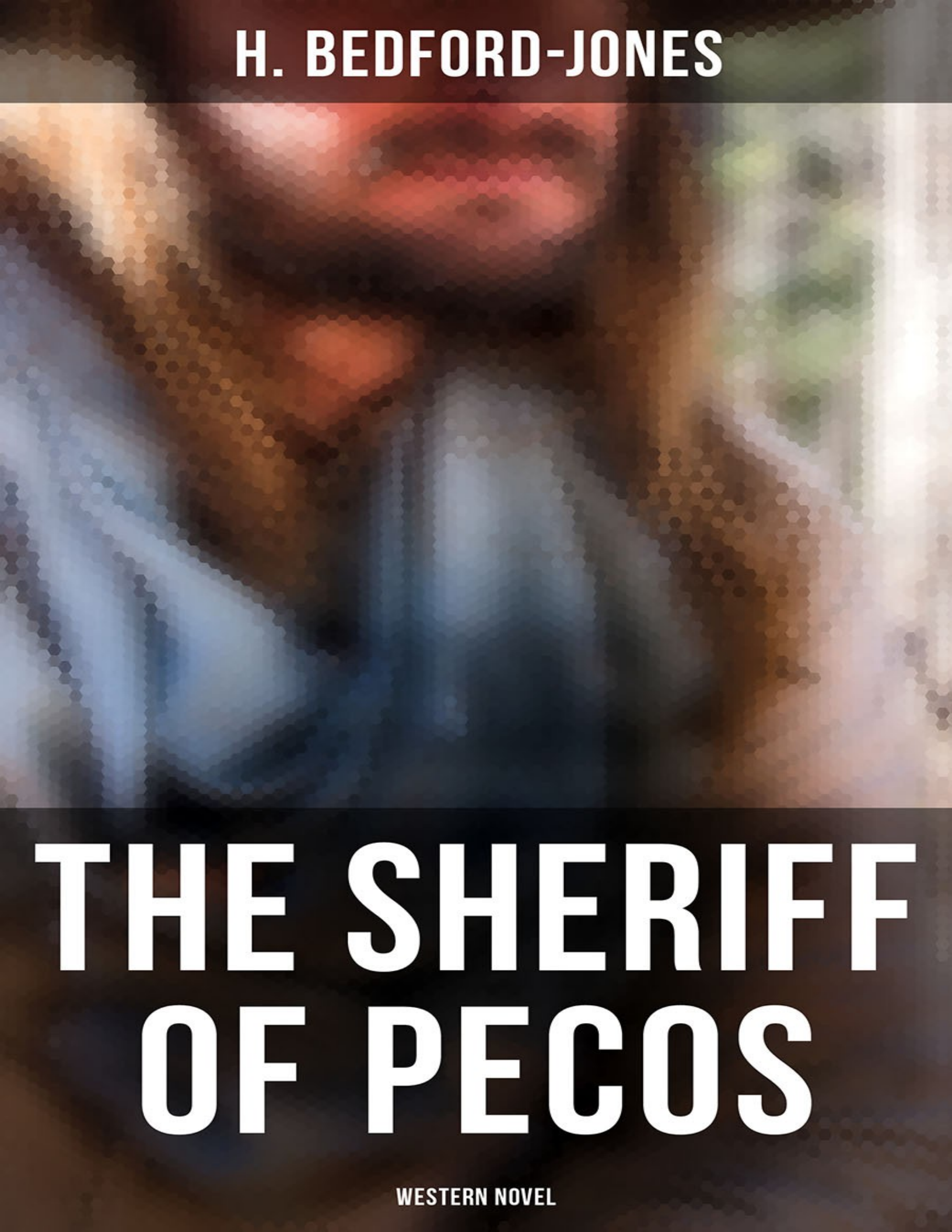




H. BEDFORD-JONES

THE SHERIFF OF PECOS

WESTERN NOVEL

H. Bedford-Jones

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CHAPTER I

JACK ROBINSON

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Besides "Galway" Mike, who was reading the Pahrump County *News* behind the bar, there were three men in Mike's Place. One of the three was a stranger. He sat drowsily at the corner table, hat pulled over his eyes, whisky untasted. The other two stood at the bar.

The tall, dangerous man who had a rattler skin about his white Stetson was speaking:

"It's like this, Murphy. Right after the old man died, young Shumway went to the pen. He was caught dead to rights with a runnin' iron, y' understand——"

"So I heard." The large, red-faced man chuckled. "So I heard, Buck."

Buck grunted. "Well, Frank Shumway went to the pen; I was sorry, too——"

"Oh, sure!" commented Murphy sarcastically. "Made you weep a lot, huh?"

"Shut your blamed mouth!" retorted Buck, acid in his voice. "Here's the point: Young Shumway had mortgaged the hull place to some cussed bank over in Laredo County—some bank the ol' man had knowed. Well, he give Estella the money, y' understand, and went to the pen. Estella, she's run the place since, but it ain't paid her."

"She's his sister, eh?" Mr. Murphy's red, aggressive features spread into a greasy grin. "Well, I reckon it ain't paid her, with you fer a neighbor! But go on, go on."

"Don't let your brain git too agile, Murphy," said Buck, tossing down his whisky and pouring another drink. "The

place has run down. All she's got there now is Miguel Cervantes and his woman, helpin' her. Not a head o' stock left."

"You done well, then," put in Murphy, who stood in no awe of his companion evidently. "You sure done well! Ol' Shumway had a powerful lot o' cattle. Least, he had when I was down here, time the boy got caught and sent over the road——"

"Times have changed since then," said Buck hastily. "As I say, Stella can't make the place pay, in spite of everything. Cervantes——"

"Done heard of him in the Panhandle. Ain't he the greaser with a big rep——"

Buck emitted a lurid oath.

"He's the one, all right—the cussed greaser! Got a rep, and everybody's scared to lay into him. Well, they lost stock, y' understand; the place is run down; and now it's near time for the mortgage to be paid—which it won't."

Murphy touched his companion's arm cautiously, and glanced at the bartender.

"Him?" Buck grinned, then leaned across the bar. "Hey, Mike! Tell my friend Murphy here who owns a half interest in this joint, you understand?"

Galway Mike looked up from his newspaper, grinning. His broad, flat face was unspeakably brutal, its brutality much aided by wide nostrils which at some previous date had been crushed flat and had never entirely recovered their beauty.

He looked at Buck, roughly elegant in his corduroys, fine boots, and handsome gun belt; then he looked at Murphy, whose elegance was more pronounced, but equally rough and ready.

"Same gent that owns the Runnin' Dawg outfit, yer honor," he responded. "More by token, he's the only wan, barrin' yourself, who does be wearin' a coat these days."

Buck, taking a handful of cigars from his corduroy coat pocket, laid them on the bar.

"C'rect, Mike," he assented proudly. "Smoke. And give us that new bottle."

The bartender obeyed. He cocked an eye at the stranger at the table, but the latter had allowed his head to droop. His mouth hung open. He was palpably asleep—dusty, worn out by hard riding, unkempt save for the gun at his hip, which was excellently cared for.

"Now, as I was sayin'," pursued Buck, who was no other than Templeton Buck, owner of the Running Dog and a big man in Pahrump County, "that there mortgage is due. I been keepin' tabs on things, y' understand? The place ain't even able to pay the mortgage interest, and I hear it's been advertised for sale likewise. All of which don't bother me none, because when I got your Denver wire that you'd come, I done bought in the mortgage in your name."

"Oh!" said Murphy, and nodded heavily. "I s'pose you got reason for being so roundabout?"

"Plenty. The reason's Stella, savvy? I ain't aiming to figger none in this, except as the rescue party. Y' understand, the Shumway place controls all the water supply on my east section, and I got to have it; but I got to have Stella, too."

"Oh, I savvy plenty," and Murphy nodded again. "But s'pose anybody with money buys in the place and pays off the mortgage?"

"He won't," said Buck, his thin, high-boned features showing a slight grimace. "I'm havin' it well understood that the place is mine. Nobody in these here parts is goin' to

start buckin' my hand, y' understand? There's only one feller might try it; Sam Fisher, a guy who was a powerful friend of the Shumways in other times. But he's clear down to the other end the State, and I'm havin' him watched."

Murphy had straightened up a trifle.

"You don't mean young Fisher, the deputy sheriff o' Pecos County—him that's goin' to be sheriff there next election? I'll tell the world you'd better watch him. Buck! That gent is one hell ringer. Yes, sir, I've heard of him."

Buck grinned and lifted his glass. "Don't worry. He ain't goin' to butt into this here show, none whatever! That mortgage comes due the first of the month—two weeks. I figger to run her slow until then, watch Fisher so's he can't hear from the girl——"

"Don't monkey with the mails, Buck!" Murphy frowned uneasily.

"I ain't," and the tall rancher chuckled. "I got plenty friends, y' understand. Say, you take it easy here until I see about them hosses, and we'll ride out. Mike, you 'tend to makin' Murphy plumb comfortable, and I'll see you in short order."

Buck left the place.

Murphy leaned over the bar and engaged Galway Mike in low-toned conversation. Of this talk, a few scattered fragments might have reached the ear of the stranger in the corner, had not the latter been utterly relaxed in shameless slumber.

"——that's the gent to be watchin', yer honor—ain't a bad greaser—divil wid a gun, they do be sayin'—some o' the byes ought to be layin' fer him some night——"

The swinging doors opened abruptly, silently. A man stood in the entrance, stepped swiftly to one side, and stood there with his dark-glinting eyes, looking about the interior.

He was tall, rangy, his skin swarthy of hue; he was coated with dust and perspiration. Despite the high, sharp lines of his features, they were much given to smiling. The hair at his temples was gray, and deep lines were chiseled about lips and eyes.

Galway Mike grabbed a towel and began to mop the bar.

"The top o' the mornin' to ye, Miguel Cervantes!" he exclaimed. "What'll it be now?"

Murphy started slightly, turned, and surveyed the new arrival with insolent eyes.

"Thanks, nothing," said Cervantes, speaking perfect English—as indeed he ought to, since his ancestors had lived in the county for a hundred years. "I was looking for someone."

His eyes met those of Murphy. The latter spoke challengingly:

"Meaning me, maybe?"

"No, not you," and Cervantes smiled, seeming to take no heed of the tone and look. "Another gentleman."

He turned away as though to leave. The hand of Murphy dropped like a flash.

At this instant there was a crash from the corner where the stranger had been sitting, followed by a low yell. Murphy abandoned his gun, quick as lightning, and turned. Cervantes also turned. The stranger was standing there, rocking unsteadily on his feet, before his overturned chair.

"Thunderation!" the stranger cried with a perplexed air. "Blamed if I didn't have the worst nightmare you ever heard of, gents; I'm a terrible person for them things! Sure's my name's Jack Robinson, I was goin' through a reg'lar gun fight, and me the most peaceable man ever stepped! Ain't it awful what can happen in your sleep?"

With his hat off and standing erect, he was revealed as a tall, slim young man, garbed in usual puncher style. Beneath his close-clipped reddish hair beamed a brown, laughing face which compelled smiles from those who met the steady eyes. That is, sometimes; behind the smile of those eyes there lurked something deeper.

His gaze met the scowl of Murphy, and forced the scowl into a half smile. Then his eyes went to Cervantes, who was staring open-mouthed.

"Hope I didn't disturb you none, gents," he said apologetically. Then he looked again at Murphy. The smile vanished from his face, which assumed a look of malicious recognition.

"Well, well!" he said briskly. "If here ain't my old friend 'Pincher' Brady, what was asked to leave Montana for his health's sake five years ago——"

"Look out you don't make a mistake, mister," said the voice of Murphy, biting and deadly. "What'd you say your name was?"

"Sure's my name's Jack Robinson, I done made a mistake," said the other at once, and shook his head. "I'm right sorry about it, pardner. You looked a heap like a gent named Brady who was up in Montana one time, but now I see you ain't him a-tall."

"No, he ain't," said Murphy, steadily observing him. "Now you've seen the mistake, let's have a drink, hey?"

"Cigar for mine, thanks." Jack Robinson stepped to the bar, picking up his hat as he came, and his genial smile brought a nod from Mike. He picked up one of the cigars laid down by Buck and pocketed it.

Miguel Cervantes unobtrusively left.

"I'm a stranger here, and mighty lonesome," said Robinson with an air of confidential inquiry. "I don't s'pose

you gents could direct me?"

Galway Mike looked at Murphy, who made, answer:

"We might. Where to?"

Robinson leaned one elbow on the bar, and surveyed Murphy with piercing, laughing, reckless eyes.

"Upon my word," he drawled, "your voice sounds a heap like Pincher Brady's, pardner!"

The two men looked at each other. The red face of Murphy became redder. With a laugh, Robinson flung about as though to face the bar—and the hand of Murphy darted down.

Crack! The bursting report of a revolver filled the place.

"I was looking for that," Robinson said coolly. "No, Mike, you leave that gun alone; I'd be right sorry to have to hurt you."

Mike straightened up. Clinging to the bar with his left hand, Murphy looked down at his right, which was wounded.

"You got quite a reputation for workin' that play," said Robinson, backing away toward the swinging doors. "You're lucky I didn't make it worse, Brady, but bein's I'm a stranger here I ain't taking chances on local prejudices——"

The swinging doors were burst inward as a group of men rushed into the place, holding the doors open. Robinson calmly stood behind the inner door, which had opened against him and held him concealed from sight.

"Who's shootin' here?" demanded the foremost man.

"I am," said Robinson, stepping out. "Got any objections?"

They faced around to meet his weapon. Over it his eyes held them; no longer smiling, those eyes were keen and bitter blue.

"Objections overruled," he went on coolly. "You gents oughtn't come busting into a place o' business like this. It