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## High Finance at Hell Station

By  
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JESSUP found the question which confronted him was something like this:

If you met the girl you loved, and her father was a convict, a prize-fighter or a rum politician—would you marry her? If you met the sweetest girl in the world, and her mother smoked a corn-cob pipe, ate garlic and talked through her nose—would you marry her? If you loved a girl whose sister had green eyes and snakes for pets, and whose brothers made bad whisky and counterfeit money—would you marry her? Jessup's questions were not quite these, but—"Would you marry a girl whose whole darned family went barefoot?"

Yes, said Jessup. It all depends on the girl, said Jessup. And the particular girl who was in his mind just now he would have married if—"if the whole danged family were rapping at the door of Hades," Jessup told himself.

But they were all very much alive, and all very much barefoot, and all very much opposed to him—except the loveliest little girl in the whole world, of course, dark-eyed, rosy-lipped Donna Isobel. Isobel's relatives were none of the things suggested above, except that they went barefoot summer and winter. Señor Alcárdes, her father, owned ten thousand acres of ranch and fifteen thousand head of cattle, but he went barefoot. Her mother did not smoke a pipe, was tall and had once upon a time been beautiful, but she went barefoot. Her brothers went barefoot; her uncles and her aunts and her grandfathers

and her grandmothers went barefoot. In fact, as Tom Jessup said when he was writing home to his sister about Isobel, "This whole God-forsaken country down here goes barefoot. It's a wonder they don't breed cattle without hoofs. But ISOBEL WEARS SHOES!" And he underscored those words heavily.

Two years ago, Tom Jessup had come down into this part of Mexico, with the burning desert to the right of him and the thin grazing country of the hills to the left of him, with a pair of lungs which the doctors had given up as lost. The new K. C. M. & O. had given him a job, and he had charge of the telegrapher's key at what the line had dubbed Hell Station, where there was a shack, a water tank, and a population of three. The population included himself, a shamble-legged cayuse, and a dog. From the first his lungs had chuckled at the joke which they were going to play on hopeless Tom Jessup. They grew stronger each day. At the end of a year Jessup was a desert-tanned, keen-eyed young athlete, as tough as wire. He would have given up Hell Station and started joyously for home if it had not been for Isobel Anunciata Alcárdes.

From the day Isobel and her father first rode over to send a message up the line, Hell Station had been transformed into a paradise for Tom Jessup. From the toes of her little shoe-clad feet to the dark masses of hair gathered in shining coils on the crown of her head he had fallen in love with her, and from

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that day on he beat a trail across the alkali desert to the ranch where Isobel lived. His was not the only trail that led to Donna Isobel's door on the outskirts of San Felipe, and Señor Alcárdes had permitted him to come with the others, welcoming him with black cigars and gaining in return the news of the world tapped by Jessup's wires. But when he discovered that Tom was the one man in the world to Isobel, and that she didn't care a flip of her pretty fingers for the rich young Spanish cattleman who lived fifty miles farther south on the range, he showed the American his back trail and told him that it would be dangerous for him to set foot again within the Alcárdes range. The fact that Tom had worn shoes almost from the time he was born seemed to make no impression on Isobel's father, who rose in righteous and barefoot indignation at the thought of a penniless Americano—whose only assets were a lame cayuse and a dog—daring to make love to his daughter, the prettiest and richest girl within two days' ride of San Felipe.

Wherefore Tom Jessup, sitting idly at his key staring through the narrow-paned window out into the sizzling desert, was in the dilemma of his life. For six consecutive evenings he had taken what he knew to be serious risks to see his sweetheart. Three times he had gone openly to San Felipe. Three times he had made a detour about the town and crossed the dead-line to their old meeting-place, where he had left notes for Isobel. But the girl had not come for his letters. She had sent him no word. Each day the desert seemed to grow more pitiless, his situation more hopeless. A dozen times he had thought of giving up his job and crossing the bigger desert to the east, beyond which, in the tall mountains which looked like a blue haze from Hell Station, venturesome prospectors were finding gold. He knew that what he lacked was a gold mine. Señor Alcárdes would bow to that, and all of the barefooted tribe would bow to it. Nothing short of a gold mine—or a promising ranch with a couple of thousand head of cattle on it—would open up the gates of paradise to him.

It was mid-day of the seventh day since he had seen Isobel, and it was so

hot his head hurt. He had been growing more and more desperate, and he paid no attention to the idle gossip that Bertrand, up at Couchla, was sending to him over the wire. At last he reached out to his key, and said:

"For God's sake, shut up. I'm dying of the heat—and planning murder!"

He went to the wall and took down his automatic rifle. With tense lips he cleaned and loaded it. What law was there to keep him off the Alcárdes range, he asked himself? Was he afraid? He laughed in a way that would have made Señor Alcárdes think twice if he had been there. When he returned to his key to ask Bertrand the correct time, he had made up his mind. There would be no train until the next morning. As soon as it was a little cooler, he would strike out for the range, and wouldn't stop until he had seen Isobel, if he had to ride straight up to the Alcárdes' hacienda.

After a little he picked up the last paper from San Antonio and began to read. At the bottom of one of the inner pages his eyes fell upon this item:

### COLLEGE PRANK PROVES SERIOUS PRACTICAL JOKERS AT GULFPORT UNIVERSITY PUT INSTITUTION TEMPORARILY OUT OF BUSINESS

Gulfport, Texas, July 9.—For three days the citizens of Gulfport, and particularly the faculty and students of the University, have been in a panic, believing that some fearful epidemic of plague had fallen upon this community. Physicians have been puzzled, but the mystery has at last been cleared up by the confession of a senior student, and the people of Gulfport are once again breathing freely.

Roy Marden, a senior student, and three other students whose names have not been revealed, secured a large quantity of the fuzzy nettle scraped from the pod of a South American bean, known as cowash. This they scattered throughout the university buildings, on doors, knobs, desks, and wherever the naked flesh might come in contact with it. Within a few hours after their prank every member of the faculty and half the students were crazed by intense itching and burning, and in the afternoon the university doors were closed, and every physician in Gulfport was at work. Not until the entire city was threatened with quarantine did young Marden explain the mystery. It will be a week before those who were unfortunate enough to come into contact with the nettle will be free of its effects, as cowash is the most powerful irritant of the nettle family known to

science. The four students who played their practical joke will be expelled at the next meeting of the university board.

Something about the item made Jessup smile. He read on, and at the bottom of the following page another item caught his eyes, and as he read it he whistled softly. He turned back to the first and re-read it twice. Then he cut out both items, placed them side by side on his table, and read them again. The smile left his face. He rose from his chair and began walking back and forth, unmindful of the heat. Half an hour later he re-seated himself at his key. The message which he sent over the wire was directed to one of his most intimate friends, a young doctor, who lived in Matagorda.

It read as follows:

Ship me as soon as possible fifty pounds of cowash. Important. Rush.

TOM JESSUP.

Then he sent another and longer message to an address in San Antonio.

Up at Couchla, young Bertrand heard both messages, and wondered if the heat had driven Tom Jessup mad. And Jessup, looking out through his window, wondered what madness could be bringing a horseman across the desert at this hour of the day, when the thermometer stood at a hundred and twenty. He slipped the revolver into his holster and went out to wait in the shade of the water tank.

## II

The lone horseman was approaching slowly through a cloud of alkali dust. When he drew up beside the water tank Jessup saw that he was scarcely more than a boy, and that his eyes were red from the desert heat. At his greeting in English, the rider shook his head negatively to show that he did not understand the language, fumbled inside his breast pocket, and placed a letter in Jessup's eager hand. Then he slipped from his saddle and made a bee-line for the open water basin under the tank.

Instantly Tom recognized the writing on the envelope as Isobel's. It could not be mistaken. Two years in a private English school in Mexico City had not quite taken the characteristic Spanish touch

from her writing. He opened the envelope joyously. What he found sent his heart down with a leaden thump. It was a slip of paper no larger than his thumb. But the words on the paper filled him with a desire to shout. There were only four:

*The old place—to-night.*

Isobel had not signed her name. She had not used an unnecessary word. The letters in the writing were of almost microscopic fineness, and a gleam of understanding shot into Jessup's head. She had been afraid to say more. The Mexican boy either could not or would not talk. But he seemed to understand with ease when Jessup told him to carry back word to his mistress that "he would be there" at the appointed time. Fifteen minutes after his arrival, young Pedro was trailing slowly back across the narrow strip of desert toward the range.

For two hours Tom Jessup hung close to his key. Then there came his signal—"H. S.—H. S." The message was from Matagorda. It read:

Will ship cowash immediately. Write and tell me what in thunder you're doing with it.

PHIL REED.

Hot after this there came a wire from San Antonio, and when Jessup read to the end of it he let out a shout of triumph that sent his startled dog out through the open door to see if the lame cayuse was safe under the water tank. Bertrand, too, might have heard that shout, for Tom heard him asking over the wire,

What in devil's name matter down there, old man? Are you going loco?

Jessup wired back:

I'm getting a corner in b-a-r-e f-e-e-t. Keep this under your hat, you nunny, and watch the balloon when she goes up.

The two clippings he folded and placed in the case of his watch. Most of that afternoon he sat at his desk, stripped to the waist, working out page after page of figures, writing letters, drawing pencil sketches and maps of the desert, the range, and the outskirts of San Felipe—until he was half buried in the litter about him. The rest of it he employed in a way that puzzled Sancho, the dog, and made Don Quixote, the lame cayuse, prick up his ragged ears.

With a saw, a hammer and a chisel he cut a hole eighteen inches square through the cabin wall, facing the range and San Felipe. Then he repaired the lock on the door, added a draw-bolt of a broken car-coupling, and made measurements for two hinge-doors of plank to go at the windows. At six o'clock he set out across the desert on Don Quixote's back.

## III

Isobel Annunciata Alcárdes was waiting for him. As he rode cautiously down into the little dip that formed a cup between two low mountains Jessup caught a glimpse of something white fluttering at him from the top of the big rock where they held their trysts. It was Isobel's scarf, and he waved his hat frantically in reply, tied Don Quixote in his old hiding place, and ran toward his sweetheart. He wondered a bit fearfully why Isobel was almost an hour ahead of time, but when he came near to the rock, and the girl approached to meet him, whatever anxiety he might have felt was dispelled in an instant. She was laughing when he caught her in his arms. She stroked his face with her two little hands, pouted her pretty mouth for him to kiss, and then bent her head so that he could kiss her soft, shining hair. She always did that, because she knew that he loved her hair, and he held her closer as the last red glow of the sun died away behind the mountains, vowing in the face of it that the whole world might go to smash if that was to be the cost of his possessing her. Suddenly she lifted her head, and told him why she was early. She had won over her favorite brother to their cause, and her mother was wavering. Miguel would help them all he could, and had ridden with her half way to the tryst—

That was as far as she got. Jessup dropped his arms from about her so suddenly that the joyous flush in her face faded almost to paleness as he jumped back and pulled out his watch. Miguel, her brother, had promised to help them! He could scarcely restrain a shout of elation. Miguel was the one link missing in the daring scheme he had formed in the cabin.

He drew Isobel down close beside him on a flat rock and showed her the two clippings. She read, and perplexity filled her eyes. What was there in these clippings to drive the Señor Tom Jessup, her lover, so mad with joy? He told her. As he talked, Isobel felt her heart beating faster and faster, and when at last they rose from the rock her face was flushed with an excitement as great as his own.

The moon had risen when Jessup accompanied her up out of the dip to the crest of the ridge, and in answer to the shrill feminine *coo-ee* that she sent down into the plain there came an answering shout from her waiting brother. Tom returned to Don Quixote, and never was a lame cayuse driven as he was driven that night.

The next day Pedro came again with a note from Isobel, and that night, with Isobel looking on and clapping her hands, Miguel and Tom Jessup shook hands beside the rock and swore brotherly fealty. During the two weeks that followed, the plotters met every other night, and the days at Hell Station were noisy with Tom Jessup's singing and whistling. On the fifteenth day the plodding train that came down from the north left a car on the water-tank siding, and from the same train there were dumped off box after box addressed to "Thomas Jessup, Hell Station, K. C. M. & O. R. R., Coahuila, Mexico."

From that hour on, Tom Jessup began alternately to pray for weather, and to curse the weather that came in answer to his prayers. The nights were magnificent, and the finer they were the more sleepless and miserable he was. On the fourteenth of August there came the night he was waiting for. Late in the afternoon the wind began to blow from off the desert, and the dust and sand began to whip range-ward in clouds. At the first warning of these desert storms he usually closed every chink and crevice in his cabin and shut himself indoors. But today he prodded old Don Quixote in a lusty gallop toward the range. It was dark night when he reached the dip between the mountains, but close beside the trysting rock he saw the glimmer of a lantern. Miguel was waiting for him, and for two hours after his

arrival they sat in the lee of the rock and smoked cigarettes, while the dust-clouds swept over them in increasing fury. It was ten o'clock when they set out for San Felipe through the smothering night.

In all San Felipe—in the whole of Coahuila—none but Isobel and these two knew what was happening that night while the dust storm raged.

General Juan Antonio de Mezquiat, who had led a barefoot division from Coahuila in the insurrecto army, was the first to place his proud and naked foot upon a bit of the cowash from Matagorda, Texas, and the yell which rang down the white-washed street in which he abode was fiercer than any yell he had ever given on a battlefield. Scarcely had the sun risen on this clear and beautiful day following the desert storm before the whole of San Felipe was in a tempest of dismay and wonder and a paroxysm of pain. Not a bare foot there but was well acquainted with the sting of sand-flies, the bite of the spike-bug, the nip of fleas and the prick of cacti, but never a one had ever before come in contact with this strange and invisible nettle that lay as thickly over the streets of San Felipe as ticks on a dog's back. The awakening of San Felipe was followed by howls and limping. The cowash was everywhere, unseen in the white dust that had come with the storm.

Not a San Felipian had ever seen the like of this plague before. They knew that it had come with the storm. Rumor passed swiftly that its sting was death; feet began to swell, and a hundred dogs yelped and howled with pain as the fire-like nettle fastened tenaciously between their toes. By ten o'clock San Felipe was as dead as though emptied by a plague, and it was then that Miguel galloped in excitedly from the Alcarde range and spread word that the pest had infected the whole country, and that he had heard it was as deadly as the Gila's bite if one trod on it too often. A hundred of his father's men, women and children were "bitten," he said, and not a soul was moving from the shelter of their roofs. He disappeared, and at noon galloped back. Half a hundred eyes saw him leap fearlessly from his saddle and

walk smilingly up and down the pest-infested streets. But there was something on his feet. He quickly explained. The Señor Tom Jessup, at Hell Station, had stopped a carload of things such as he was wearing, on their way to Mexico City, and was holding them for the people of San Felipe and the Alcarde range. Señor Jessup called them "rubbers." They were proof against the bite of the things in the desert dust, and he would sell them to all who called as long as they lasted. But there were not enough to go round, and those who wanted them would have to hurry.

It was two o'clock when Tom Jessup, through the hole he had cut in his cabin, saw the beginning of the rush to Hell Station. First he saw a cloud of dust, and a horseman; then another horseman, and others trailing behind, and after them there limped the stricken people from over the range. He was a bit nervous. On a chair within reach of his right hand was his automatic, on a box at his left a coupling-pin. The door and windows were closed, and over the front of the cabin there was a sign painted by Miguel, stating the fact that it would cost from five to ten Mexican dollars to carry away a pair of Señor Jessup's wonderful plague-proof foot-protectors. It was the glaring statement of this sign that made Jessup nervous. He had bought a bankrupt stock at forty-eight cents on the dollar, and the rubbers had cost him, including freight, about twenty-seven cents a pair. The margin of profit between almost frightened him, and in spite of Miguel's protestations that all would be pulled off as smoothly as an over-night revolution, he half expected to be mobbed and hung to one of the water-tank beams.

A warm shiver ran up his back as the first six silver dollars clinked down into the wooden rubber box at his feet. The next sale was a ten-dollar No. 12 size to a slab-footed, parchment faced old miser of San Felipe whose yellow visage was snarling with pain, and so eager was he to secure his pair that he counted wrong and left a dollar extra. Jessup actually smiled at the next customer, and his smile grew broader and broader, until at last he was calling out in very bad Spanish, like a barker at a

circus, while the cataract of dollars made tinkling music at his feet. In the excitement of the game Jessup forgot Señor Alcarde, Miguel, and even his Isobel Annunciata, until Juan and José and Fresnillo Alcarde came up in a bunch—when he passed out three pairs and shoved back their money.

Two minutes later, Señor Alcarde and his four sons trailed in through the door, all smoking thoughtfully at black cigars. The Señor's feet were done up in cloths that were worn to rags. Tom tossed him a pair of No. Elevens and pointed to the box, which was a quarter full.

Two hours later he closed the newly made window. The last rubber was gone. With a pencil he figured on a piece of paper. Seven hundred pairs at an average of eight dollars a pair—\$5,600. He was sweating; his face was grimy, but it glowed with joy. Two grandfathers and three uncles were hovering near the shack, and he called them in. He showed them the figures, and with Miguel's aid told them a few things which made them forget to suck at their long black cigars. He was not the cheap and penniless *Americano* they had supposed him to be, he told them. He was not exactly rich, but he had brains. He had figured out that this pest was coming. It had been coming for two years, creeping farther and farther south along the Gulf coast. He had come down, disguised as an operator, and had waited for it. He explained that the one cardinal virtue of the plague was that once it came it persisted in returning year after year. Thereafter the people of San Felipe would always wear foot-protectors, and he, Señor Tom Jessup, of the *Estados Unidos del Norte*, had a strangle grip on the trade. Rubbers and shoes wore out, but the sand-plague—never. He would soon be the richest and most looked-up-to man in Coahuila. He would never leave Coahuila; because he loved one of San Felipe's fairest daughters. To prove what he said he would send in another order for the wonderful foot-protectors before their very eyes. He

went to the key and sent the following message to Phil Reed, at Matagorda:

Ship one hundred pounds of cowash as soon as you can get it, and await further orders.  
TOM JESSUP.

To the house in San Antonio he wired:

Ship 1,000 pairs rubbers, assorted sizes, mostly nines to twelves.  
TOM JESSUP.

The last message he read aloud. One of the grandfathers was the first to make a move. He made a sound that was something in Spanish; peered with his watery old eyes down into the box of silver, straightened with another sound, and held out a hand to Señor Jessup. Miguel was next, Señor Alcarde last. There were almost tears in Jessup's eyes when he spoke a few words to him in slow, distinctive Spanish.

It was an invitation for him to take supper that night with Señor Alcarde and his family.

Three weeks later the new man came down the line to Hell Station, accompanied by his wife, a pretty, brown-haired little woman with big, sad, yearning eyes. At a glance Jessup saw the reason for this yearning and hope and hopelessness in her face. Meesen, the new man, was thin and white and bright-eyed, and he coughed.

Two hours later, when Jessup was about to leave them in their new home, the woman's eyes lighted up with joy at the words he spoke:

"Look at me," he said to Meesen, a little hesitatingly. "Do I look sick? And I came down here—like you, with only two half-lungs in my body. You're as good as cured, Meesen. I came down almost dead—and look at me now, tough as a knot. A week from to-morrow I'm going to marry the sweetest little girl in all Mexico, and I want you and Mrs. Meesen to come over and see us often. I think I'll be able to put you up against something good. There's money as well as health down here, lots of it—if you go after it right. Good-by!"

And Don Quixote ambled slowly toward the range.