. "I'm done! It's been the dickens of a pull, this year has—and now I'm done."

He was right: he was done, and he knew it.

Every newspaper man dreams of running, some day, a paper all his own, dreams of taking over some "small-town" paper, dreams of running it his own way and indulging his own ideas of how a paper should be run, dreams of wealth and fame in consequence. Once in a thousand cases, perhaps, the dream comes true.

Tom Dennis was at the end of his own particular dream. A college man, a star reporter on a Chicago daily, he had saved his money, and, at twenty-three, had become the owner of *The Clarion* in the sleepy little town of Marshville.

A meteoric year had ensued. Tom Dennis had gone to work to wake up Marshville—and he had succeeded. He had

wakened Marshville to a lively animosity, a deadly resentment that a stranger should come in here and give advice. Marshville knew that it was a sleepy, dying, vicious, ingrowing little town—and Marshville wanted to be just that kind of town! So, when Tom Dennis tried to root out the viciousness and decay, Marshville was angered.

Six months passed, and the last of Tom Dennis' money was gone. He mortgaged the whole property, lock, stock, and barrel, and went on fighting. He had gleams of success, and the letters of Florence Hathaway had inspired him to renewed efforts, but now the end had come. He must either borrow on his personal credit, which was not extensive enough to carry him very long, or else go under.

"A smart Yankee packet lay out in the bay,
To me way hay, o-*hi*-o!
A-waiting for a fair wind to get under way,
A long time ago!"

The voice—a musing rumbling voice—came from the outer office, and it was a voice strange to Tom Dennis. But he scarce heard the words, or the swinging air. His hand had clenched upon the sheaf of papers, and his head had lowered. Chin to breast, he was in the agony of defeat; despite himself, despite his rugged features, slow tears were groping on his cheeks.

Those tears were not for himself, not for the fact of his failure here. A year ago Tom Dennis would have taken his defeat with a laugh and a joke, and he had not changed. It

was not self-misery which drew those man's tears to his cheeks.

He was thinking of Florence Hathaway. He had found her here in the *Clarion* office a year ago, a society reporter; she was then supporting her slowly-dying mother. Two years previously her father, Captain Miles Hathaway, had been lost at sea somewhere in the Pacific; the girl had brought her mother back to Marshville, the mother's old home town, and there the mother had died. This had been three months after the coming of Tom Dennis.

For another three months, Florence Hathaway had stayed on with the *Clarion*—largely for love of Tom Dennis. Then had come the offer of a teacher's position in a private school in Chicago, and she had accepted the offer.

Not that Dennis wanted her to accept—far from it! They had argued it all out that night, under the willow trees by the river. Her hand in his, the girl had made Tom Dennis face a few hard facts. She was the rare kind who can make a man realize things.

"Tom, dear," she had said gently, "another year will see you firmly established here in Marshville. Until then we can't dare marry; it isn't fair to you! Get clear of financial worries first. Not that I care about the money, Tom, but I do care so much about you; and now you're talking about mortgaging the paper, and it's bearing you down."

"And if I fail?"

"Then come to me in Chicago, and we'll start fresh—together."

"But why go there? Stay here where you can help me most! It's your society stuff that does most good——"

"No, dear, Marshville hates you; you must conquer or be conquered, and you don't know how terribly bitter Marshville can be. It's like any small town, Tom. They're all against you now, and if I stay on the paper, they'll be talking—about us. Besides, I don't like the place. I want to be in Chicago a little while, mistress of myself, enjoying a little bit of real life and real things. I'll come back to you here, or you'll come to me there, Tom, and——"

Now, as he sat in the dingy back room, Tom Dennis thought over these things, and his pride revolted within him. He could not go back to his old job, admitting that he had made a failure of his paper, admitting that he was good for nothing better than a reporter's job. He could not go to Florence Hathaway—a failure! He had tasted of freedom, and now it seemed to him that a reporter's was a dog's life. He would not go back to it. He would not ask her to face it all, even though she might be willing—

"We didn't get a drink for seventeen days,
To me way hay, o-*hi*-o!
And nobody cared if she hung in stays,
A *long* time ago!"

Dimly the words penetrated the consciousness of Tom Dennis, roused him slightly. Who was in the outer office? Well, no matter. The bank owned it now—tight-lipped old banker Dribble up the street, who owned everything.

"It wasn't a fair fight, maybe," muttered Tom Dennis, sudden storm in his eyes. "They lied to me right and left.

The advertising contracts were faked on me. They tried to stab me in the back whenever they had a chance—and they did it, too! But there's no use sobbing over all that."

He would have to leave town, of course—the sooner the better. He might as well take the evening train to Chicago and make his plans to start afresh. There was nothing to hold him here; everything was paid, even to the interest on the mortgage. The mortgage still had six months to run.

"Why not?" Dennis suddenly came to his feet. "I can shut up this coop, and they can't touch it for six months! The property may deteriorate, of course; mice will eat the rollers, and the ink will dry up, and the presses won't be oiled—but that's old Dribble's lookout, not mine! I still have six months left! A stroke of luck——"

"Ahoy, matey!" billowed a voice. "Ahoy, Dennis! Where are you, skipper?"

A monstrous voice was that, a roaring thunderous voice that filled the dingy old back room with rolling waves of sound. Startled, Tom Dennis reached to the nearest electric bulb, switched it on, and directed the light toward the door of the outer office.

There, standing in the doorway, he saw a surprising figure. The stranger was two inches taller than Dennis, who himself stood six feet one. Not particularly well dressed was the intruder—rough blue serge, manifestly hand-me-downs, and a white soft shirt with loosely-knotted cravat. But the face—the face was the thing!

A peculiar face it was, for in it was emphasized the trait common to most men. Its left side was regular enough. The right brow, however, was uptwisted satanically; the right

side of the mouth was down-twisted in a leer. Seldom had Tom Dennis seen this dissimilarity between the two sides of a man's face so pronounced. Aside from this, it was a massive strong face, lighted by two very direct, piercing, predatory eyes of light-blue, and crowned by flaming red hair.

"Ha!" said the stranger, coming forward. "You're Dennis?"

"You're right." And a sour smile twisted the lips of the newspaper man. "My name is Dennis, right enough. You've got another bill to present?"

The other halted, and stared at him.

"Bill?" he repeated. "Bill? Paying your bills, are you?"

Dennis laughed shortly. "You bet. I'm clearing out of here to-night. Well, how much is it? Guess I can scrape up enough to pay it; if not, there's a typewriter out in front you can take along. Thought I'd cleared 'em all off, though——"

The stranger threw back his head and laughed. That laugh was a roaring billow of sound, as though the red-head were accustomed to fling his laughter into the teeth of a singing gale.

"Ho-ho!" he cried boisterously. "Slipping your cable, hey? Gone under, hey? Another poor swab who can't beat the shyster law-clerks and has gone under! Well, do what I did, matey. I was in the same boat myself, oncet—and I run off to sea! Strike me blind if it wasn't the makin' of me! Now, if you'll take my advice and do the same thing——"

"What do you want?" snapped Dennis suddenly. "I'm not asking for your advice, my friend. Have you business with me?"

"Aye." The other came forward, hand extended. His voice was conciliating. "Come, no harm done by a bit o' fun, matey! None intended, none took. My name's Ericksen; they calls me Boatswain Joe, mostly, though I've got a quartermaster's ticket in me oilskin. I want a bit o' talk, if you have the time."

"I'm rich in time," responded Dennis. "Take a seat."

As they shook hands, Dennis felt the palm of Ericksen to be horny, rough with great calluses; but the thumb lay over the back of his own fingers with smooth pressure. A sailor, then, and one used to handling lines! That explained the odd snatches of lingo. But what was a sailor doing here, in the middle of the United States?

Ericksen eased himself up on a high stool, stuffed loose tobacco from his pocket into a pipe-bowl and struck a match. His piercing, arrogant, light-blue eyes surveyed Tom Dennis with a comprehensive scrutiny.

"I hear," he said abruptly, a cloud of smoke issuing from his lips, "I hear you and Miss Hathaway are engaged to be married."

His voice was still conciliatory, rather bearing an air of a forced whine, and it was entirely belied by those fierce predatory eyes. Tom Dennis flushed angrily.

"What are you driving at?" he demanded. "What have my private affairs to do with you?"

"Don't flare up, matey," responded the other. "I'm comin' to the p'int, steerin' a safe course meantime. 'Keep an eye on your charts, boatswain,' says the skipper, 'and look out for shoals among them land-sharks.' So I'm doin' it. Of

course, knowing the inside of the country pretty well, comin' from Wisconsin way like I do, I'm able to navigate better'n the others would be; but just the same, I'm mindin' my wheel mighty close. 'No steerin' by the wind this cruise,' says the skipper, and right he was."

This was all Greek to Tom Dennis.

"Well, what do you want with me?" he reiterated.

"You answer my question, matey," returned the other calmly.

"None of your business, then," snapped Dennis.

To his surprise, Ericksen only chuckled good-humouredly, and slapped his knee as though at a good joke.

"I knowed it! You are, right enough. Goin' to Chicago to get spliced, maybe?"

The hand of Dennis closed on a printer's key, but Ericksen interposed.

"Here, don't start no rumpus, matey! You see, I got to know the chart before I can lay my course. Ain't that reasonable? I got to this here town this afternoon, lookin' for Miss Hathaway, and first one, then another, tells me she's gone to Chicago, but they don't know exactly where. They said to come here an' find you, you bein' supposed to know for private reasons. Ain't that statin' it plain and unoffensive? That's me every time. 'Mind your jaw-tackle, boatswain,' says the skipper. 'Be mild an' gentle.' And I am."

The sailor grinned. So cheerful and white-toothed was that grin, that Tom Dennis felt impelled to laugh, but the arrogant, light-blue eyes steadied him.

"You want Miss Hathaway's address—is that it?"

"Part of it, matey," responded Ericksen. "Only part of it!"

CHAPTER II

NEWS FROM NOWHERE

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Florence Hathaway was extremely astonished when, upon Sunday morning, she heard the voice of Tom Dennis on the telephone, and received a request to join him downtown for noon dinner.

"Come up to the school, Tom!" she returned. "You can dine in hall as my guest. And what brought you to town?"

"Can't talk now, Florence. And I'll have to refuse your invitation—because we'll all three have to dine downtown. Better make it the 'Royton'; then we can have comparative privacy."

"All three?" she echoed. "Who's with you?"

"A man who has news of your father, dear. He's to join us at the 'Royton' at one sharp, but I want to see you for a few moments first. Why not meet me at the Art Institute about twelve-thirty? I'll be in the Japanese Room. Believe me, it's important!"

"News of—father? Why, yes! I'll be there on time, Tom. Japanese Room!"

So, at the hour when the galleries were totally deserted, Tom Dennis was striding up and down in the Japanese Room, past the cases filled with lacquer ware. In his present mood of frowning meditation, his features looked almost forbidding; they were strong features, rugged with an uncompromising virility. Looking at them, one could

understand how this man, unaided, had first worked his way through college and had later gone to the top of an overcrowded profession.

On time almost to the minute, Florence Hathaway appeared. Dennis met her at the door, his hand to hers; a swift glance around, and he bent his lips to hers.

"This way, dear!" he said, turning. "There'll be no interruptions then."

Together they made their way outside to one of the little balconies overlooking the smoky park and lake front. Brushing off two of the chairs, Tom Dennis set them by the stone rail.

"What on earth is it all about, Tom?" asked the girl wonderingly.

"Me, first—then you," smiling he filled his pipe and lighted it. Then he set about his tale, beginning with his own situation of the previous afternoon, and passing on to the coming of Boatswain Joe. He described his own hopeless case very bluntly and frankly.

Florence Hathaway did not interrupt him, but sat in silence, her eyes fastened upon his rugged face, reading there the signs of his past worries and failure. They were fine eyes, those that dwelt upon him with love and tenderness. An artist might have said that they were too large for her face, that their glowing brown depths held too passionate a fervor, too calmly poised a radiance, to match her almost colourless cheeks. By no rule could Florence Hathaway be adjudged beautiful; and yet Marshville had

missed her more than all its other absent daughters put together.

In her eyes, indeed, lay the brave and tender soul of Florence Hathaway. Frail seemed her slender, almost girlish body; yet one who gazed into her level eyes knew that hers was an indomitable spirit—a heritage perhaps, from that lost father whose iron soul had battled the men and winds and seas of half the world.

"Then you've left Marshville for good?" she asked quietly when Dennis paused.

"Yes." He nodded curtly. "The place will be shut for six months. If I've not returned by that time, if I've not struck some lucky vein, old Dribble can foreclose his mortgage and be blessed! Of course, I'm not gambling on striking it rich in a hurry; it's just a long chance that still remains. Well, now that's settled, let's get on about your friend Ericksen. You never heard of anyone by that name?"

"No. He may have known my father——"

"I'm coming to that. Ericksen had come from the Pacific Coast to find you—in person; mark that down as Point One, upper case! Why in person, when a letter or telegram would have fetched you? Point One—Query! I don't like that fellow's looks.

"Point Two: he tells a very fishy sort of tale—namely, that your father was not lost at sea at all, but was rescued——"

"What?" broke in the girl, leaning forward. Again Dennis nodded, imperturbable.

"Yes, if you care to believe it. I don't! He says that your father was taken into Unalaska by some natives who had found him on one of the Aleut islands—he was then down