

THE STAMPEDE TO SQUAW CREEK.

I.

Two months after Smoke Bellew and Shorty went after moose for a grubstake, they were back in the Elkhorn saloon at Dawson. The hunting was done, the meat hauled in and sold for two dollars and a half a pound, and between them they possessed three thousand dollars in gold dust and a good team of dogs. They had played in luck. Despite the fact that the gold rush had driven the game a hundred miles or more into the mountains, they had, within half that distance, bagged four moose in a narrow canyon.

The mystery of the strayed animals was no greater than the luck of their killers, for within the day four famished Indian families reporting no game in three days' journey back, camped beside them. Meat was traded for starving dogs, and after a week of feeding, Smoke and Shorty harnessed the animals and began freighting the meat to the eager Dawson market.

The problem of the two men now, was to turn their gold-dust into food. The current price for flour and beans was a dollar and a half a pound, but the difficulty was to find a seller. Dawson was in the

throes of famine. Hundreds of men, with money but no food, had been compelled to leave the country. Many had gone down the river on the last water, and many more with barely enough food to last, had walked the six hundred miles over the ice to Dyea.

Smoke met Shorty in the warm saloon, and found the latter jubilant.

"Life ain't no punkins without whiskey an' sweetenin'," was Shorty's greeting, as he pulled lumps of ice from his thawing moustache and flung them rattling on the floor. "An' I sure just got eighteen pounds of that same sweetenin'. The geezer only charged three dollars a pound for it. What luck did you have?"

"I, too, have not been idle," Smoke answered with pride. "I bought fifty pounds of flour. And there's a man up on Adam Creek says he'll let me have fifty pounds more to-morrow."

"Great! We'll sure live till the river opens. Say, Smoke, them dogs of ourn is the goods. A dog-buyer offered me two hundred apiece for the five of them. I told him nothin' doin'. They sure took on class when they got meat to get outside of; but it goes against the grain feedin' dog-critters on grub that's worth two and a half a pound. Come on an' have a drink. I just got to celebrate them eighteen pounds of sweetenin'."

Several minutes later, as he weighed in on the gold-scales for the

drinks, he gave a start of recollection.

"I plum forgot that man I was to meet in the Tivoli. He's got some spoiled bacon he'll sell for a dollar an' a half a pound. We can feed it to the dogs an' save a dollar a day on each's board bill. So long."

"So long," said Smoke. "I'm goin' to the cabin an' turn in."

Hardly had Shorty left the place, when a fur-clad man entered through the double storm-doors. His face lighted at sight of Smoke, who recognized him as Breck, the man whose boat he had run through the Box Canyon and White Horse rapids.

"I heard you were in town," Breck said hurriedly, as they shook hands. "Been looking for you for half an hour. Come outside, I want to talk with you."

Smoke looked regretfully at the roaring, red-hot stove.

"Won't this do?"

"No; it's important. Come outside."

As they emerged, Smoke drew off one mitten, lighted a match, and glanced at the thermometer that hung beside the door. He re-

mittened his naked hand hastily as if the frost had burnt him. Overhead arched the flaming aurora borealis, while from all Dawson arose the mournful howling of thousands of wolf-dogs.

"What did it say?" Breck asked.

"Sixty below." Kit spat experimentally, and the spittle crackled in the air. "And the thermometer is certainly working. It's falling all the time. An hour ago it was only fifty-two. Don't tell me it's a stampede."

"It is," Breck whispered back cautiously, casting anxious eyes about in fear of some other listener. "You know Squaw Creek?--empties in on the other side the Yukon thirty miles up?"

"Nothing doing there," was Smoke's judgment. "It was prospected years ago."

"So were all the other rich creeks. Listen! It's big. Only eight to twenty feet to bedrock. There won't be a claim that don't run to half a million. It's a dead secret. Two or three of my close friends let me in on it. I told my wife right away that I was going to find you before I started. Now, so long. My pack's hidden down the bank. In fact, when they told me, they made me promise not to pull out until Dawson was asleep. You know what it means if you're seen with a stampeding outfit. Get your partner and follow. You

ought to stake fourth or fifth claim from Discovery. Don't forget--
Squaw Creek. It's the third after you pass Swede Creek."

II.

When Smoke entered the little cabin on the hillside back of Dawson, he heard a heavy familiar breathing.

"Aw, go to bed," Shorty mumbled, as Smoke shook his shoulder. "I'm not on the night shift," was his next remark, as the rousing hand became more vigorous. "Tell your troubles to the bar-keeper."

"Kick into your clothes," Smoke said. "We've got to stake a couple of claims."

Shorty sat up and started to explode, but Smoke's hand covered his mouth.

"Ssh!" Smoke warned. "It's a big strike. Don't wake the neighbourhood. Dawson's asleep."

"Huh! You got to show me. Nobody tells anybody about a strike, of course not. But ain't it plum amazin' the way everybody hits the trail just the same?"

"Squaw Creek," Smoke whispered. "It's right. Breck gave me the tip. Shallow bedrock. Gold from the grass-roots down. Come on. We'll sling a couple of light packs together and pull out."

Shorty's eyes closed as he lapsed back into sleep. The next moment his blankets were swept off him.

"If you don't want them, I do," Smoke explained.

Shorty followed the blankets and began to dress.

"Goin' to take the dogs?" he asked.

"No. The trail up the creek is sure to be unbroken, and we can make better time without them."

"Then I'll throw 'em a meal, which'll have to last 'em till we get back. Be sure you take some birch-bark and a candle."

Shorty opened the door, felt the bite of the cold, and shrank back to pull down his ear-flaps and mitten his hands.

Five minutes later he returned, sharply rubbing his nose.

"Smoke, I'm sure opposed to makin' this stampede. It's colder than the hinges of hell a thousand years before the first fire was lighted. Besides, it's Friday the thirteenth, an' we're goin' to trouble as the sparks fly upward."

With small stampeding packs on their backs, they closed the door

behind them and started down the hill. The display of the aurora borealis had ceased, and only the stars leaped in the great cold, and by their uncertain light made traps for the feet. Shorty floundered off a turn of the trail into deep snow, and raised his voice in blessing of the date of the week and month and year.

"Can't you keep still?" Smoke chided. "Leave the almanac alone. You'll have all Dawson awake and after us."

"Huh! See the light in that cabin? And in that one over there? An' hear that door slam? Oh, sure Dawson's asleep. Them lights? Just buryin' their dead. They ain't stampedin', betcher life they ain't."

By the time they reached the foot of the hill and were fairly in Dawson, lights were springing up in the cabins, doors were slamming, and from behind came the sound of many moccasins on the hard-packed snow. Again Shorty delivered himself.

"But it beats hell the amount of mourners there is."

They passed a man who stood by the path and was calling anxiously in a low voice: "Oh, Charley; get a move on."

"See that pack on his back, Smoke? The graveyard's sure a long ways off when the mourners got to pack their blankets."

By the time they reached the main street a hundred men were in line behind them, and while they sought in the deceptive starlight for the trail that dipped down the bank to the river, more men could be heard arriving. Shorty slipped and shot down the thirty-foot chute into the soft snow. Smoke followed, knocking him over as he was rising to his feet.

"I found it first," he gurgled, taking off his mittens to shake the snow out of the gauntlets.

The next moment they were scrambling wildly out of the way of the hurtling bodies of those that followed. At the time of the freeze-up, a jam had occurred at this point, and cakes of ice were up-ended in snow-covered confusion. After several hard falls, Smoke drew out his candle and lighted it. Those in the rear hailed it with acclaim. In the windless air it burned easily, and he led the way more quickly.

"It's a sure stampede," Shorty decided. "Or might all them be sleep-walkers?"

"We're at the head of the procession at any rate," was Smoke's answer.

"Oh, I don't know. Mebbe that's a firefly ahead there. Mebbe

they're all fireflies--that one, an' that one. Look at 'em.
Believe me, they is whole strings of processions ahead."

It was a mile across the jams to the west bank of the Yukon, and candles flickered the full length of the twisting trail. Behind them, clear to the top of the bank they had descended, were more candles.

"Say, Smoke, this ain't no stampede. It's a exode-us. They must be a thousand men ahead of us an' ten thousand behind. Now, you listen to your uncle. My medicine's good. When I get a hunch it's sure right. An' we're in wrong on this stampede. Let's turn back an' hit the sleep."

"You'd better save your breath if you intend to keep up," Smoke retorted gruffly.

"Huh! My legs is short, but I slog along slack at the knees an' don't worry my muscles none, an' I can sure walk every piker here off the ice."

And Smoke knew he was right, for he had long since learned his comrade's phenomenal walking powers.

"I've been holding back to give you a chance," Smoke jeered.

"An' I'm plum troddin' on your heels. If you can't do better, let me go ahead and set pace."

Smoke quickened, and was soon at the rear of the nearest bunch of stampedeers.

"Hike along, you, Smoke," the other urged. "Walk over them unburied dead. This ain't no funeral. Hit the frost like you was goin' somewheres."

Smoke counted eight men and two women in this party, and before the way across the jam-ice was won, he and Shorty had passed another party twenty strong. Within a few feet of the west bank, the trail swerved to the south, emerging from the jam upon smooth ice. The ice, however, was buried under several feet of fine snow. Through this the sled-trail ran, a narrow ribbon of packed footing barely two feet in width. On either side one sank to his knees and deeper in the snow. The stampedeers they overtook were reluctant to give way, and often Smoke and Shorty had to plunge into the deep snow, and by supreme efforts flounder past.

Shorty was irrepressible and pessimistic. When the stampedeers resented being passed, he retorted in kind.

"What's your hurry?" one of them asked.

"What's yours?" he answered. "A stampede come down from Indian River yesterday afternoon an' beat you to it. They ain't no claims left."

"That being so, I repeat, what's your hurry?"

"WHO? Me? I ain't no stamper. I'm workin' for the government. I'm on official business. I'm just traipsin' along to take the census of Squaw Creek."

To another, who hailed him with: "Where away, little one? Do you really expect to stake a claim?" Shorty answered:

"Me? I'm the discoverer of Squaw Creek. I'm just comin' back from recordin' so as to see no blamed chechaquo jumps my claim."

The average pace of the stampede on the smooth going was three miles and a half an hour. Smoke and Shorty were doing four and a half, though sometimes they broke into short runs and went faster.

"I'm going to travel your feet clean off, Shorty," Smoke challenged.

"Huh! I can hike along on the stumps an' wear the heels off your moccasins. Though it ain't no use. I've ben figgerin'. Creek claims is five hundred feet. Call 'em ten to the mile. They's a thousand stampede ahead of us, an' that creek ain't no hundred

miles long. Somebody's goin' to get left, an' it makes a noise like you an' me."

Before replying, Smoke let out an unexpected link that threw Shorty half a dozen feet in the rear.

"If you saved your breath and kept up, we'd cut down a few of that thousand," he chided.

"Who? Me? If you's get outa the way I'd show you a pace what is."

Smoke laughed, and let out another link. The whole aspect of the adventure had changed. Through his brain was running a phrase of the mad philosopher--"the transvaluation of values." In truth, he was less interested in staking a fortune than in beating Shorty. After all, he concluded, it wasn't the reward of the game but the playing of it that counted. Mind, and muscle, and stamina, and soul, were challenged in a contest with this Shorty, a man who had never opened the books, and who did not know grand opera from rag-time, nor an epic from a chilblain.

"Shorty, I've got you skinned to death. I've reconstructed every cell in my body since I hit the beach at Dyea. My flesh is as stringy as whipcords, and as bitter and mean as the bite of a rattlesnake. A few months ago I'd have patted myself on the back to write such words, but I couldn't have written them. I had to live

them first, and now that I'm living them there's no need to write them. I'm the real, bitter, stinging goods, and no scrub of a mountaineer can put anything over on me without getting it back compound. Now, you go ahead and set pace for half an hour. Do your worst, and when you're all in I'll go ahead and give you half an hour of the real worst."

"Huh!" Shorty sneered genially. "An' him not dry behind the ears yet. Get outa the way an' let your father show you some goin'."

Half-hour by half-hour they alternated in setting pace. Nor did they talk much. Their exertions kept them warm, though their breath froze on their faces from lips to chin. So intense was the cold that they almost continually rubbed their noses and cheeks with their mittens. A few minutes cessation from this allowed the flesh to grow numb, and then most vigorous rubbing was required to produce the burning prickle of returning circulation.

Often they thought they had reached the lead, but always they overtook more stampedeers who had started before them. Occasionally, groups of men attempted to swing in behind to their pace, but invariably they were discouraged after a mile or two, and disappeared in the darkness to the rear.

"We've been out on trail all winter," was Shorty's comment. "An' them geezers, soft from laying around their cabins, has the nerve to

think they can keep our stride. Now, if they was real sour-doughs it'd be different. If there's one thing a sour-dough can do it's sure walk."

Once, Smoke lighted a match and glanced at his watch. He never repeated it, for so quick was the bite of the frost on his bared hands, that half an hour passed before they were again comfortable.

"Four o'clock," he said, as he pulled on his mittens, "and we've already passed three hundred."

"Three hundred and thirty-eight," Shorty corrected. "I ben keepin' count. Get outa the way, stranger. Let somebody stampede that knows how to stampede."

The latter was addressed to a man, evidently exhausted, who could no more than stumble along, and who blocked the trail. This, and one other, were the only played-out men they encountered, for they were very near to the head of the stampede. Nor did they learn till afterwards the horrors of that night. Exhausted men sat down to rest by the way, and failed to get up. Seven were frozen to death, while scores of amputations of toes, feet, and fingers were performed in the Dawson hospitals on the survivors. For of all nights for a stampede, the one to Squaw Creek occurred on the coldest night of the year. Before morning, the spirit thermometers at Dawson registered seventy degrees below zero. The men composing

the stampede, with few exceptions, were new-comers in the country who did not know the way of the cold.

The other played-out man they found a few minutes later, revealed by a streamer of aurora borealis that shot like a searchlight from horizon to zenith. He was sitting on a piece of ice beside the trail.

"Hop along, sister Mary," Shorty gaily greeted him. "Keep movin'. If you sit there you'll freeze stiff."

The man made no response, and they stopped to investigate.

"Stiff as a poker," was Shorty's verdict. "If you tumbled him over he'd break."

"See if he's breathing," Smoke said, as, with bared hands, he sought through furs and woollens for the man's heart.

Shorty lifted one ear-flap and bent to the iced lips.

"Nary breathe," he reported.

"Nor heart-beat," said Smoke.

He mittened his hand and beat it violently for a minute before

exposing it to the frost to strike a match. It was an old man, incontestably dead. In the moment of illumination, they saw a long grey beard, massed with ice to the nose, cheeks that were white with frost, and closed eyes with frost-rimmed lashes frozen together. Then the match went out.

"Come on," Shorty said, rubbing his ear. "We can't do nothing for the old geezer. An' I've sure frosted my ear. Now all the blamed skin'll peel off and it'll be sore for a week."

A few minutes later, when a flaming ribbon spilled pulsating fire over the heavens, they saw on the ice a quarter of a mile ahead two forms. Beyond, for a mile, nothing moved.

"They're leading the procession," Smoke said, as darkness fell again. "Come on, let's get them."

At the end of half an hour, not yet having overtaken the two in front, Shorty broke into a run.

"If we catch 'em we'll never pass 'em," he panted. "Lord, what a pace they're hittin'. Dollars to doughnuts they're no chechaquos. They're the real sour-dough variety, you can stack on that."

Smoke was leading when they finally caught up, and he was glad to ease to a walk at their heels. Almost immediately he got the

impression that the one nearer him was a woman. How this impression came, he could not tell. Hooded and furred, the dark form was as any form; yet there was a haunting sense of familiarity about it. He waited for the next flame of the aurora, and by its light saw the smallness of the moccasined feet. But he saw more--the walk; and knew it for the unmistakable walk he had once resolved never to forget.

"She's a sure goer," Shorty confided hoarsely. "I'll bet it's an Indian."

"How do you do, Miss Gastell," Smoke addressed.

"How do you do," she answered, with a turn of the head and a quick glance. "It's too dark to see. Who are you?"

"Smoke,"

She laughed in the frost, and he was certain it was the prettiest laughter he had ever heard.

"And have you married and raised all those children you were telling me about?" Before he could retort, she went on. "How many chechaquos are there behind?"

"Several thousand, I imagine. We passed over three hundred. And

they weren't wasting any time."

"It's the old story," she said bitterly. "The new-comers get in on the rich creeks, and the old-timers who dared and suffered and made this country, get nothing. Old-timers made this discovery on Squaw Creek--how it leaked out is the mystery--and they sent word up to all the old-timers on Sea Lion. But it's ten miles farther than Dawson, and when they arrive they'll find the creek staked to the skyline by the Dawson chechaquos. It isn't right, it isn't fair, such perversity of luck."

"It is too bad," Smoke sympathized. "But I'm hanged if I know what you're going to do about it. First come, first served, you know."

"I wish I could do something," she flashed back at him. "I'd like to see them all freeze on the trail, or have everything terrible happen to them, so long as the Sea Lion stampede arrived first."

"You've certainly got it in for us, hard," he laughed.

"It isn't that," she said quickly. "Man by man, I know the crowd from Sea Lion, and they are men. They starved in this country in the old days, and they worked like giants to develop it. I went through the hard times on the Koyokuk with them when I was a little girl. And I was with them in the Birch Creek famine, and in the Forty Mile famine. They are heroes, and they deserve some reward,

and yet here are thousands of green softlings who haven't earned the right to stake anything, miles and miles ahead of them. And now, if you'll forgive my tirade, I'll save my breath, for I don't know when you and all the rest may try to pass dad and me."

No further talk passed between Joy and Smoke for an hour or so, though he noticed that for a time she and her father talked in low tones.

"I know'm now," Shorty told Smoke. "He's old Louis Gastell, an' the real goods. That must be his kid. He come into this country so long ago they ain't nobody can recollect, an' he brought the girl with him, she only a baby. Him an' Beetles was tradin' partners an' they ran the first dinkey little steamboat up the Koyokuk."

"I don't think we'll try to pass them," Smoke said. "We're at the head of the stampede, and there are only four of us."

Shorty agreed, and another hour of silence followed, during which they swung steadily along. At seven o'clock, the blackness was broken by a last display of the aurora borealis, which showed to the west a broad opening between snow-clad mountains.

"Squaw Creek!" Joy exclaimed.

"Goin' some," Shorty exulted. "We oughtn't to ben there for another

half hour to the least, accordin' to my reckonin'. I must a' ben spreadin' my legs."

It was at this point that the Dyea trail, baffled by ice-jams, swerved abruptly across the Yukon to the east bank. And here they must leave the hard-packed, main-travelled trail, mount the jams, and follow a dim trail, but slightly packed, that hovered the west bank.

Louis Gastell, leading, slipped in the darkness on the rough ice, and sat up, holding his ankle in both his hands. He struggled to his feet and went on, but at a slower pace and with a perceptible limp. After a few minutes he abruptly halted.

"It's no use," he said to his daughter. "I've sprained a tendon. You go ahead and stake for me as well as yourself."

"Can't we do something?" Smoke asked.

Louis Gastell shook his head.

"She can stake two claims as well as one. I'll crawl over to the bank, start a fire, and bandage my ankle. I'll be all right. Go on, Joy. Stake ours above the Discovery claim; it's richer higher up."

"Here's some birch bark," Smoke said, dividing his supply equally.

"We'll take care of your daughter."

Louis Gastell laughed harshly.

"Thank you just the same," he said. "But she can take care of herself. Follow her and watch her."

"Do you mind if I lead?" she asked Smoke, as she headed on. "I know this country better than you."

"Lead on," Smoke answered gallantly, "though I agree with you it's a darned shame all us chechaquos are going to beat that Sea Lion bunch to it. Isn't there some way to shake them?"

She shook her head.

"We can't hide our trail, and they'll follow it like sheep."

After a quarter of a mile, she turned sharply to the west. Smoke noticed that they were going through unpacked snow, but neither he nor Shorty observed that the dim trail they had been on still led south. Had they witnessed the subsequent procedure of Louis Gastell, the history of the Klondike would have been written differently; for they would have seen that old-timer, no longer limping, running with his nose to the trail like a hound, following

them. Also, they would have seen him trample and widen the turn they had made to the west. And, finally, they would have seen him keep on the old dim trail that still led south.

A trail did run up the creek, but so slight was it that they continually lost it in the darkness. After a quarter of an hour, Joy Gastell was willing to drop into the rear and let the two men take turns in breaking a way through the snow. This slowness of the leaders enabled the whole stampede to catch up, and when daylight came, at nine o'clock, as far back as they could see was an unbroken line of men. Joy's dark eyes sparkled at the sight.

"How long since we started up the creek?" she asked.

"Fully two hours," Smoke answered.

"And two hours back makes four," she laughed. "The stampede from Sea Lion is saved."

A faint suspicion crossed Smoke's mind, and he stopped and confronted her.

"I don't understand," he said.

"You don't. Then I'll tell you. This is Norway Creek. Squaw Creek is the next to the south."

Smoke was for the moment, speechless.

"You did it on purpose?" Shorty demanded.

"I did it to give the old-timers a chance."

She laughed mockingly. The men grinned at each other and finally joined her.

"I'd lay you across my knee an' give you a wallop in', if womenfolk wasn't so scarce in this country," Shorty assured her.

"Your father didn't sprain a tendon, but waited till we were out of sight and then went on?" Smoke asked.

She nodded.

"And you were the decoy."

Again she nodded, and this time Smoke's laughter rang out clear and true. It was the spontaneous laughter of a frankly beaten man.

"Why don't you get angry with me?" she queried ruefully. "Or--or wallop me?"

"Well, we might as well be starting back," Shorty urged. "My feet's gettin' cold standin' here."

Smoke shook his head.

"That would mean four hours lost. We must be eight miles up this Creek now, and from the look ahead Norway is making a long swing south. We'll follow it, then cross over the divide somehow, and tap Squaw Creek somewhere above Discovery." He looked at Joy. "Won't you come along with us? I told your father we'd look after you."

"I--" She hesitated. "I think I shall, if you don't mind." She was looking straight at him, and her face was no longer defiant and mocking. "Really, Mr Smoke, you make me almost sorry for what I have done. But somebody had to save the old-timers."

"It strikes me that stampeding is at best a sporting proposition."

"And it strikes me you two are very game about it," she went on, then added with the shadow of a sigh: "What a pity you are not old-timers."

For two hours more they kept to the frozen creek-bed of Norway, then turned into a narrow and rugged tributary that flowed from the south. At midday they began the ascent of the divide itself.

Behind them, looking down and back, they could see the long line of

stampedeers breaking up. Here and there, in scores of places, thin smoke-columns advertised the making of camps.

As for themselves, the going was hard. They wallowed through snow to their waists, and were compelled to stop every few yards to breathe. Shorty was the first to call a halt.

"We ben hittin' the trail for over twelve hours," he said. "Smoke, I'm plum willin' to say I'm good an' tired. An' so are you. An' I'm free to shout that I can sure hang on to this here pascar like a starvin' Indian to a hunk of bear-meat. But this poor girl here can't keep her legs no time if she don't get something in her stomach. Here's where we build a fire. What d'ye say?"

So quickly, so deftly and methodically, did they go about making a temporary camp, that Joy, watching with jealous eyes, admitted to herself that the old-timers could not do it better. Spruce boughs, with a spread blanket on top, gave a foundation for rest and cooking operations. But they kept away from the heat of the fire until noses and cheeks had been rubbed cruelly.

Smoke spat in the air, and the resultant crackle was so immediate and loud that he shook his head.

"I give it up," he said. "I've never seen cold like this."

"One winter on the Koyokuk it went to eighty-six below," Joy answered. "It's at least seventy or seventy-five right now, and I know I've frosted my cheeks. They're burning like fire."

On the steep slope of the divide there was no ice, while snow, as fine and hard and crystalline as granulated sugar, was poured into the gold-pan by the bushel until enough water was melted for the coffee. Smoke fried bacon and thawed biscuits. Shorty kept the fuel supplied and tended the fire, and Joy set the simple table composed of two plates, two cups, two spoons, a tin of mixed salt and pepper, and a tin of sugar. When it came to eating, she and Smoke shared one set between them. They ate out of the same plate and drank from the same cup.

It was nearly two in the afternoon when they cleared the crest of the divide and began dropping down a feeder of Squaw Creek. Earlier in the winter some moose-hunter had made a trail up the canyon--that is, in going up and down he had stepped always in his previous tracks. As a result, in the midst of soft snow, and veiled under later snow falls, was a line of irregular hummocks. If one's foot missed a hummock, he plunged down through unpacked snow and usually to a fall. Also, the moose-hunter had been an exceptionally long-legged individual. Joy, who was eager now that the two men should stake, and fearing that they were slackening pace on account of her evident weariness, insisted on taking the lead. The speed and manner in which she negotiated the precarious footing, called out

Shorty's unqualified approval.

"Look at her!" he cried. "She's the real goods an' the red meat.

Look at them moccasins swing along. No high-heels there. She uses the legs God gave her. She's the right squaw for any bear-hunter."

She flashed back a smile of acknowledgment that included Smoke. He caught a feeling of chumminess, though at the same time he was bitingly aware that it was very much of a woman who embraced him in that comradely smile.

Looking back, as they came to the bank of Squaw Creek, they could see the stampede, strung out irregularly, struggling along the descent of the divide.

They slipped down the bank to the creek bed. The stream, frozen solidly to bottom, was from twenty to thirty feet wide and ran between six- and eight-foot earth banks of alluvial wash. No recent feet had disturbed the snow that lay upon its ice, and they knew they were above the Discovery claim and the last stakes of the Sea Lion stampeders.

"Look out for springs," Joy warned, as Smoke led the way down the creek. "At seventy below you'll lose your feet if you break through."

These springs, common to most Klondike streams, never ceased at the lowest temperatures. The water flowed out from the banks and lay in pools which were cuddled from the cold by later surface-freezings and snow falls. Thus, a man, stepping on dry snow, might break through half an inch of ice-skin and find himself up to the knees in water. In five minutes, unless able to remove the wet gear, the loss of one's foot was the penalty.

Though only three in the afternoon, the long grey twilight of the Arctic had settled down. They watched for a blazed tree on either bank, which would show the centre-stake of the last claim located. Joy, impulsively eager, was the first to find it. She darted ahead of Smoke, crying: "Somebody's been here! See the snow! Look for the blaze! There it is! See that spruce!"

She sank suddenly to her waist in the snow.

"Now I've done it," she said woefully. Then she cried: "Don't come near me! I'll wade out."

Step by step, each time breaking through the thin skin of ice concealed under the dry snow, she forced her way to solid footing. Smoke did not wait, but sprang to the bank, where dry and seasoned twigs and sticks, lodged amongst the brush by spring freshets, waited the match. By the time she reached his side, the first flames and flickers of an assured fire were rising.

"Sit down!" he commanded.

She obediently sat down in the snow. He slipped his pack from his back, and spread a blanket for her feet.

From above came the voices of the stampedeers who followed them.

"Let Shorty stake," she urged

"Go on, Shorty," Smoke said, as he attacked her moccasins, already stiff with ice. "Pace off a thousand feet and place the two centre-stakes. We can fix the corner-stakes afterwards."

With his knife Smoke cut away the lacings and leather of the moccasins. So stiff were they with ice that they snapped and crackled under the hacking and sawing. The Siwash socks and heavy woollen stockings were sheaths of ice. It was as if her feet and calves were encased in corrugated iron.

"How are your feet?" he asked, as he worked.

"Pretty numb. I can't move nor feel my toes. But it will be all right. The fire is burning beautifully. Watch out you don't freeze your own hands. They must be numb now from the way you're fumbling."

He slipped his mittens on, and for nearly a minute smashed the open hands savagely against his sides. When he felt the blood-prickles, he pulled off the mittens and ripped and tore and sawed and hacked at the frozen garments. The white skin of one foot appeared, then that of the other, to be exposed to the bite of seventy below zero, which is the equivalent of one hundred and two below freezing.

Then came the rubbing with snow, carried on with an intensity of cruel fierceness, till she squirmed and shrank and moved her toes, and joyously complained of the hurt.

He half-dragged her, and she half-lifted herself, nearer to the fire. He placed her feet on the blanket close to the flesh-saving flames.

"You'll have to take care of them for a while," he said.

She could now safely remove her mittens and manipulate her own feet, with the wisdom of the initiated, being watchful that the heat of the fire was absorbed slowly. While she did this, he attacked his hands. The snow did not melt nor moisten. Its light crystals were like so much sand. Slowly the stings and pangs of circulation came back into the chilled flesh. Then he tended the fire, unstrapped the light pack from her back, and got out a complete change of foot-gear.

Shorty returned along the creek-bed and climbed the bank to them.

"I sure staked a full thousan' feet," he proclaimed. "Number twenty-seven and number twenty-eight, though I'd only got the upper stake of twenty-seven, when I met the first geezer of the bunch behind. He just straight declared I wasn't goin' to stake twenty-eight. An' I told him"

"Yes, yes," Joy cried. "What did you tell him?"

"Well, I told him straight that if he didn't back up plum five hundred feet I'd sure punch his frozen nose into ice-cream an' chocolate eclaires. He backed up, an' I've got in the centre-stakes of two full an' honest five-hundred-foot claims. He staked next, and I guess by now the bunch has Squaw Creek located to head-waters an' down the other side. Ourn is safe. It's too dark to see now, but we can put out the corner-stakes in the mornin'."

III.

When they awoke, they found a change had taken place during the night. So warm was it, that Shorty and Smoke, still in their mutual blankets, estimated the temperature at no more than twenty below. The cold snap had broken. On top their blankets lay six inches of frost crystals.

"Good morning! how's your feet?" was Smoke's greeting across the ashes of the fire to where Joy Gastell, carefully shaking aside the snow, was sitting up in her sleeping furs.

Shorty built the fire and quarried ice from the creek, while Smoke cooked breakfast. Daylight came on as they finished the meal.

"You go an' fix them corner-stakes, Smoke," Shorty said. "There's a gravel under where I chopped ice for the coffee, an' I'm goin' to melt water and wash a pan of that same gravel for luck."

Smoke departed, axe in hand, to blaze the stakes. Starting from the down-stream centre-stake of 'twenty-seven,' he headed at right angles across the narrow valley towards its rim. He proceeded methodically, almost automatically, for his mind was alive with recollections of the night before. He felt, somehow, that he had won to empery over the delicate lines and firm muscles of those feet and ankles he had rubbed with snow, and this empery seemed to extend

to all women. In dim and fiery ways a feeling of possession mastered him. It seemed that all that was necessary was for him to walk up to this Joy Gastell, take her hand in his, and say "Come."

It was in this mood that he discovered something that made him forget empery over the white feet of woman. At the valley rim he blazed no corner-stake. He did not reach the valley rim, but, instead, he found himself confronted by another stream. He lined up with his eye a blasted willow tree and a big and recognizable spruce. He returned to the stream where were the centre stakes. He followed the bed of the creek around a wide horseshoe bend through the flat, and found that the two creeks were the same creek. Next, he floundered twice through the snow from valley rim to valley rim, running the first line from the lower stake of 'twenty-seven,' the second from the upper stake of 'twenty-eight,' and he found that THE UPPER STAKE OF THE LATTER WAS LOWER THAN THE LOWER STAKE OF THE FORMER. In the gray twilight and half-darkness Shorty had located their two claims on the horseshoe.

Smoke plodded back to the little camp. Shorty, at the end of washing a pan of gravel, exploded at sight of him.

"We got it!" Shorty cried, holding out the pan. "Look at it! A nasty mess of gold. Two hundred right there if it's a cent. She runs rich from the top of the wash-gravel. I've churned around placers some, but I never got butter like what's in this pan."

Smoke cast an incurious glance at the coarse gold, poured himself a cup of coffee at the fire, and sat down. Joy sensed something wrong and looked at him with eagerly solicitous eyes. Shorty, however, was disgruntled by his partner's lack of delight in the discovery.

"Why don't you kick in an' get excited?" he demanded. "We got our pile right here, unless you're stickin' up your nose at two-hundred-dollar pans."

Smoke took a swallow of coffee before replying.

"Shorty, why are our two claims here like the Panama Canal?"

"What's the answer?"

"Well, the eastern entrance of the Panama Canal is west of the western entrance, that's all."

"Go on," Shorty said. "I ain't seen the joke yet."

"In short, Shorty, you staked our two claims on a big horseshoe bend."

Shorty set the gold pan down in the snow and stood up.

"Go on," he repeated.

"The upper stake of twenty-eight is ten feet below the lower stake of twenty-seven."

"You mean we ain't got nothin', Smoke?"

"Worse than that; we've got ten feet less than nothing."

Shorty departed down the bank on the run. Five minutes later he returned. In response to Joy's look, he nodded. Without speech, he went over to a log and sat down to gaze steadily at the snow in front of his moccasins.

"We might as well break camp and start back for Dawson," Smoke said, beginning to fold the blankets.

"I am sorry, Smoke," Joy said. "It's all my fault."

"It's all right," he answered. "All in the day's work, you know."

"But it's my fault, wholly mine," she persisted. "Dad's staked for me down near Discovery, I know. I'll give you my claim."

He shook his head.

"Shorty," she pleaded.

Shorty shook his head and began to laugh. It was a colossal laugh.

Chuckles and muffled explosions yielded to hearty roars.

"It ain't hysterics," he explained, "I sure get powerful amused at times, an' this is one of them."

His gaze chanced to fall on the gold pan. He walked over and gravely kicked it, scattering the gold over the landscape.

"It ain't ourn," he said. "It belongs to the geezer I backed up five hundred feet last night. An' what gets me is four hundred an' ninety of them feet was to the good . . . his good. Come on, Smoke. Let's start the hike to Dawson. Though if you're hankerin' to kill me I won't lift a finger to prevent."

SHORTY DREAMS.

I.