

The Tragic Quest of Faraway Jones

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I never set out to be the first man to set foot on two or three hundred worlds (began Jones), nor the millionth to touch down on another few hundred. All I ever wanted was to find my Penelope.

I started looking for her, let me see, 43 years, 8 months and 19 days ago. First planet I went to was Castor XII. She wasn't there, of course.

Then I tried the Nelson system, and all the oxygen planets in the Roosevelt system. Even touched down on Walpurgis III, which was as strange a world as I've ever seen in a lifetime of seeing strange worlds, but she wasn't there either.

So I kept looking. I looked all through the Inner Frontier and the Monarchy and the Spiral Arm and the Outer Frontier and the Rim, and even in the Greater and Lesser Clouds, but there was no sign of her. After it became obvious that this was going to be an epic search, I re-named my ship The Flying Dutchman.

Had a lot of interesting adventures along the way. Once I stood atop the highest mountain in the galaxy, and another time I walked along the bottom of the deepest chlorine ocean. I threw away diamonds the size of walnuts, because my pockets were loaded with bigger ones. I killed animals that would make Hellfire Van Winkle's Landships look like household pets.

I turned down the chance to be King of the Purple Planet, and I said no when I was begged to be the consort of a woman who was even prettier than Sinderella and Silicon Carny, meaning no offense to those lovely ladies. But I knew I had to stay free of all entanglements, both political and romantic, and of course I had to keep myself pure for my Penelope.

At one point I even enlisted the help of the Golden Gang, but although they could find hidden treasures and lost masterpieces of artwork, they couldn't find Penelope. I went to Domar and rented the services of their Master Telepath, but although he could read every mind within fifty thousand light-years, he couldn't come up with a single clue as to my Penelope's whereabouts.

So I kept going from one world to another, hoping for some sign of her, or maybe to meet someone who'd seen her or even heard of her. The years slid by without my noticing, but I've never lost faith that someday I'll find her and that would make all the suffering and hardship and loneliness worthwhile.

You don't know how heartbreaking it can be, to think you've got an inkling of where she might be, only to find out, again and again, that it was a false lead, an empty hope...

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"Just a minute," interrupted Three-Gun Max. "Why not ask us?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Faraway Jones.

"The Outpost's clientele," explained Max. "Together, we've been to even more worlds than you have. Just tell us something about her, and I'll bet one of us can put you on the right track."

Jones blinked his eyes several times. "Well, I think her hair's probably blonde. Not yellow-blonde. More sandy-like. And she's likely kind of slim. Very pretty, but not the eye-popper that the ladies here are." He paused. "That's okay, though. My mother was a frump, and she wasn't the brightest woman you'd ever want to meet, but when she was 85 and fat and wrinkled, my father would still have gladly laid down his

life for her. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and in my eye, Penelope is the most beautiful woman in the galaxy." Another pause. "She'll be wearing a blue-checked gingham dress, with a little red silk scarf around her neck, and a big velvet bow in her hair. At least, that's what I figure she _ought_ to be wearing."

"You haven't seen her for 43 years," noted Max. "Her hair might be gray or white, and she could have gained or lost 30 or 40 pounds, and she's sure as hell not wearing the same clothes now. So tell us things about her that aren't likely to change. Like, for starters, how tall is she?"

Jones frowned and ran a hand through his thick, shaggy, unkempt white hair. "I don't know." He touched his nose with a forefinger. "I think she came up to about here."

"All right. What about her name?"

"Penelope," said Faraway Jones. "A beautiful name, Penelope. It's a poem all by itself."

"What's her last name?"

Jones shrugged. "Beats me."

"Just a minute," said Max. "You've been searching for her for 43 years and you don't even know her name?"

"Wouldn't a rose by any other name smell as sweet?" replied Jones defensively.

"Yeah, but it'd be a lot easier to find if you could tell people you were looking for a rose," said Max irritably. "All right -- just what _do_ you remember about her?"

"I don't have to remember anything," said Jones. "I know everything I need to know about her."

"Except her name and her whereabouts," said Max. "Where did you meet her? On what world did you last see her?"

Jones looked very uncomfortable. "I never met her," he said at last.

"You've spent 43 years searching for a woman you never met?" said Max incredulously.

"You're making it sound ludicrous, and it's not!"

"Perish the thought," said Max. He decided to try one more time. "She must have been a woman of remarkable accomplishments for you to spend your entire adult life trying to find her."

"I really couldn't say," answered Jones.

"Uh ... I don't want to seem unfeeling, but I think an explanation is in order."

"There was this poem."

"A poem?"

Jones closed his eyes. "The last few lines went like this:

_Out there somewhere, beyond the sea, _

_I'll find my sweet Penelope, _

_With burning kisses on her lips, and flowers in her hair." _

He paused. "The instant I read it, I knew that there was a Penelope waiting out there for me, and all I had to do was find her."

"How do you know her name wasn't Gertrude or Beatrice?" asked Max.

"The poem says it's Penelope."

"The poem also says that the _poet_ will find her."

"The poet's been dead for seven millennia. I looked him up. He never married anyone called Penelope."

"So based on three lines, you've wasted 43 years searching for a woman who either never existed or who died seven thousand years ago?"

"There were a _lot_ of lines! I only quoted three. And she's out there somewhere. If there's a woman for every man, then she's the woman for me. The _only_ woman."

"How will you know her when you see her?" asked Sinderella.

"I'll know her," said Jones with absolute, almost devout, certainty.

"I wish you luck, Faraway Jones," said Sinderella, walking over to him. "But just in case you don't find her, I'd hate to think of you going to your grave without ever having kissed a real, flesh-and-blood woman."

She put her arms around his neck and leaned over to kiss him, and he almost fell off his chair avoiding her.

"I'm sorry, and I don't mean any insult," he said, getting to his feet, "but I've got to keep myself pure for her, just as I know she's keeping herself pure for me."

"You've got a funny notion of pure," offered Max.

"That's okay," said Jones, walking to the door. "As far as I'm concerned, all of you have a funny notion of love." He paused. "I've wasted a whole day here. It's time to go off looking for her again."

"Be careful," warned Achmed of Alphard. "There's a war going on out there."

Jones smiled. "If Men and aliens and meteor showers and supernovas couldn't keep me from searching for my Penelope, you don't really think a little thing like a war can stop me, do you?"

"Wars have stopped people from more important quests," said Achmed.

Jones smiled. "You don't know Faraway Jones," he said, opening the door. "And there _are_ no more important quests."

And with that, he was gone.

There was a long silence. Finally Bet-a-World O'Grady pulled out a wad of banknotes. "Anyone want to start a pool?"

"On whether he finds her, or on whether she exists?" asked Baker.

O'Grady shrugged. "Either one," he said with a smile.

Nicodemus Mayflower sighed and shook his head. "He's not exactly the brightest being traveling the spaceways, is he?"

"If he's got a pet, he may not even be the brightest thing in his ship," chimed in Three-Gun Max with a chuckle.

"Well, I thought he was sweet," said Sinderella.

"So's a bag of sugar," said Max. "But you wouldn't want to go off and live with it."

"You're too cynical by half," she shot back. "I wish someone like Faraway Jones was looking for me."

"No you don't," said Max.

"And why not?" demanded Sinderella.

Max laughed. "He might find you."

"He's a lot better than you!" she snapped.

"Hell, we're all a lot better than Max," said Baker. "But that don't mean Faraway Jones is Mister Right."

"I created Mister Right," said Sinderella. "I'll settle for Faraway Jones any old day."

"You mean you met Mister Right," Max corrected her.

"I meant what I said."

"You know we ain't letting you get away without telling us the details," said Max.

"Why not?" she replied after some consideration. "Who knows? You might even learn something, though I doubt it."