

"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.

"Funny you don't gamble none," Shorty said to Smoke one night in the Elkhorn. "Ain't it in your blood?"

"It is," Smoke answered. "But the statistics are in my head. I like an even break for my money."

All about them, in the huge bar-room, arose the click and rattle and rumble of a dozen games, at which fur-clad, moccasined men tried their luck. Smoke waved his hand to include them all.

"Look at them," he said. "It's cold mathematics that they will lose more than they win to-night, that the big proportion is losing right now."

"You're sure strong on figgers," Shorty murmured admiringly. "An' in the main you're right. But they's such a thing as facts. An' one fact is streaks of luck. They's times when every geezer playin' wins, as I know, for I've sat in in such games an' saw more'n one bank busted. The only way to win at gamblin' is wait for a hunch that you've got a lucky streak comin' and then to play it to the roof."

"It sounds simple," Smoke criticized. "So simple I can't see how men can lose."

"The trouble is," Shorty admitted, "that most men gets fooled on their hunches. On occasion I sure get fooled on mine. The thing is to try, an' find out."

Smoke shook his head.

"That's a statistic, too, Shorty. Most men prove wrong on their hunches."

"But don't you ever get one of them streaky feelin's that all you got to do is put your money down an' pick a winner?"

Smoke laughed.

"I'm too scared of the percentage against me. But I'll tell you what, Shorty. I'll throw a dollar on the 'high card' right now and see if it will buy us a drink."

Smoke was edging his way in to the faro table, when Shorty caught his arm.

"Hold on. I'm gettin' one of them hunches now. You put that dollar on roulette."

They went over to a roulette table near the bar.

"Wait till I give the word," Shorty counselled.

"What number?" Smoke asked.

"Pick it yourself. But wait till I say let her go."

"You don't mean to say I've got an even chance on that table?" Smoke argued.

"As good as the next geezers."

"But not as good as the bank's."

"Wait and see," Shorty urged. "Now! Let her go!"

The game-keeper had just sent the little ivory ball whirling around the smooth rim above the revolving, many-slotted wheel. Smoke, at the lower end of the table, reached over a player, and blindly tossed the dollar. It slid along the smooth, green cloth and stopped fairly in the centre of '34.'

The ball came to rest, and the game-keeper announced, "Thirty-four wins!" He swept the table, and alongside of Smoke's dollar, stacked thirty-five dollars. Smoke drew the money in, and Shorty slapped him on the shoulder.

"Now, that was the real goods of a hunch, Smoke! How'd I know it? There's no tellin'. I just knew you'd win. Why, if that dollar of yours'd fell on any other number it'd won just the same. When the hunch is right, you just can't help winnin'."

"Suppose it had come 'double nought'?" Smoke queried, as they made their way to the bar.

"Then your dollar'd ben on 'double nought,'" was Shorty's answer. "They's no gettin' away from it. A hunch is a hunch. Here's how. Come on back to the table. I got a hunch, after pickin' you for a winner, that I can pick some few numbers myself."

"Are you playing a system?" Smoke asked, at the end of ten minutes, when his partner had dropped a hundred dollars.

Shorty shook his head indignantly, as he spread his chips out in the vicinities of '3,' '11,' and '17,' and tossed a spare chip on the 'green.'

"Hell is sure cluttered with geezers that played systems," he exposted, as the keeper raked the table.

From idly watching, Smoke became fascinated, following closely every detail of the game from the whirling of the ball to the making and the paying of the bets. He made no plays, however, merely

contenting himself with looking on. Yet so interested was he, that Shorty, announcing that he had had enough, with difficulty drew Smoke away from the table. The game-keeper returned Shorty the gold sack he had deposited as a credential for playing, and with it went a slip of paper on which was scribbled, "Out . . . 350 dollars." Shorty carried the sack and the paper across the room and handed them to the weigher, who sat behind a large pair of gold-scales. Out of Shorty's sack he weighed 350 dollars, which he poured into the coffer of the house.

"That hunch of yours was another one of those statistics," Smoke jeered.

"I had to play it, didn't I, in order to find out?" Shorty retorted.

"I reckon I was crowdin' some just on account of tryin' to convince you they's such a thing as hunches."

"Never mind, Shorty," Smoke laughed. "I've got a hunch right now--"

Shorty's eyes sparkled as he cried eagerly: "What is it? Kick in an' play it pronto."

"It's not that kind, Shorty. Now, what I've got is a hunch that some day I'll work out a system that will beat the spots off that table."

"System!" Shorty groaned, then surveyed his partner with a vast pity. "Smoke, listen to your side-kicker an' leave system alone. Systems is sure losers. They ain't no hunches in systems."

"That's why I like them," Smoke answered. "A system is statistical. When you get the right system you can't lose, and that's the difference between it and a hunch. You never know when the right hunch is going wrong."

"But I know a lot of systems that went wrong, an' I never seen a system win." Shorty paused and sighed. "Look here, Smoke, if you're gettin' cracked on systems this ain't no place for you, an' it's about time we hit the trail again."

II.

During the several following weeks, the two partners played at cross purposes. Smoke was bent on spending his time watching the roulette game in the Elkhorn, while Shorty was equally bent on travelling trail. At last Smoke put his foot down when a stampede was proposed for two hundred miles down the Yukon.

"Look here, Shorty," he said, "I'm not going. That trip will take ten days, and before that time I hope to have my system in proper working order. I could almost win with it now. What are you dragging me around the country this way for anyway?"

"Smoke, I got to take care of you," was Shorty's reply. "You're getting nutty. I'd drag you stampedin' to Jericho or the North Pole if I could keep you away from that table."

"It's all right, Shorty. But just remember I've reached full man-grown, meat-eating size. The only dragging you'll do, will be dragging home the dust I'm going to win with that system of mine, and you'll most likely have to do it with a dog-team."

Shorty's response was a groan.

"And I don't want you to be bucking any games on your own," Smoke went on. "We're going to divide the winnings, and I'll need all our

money to get started. That system's young yet, and it's liable to trip me for a few falls before I get it lined up."

III.

At last, after long hours and days spent at watching the table, the night came when Smoke proclaimed he was ready, and Shorty, glum and pessimistic, with all the seeming of one attending a funeral, accompanied his partner to the Elkhorn. Smoke bought a stack of chips and stationed himself at the game-keeper's end of the table. Again and again the ball was whirled and the other players won or lost, but Smoke did not venture a chip. Shorty waxed impatient.

"Buck in, buck in," he urged. "Let's get this funeral over. What's the matter? Got cold feet?"

Smoke shook his head and waited. A dozen plays went by, and then, suddenly, he placed ten one-dollar chips on '26.' The number won, and the keeper paid Smoke three hundred and fifty dollars. A dozen plays went by, twenty plays, and thirty, when Smoke placed ten dollars on '32.' Again he received three hundred and fifty dollars.

"It's a hunch." Shorty whispered vociferously in his ear. "Ride it! Ride it!"

Half an hour went by, during which Smoke was inactive, then he placed ten dollars on '34' and won.

"A hunch!" Shorty whispered.

"Nothing of the sort," Smoke whispered back. "It's the system. Isn't she a dandy?"

"You can't tell me," Shorty contended. "Hunches comes in mighty funny ways. You might think it's a system, but it ain't. Systems is impossible. They can't happen. It's a sure hunch you're playin'."

Smoke now altered his play. He bet more frequently, with single chips, scattered here and there, and he lost more often than he won.

"Quit it," Shorty advised. "Cash in. You've rung the bull's eye three times, an' you're ahead a thousand. You can't keep it up."

At this moment the ball started whirling, and Smoke dropped ten chips on '26.' The ball fell into the slot of '26,' and the keeper again paid him three hundred and fifty dollars. "If you're plum crazy an' got the immortal cinch, bet'm the limit," Shorty said. "Put down twenty-five next time."

A quarter of an hour passed, during which Smoke won and lost on small scattering bets. Then, with the abruptness that characterized his big betting, he placed twenty-five dollars on the 'double nought,' and the keeper paid him eight hundred and seventy-five dollars.

"Wake me up, Smoke, I'm dreamin'," Shorty moaned.

Smoke smiled, consulted his note-book, and became absorbed in calculation. He continually drew the note-book from his pocket, and from time to time jotted down figures.

A crowd had packed densely around the table, while the players themselves were attempting to cover the same numbers he covered. It was then that a change came over his play. Ten times in succession he placed ten dollars on '18' and lost. At this stage he was deserted by the hardiest. He changed his number and won another three hundred and fifty dollars. Immediately the players were back with him, deserting again after a series of losing bets.

"Quit it, Smoke, quit it," Shorty advised. "The longest string of hunches is only so long, an' your string's finished. No more bull's-eyes for you."

"I'm going to ring her once again before I cash in," Smoke answered.

For a few minutes, with varying luck, he played scattering chips over the table, and then dropped twenty-five dollars on the 'double nought.'

"I'll take my slip now," he said to the dealer, as he won.

"Oh, you don't need to show it to me," Shorty said, as they walked to the weigher. "I ben keepin' track. You're something like thirty-six hundred to the good. How near am I?"

"Thirty-six-thirty," Smoke replied. "And now you've got to pack the dust home. That was the agreement."

IV.

"Don't crowd your luck," Shorty pleaded with Smoke, the next night, in the cabin, as he evidenced preparations to return to the Elkhorn. "You played a mighty long string of hunches, but you played it out. If you go back you'll sure drop all your winnings."

"But I tell you it isn't hunches, Shorty. It's statistics. It's a system. It can't lose."

"System be damned. They ain't no such a thing as system. I made seventeen straight passes at a crap table once. Was it system? Nope. It was fool luck, only I had cold feet an' didn't dast let it ride. It it'd rid, instead of me drawin' down after the third pass, I'd a won over thirty thousan' on the original two-bit piece."

"Just the same, Shorty, this is a real system."

"Huh! You got to show me."

"I did show you. Come on with me now and I'll show you again."

When they entered the Elkhorn, all eyes centred on Smoke, and those about the table made way for him as he took up his old place at the keeper's end. His play was quite unlike that of the previous night. In the course of an hour and a half he made only four bets, but each

bet was for twenty-five dollars, and each bet won. He cashed in thirty-five hundred dollars, and Shorty carried the dust home to the cabin.

"Now's the time to jump the game," Shorty advised, as he sat on the edge of his bunk and took off his moccasins. "You're seven thousand ahead. A man's a fool that'd crowd his luck harder."

"Shorty, a man would be a blithering lunatic if he didn't keep on backing a winning system like mine."

"Smoke, you're a sure bright boy. You're college-learnt. You know more'n a minute than I could know in forty thousand years. But just the same you're dead wrong when you call your luck a system. I've ben around some, an' seen a few, an' I tell you straight an' confidential an' all-assurin', a system to beat a bankin' game ain't possible."

"But I'm showing you this one. It's a pipe."

"No, you're not, Smoke. It's a pipe-dream. I'm asleep. Bime by I'll wake up, an' build the fire, an' start breakfast."

"Well, my unbelieving friend, there's the dust. Heft it."

So saying, Smoke tossed the bulging gold-sack upon his partner's

knees. It weighed thirty-five pounds, and Shorty was fully aware of the crush of its impact on his flesh.

"It's real," Smoke hammered his point home.

"Huh! I've saw some mighty real dreams in my time. In a dream all things is possible. In real life a system ain't possible. Now, I ain't never ben to college, but I'm plum justified in sizin' up this gamblin' orgy of ourn as a sure enough dream."

"Hamilton's 'Law of Parsimony,'" Smoke laughed.

"I ain't never heard of the geezer, but his dope's sure right. I'm dreamin', Smoke, an' you're just snoopin' around in my dream an' tormentin' me with system. If you love me, if you sure do love me, you'll just yell, 'Shorty! Wake up!' An' I'll wake up an' start breakfast."

V.

The third night of play, as Smoke laid his first bet, the game-keeper shoved fifteen dollars back to him.

"Ten's all you can play," he said. "The limit's come down."

"Gettin' picayune," Shorty sneered.

"No one has to play at this table that don't want to," the keeper retorted. "And I'm willing to say straight out in meeting that we'd sooner your pardner didn't play at our table."

"Scared of his system, eh?" Shorty challenged, as the keeper paid over three hundred and fifty dollars.

"I ain't saying I believe in system, because I don't. There never was a system that'd beat roulette or any percentage game. But just the same I've seen some queer strings of luck, and I ain't going to let this bank go bust if I can help it."

"Cold feet."

"Gambling is just as much business, my friend, as any other business. We ain't philanthropists."

Night by night, Smoke continued to win. His method of play varied. Expert after expert, in the jam about the table, scribbled down his bets and numbers in vain attempts to work out his system. They complained of their inability to get a clew to start with, and swore that it was pure luck, though the most colossal streak of it they had ever seen.

It was Smoke's varied play that obfuscated them. Sometimes, consulting his note-book or engaging in long calculations, an hour elapsed without his staking a chip. At other times he would win three limit-bets and clean up a thousand dollars and odd in five or ten minutes. At still other times, his tactics would be to scatter single chips prodigally and amazingly over the table. This would continue for from ten to thirty minutes of play, when, abruptly, as the ball whirled through the last few of its circles, he would play the limit on column, colour, and number, and win all three. Once, to complete confusion in the minds of those that strove to divine his secret, he lost forty straight bets, each at the limit. But each night, play no matter how diversely, Shorty carried home thirty-five hundred dollars for him.

"It ain't no system," Shorty expounded at one of their bed-going discussions. "I follow you, an' follow you, but they ain't no figgerin' it out. You never play twice the same. All you do is pick winners when you want to, an' when you don't want to, you just on purpose don't."

"Maybe you're nearer right than you think, Shorty. I've just got to pick losers sometimes. It's part of the system."

"System--hell! I've talked with every gambler in town, an' the last one is agreed they ain't no such thing as system."

"Yet I'm showing them one all the time."

"Look here, Smoke." Shorty paused over the candle, in the act of blowing it out. "I'm real irritated. Maybe you think this is a candle. It ain't. An' this ain't me neither. I'm out on trail somewheres, in my blankets, lyin' on my back with my mouth open, an' dreamin' all this. That ain't you talkin', any more than this candle is a candle."

"It's funny, how I happen to be dreaming along with you then," Smoke persisted.

"No, it ain't. You're part of my dream, that's all. I've hearn many a man talk in my dreams. I want to tell you one thing, Smoke. I'm gettin' mangy an' mad. If this here dream keeps up much more I'm goin' to bite my veins an' howl."

VI.

On the sixth night of play at the Elkhorn, the limit was reduced to five dollars.

"It's all right," Smoke assured the game-keeper. "I want thirty-five hundred to-night, as usual, and you only compel me to play longer. I've got to pick twice as many winners, that's all."

"Why don't you buck somebody else's table?" the keeper demanded wrathfully.

"Because I like this one." Smoke glanced over to the roaring stove only a few feet away. "Besides, there are no draughts here, and it is warm and comfortable."

On the ninth night, when Shorty had carried the dust home, he had a fit.

"I quit, Smoke, I quit," he began. "I know when I got enough. I ain't dreamin'. I'm wide awake. A system can't be, but you got one just the same. There's nothin' in the rule o' three. The almanac's clean out. The world's gone smash. There's nothin' regular an' uniform no more. The multiplication table's gone loco. Two is eight, nine is eleven, and two-times-six is eight hundred an' forty-six--an'--an' a half. Anything is everything, an' nothing's all,

an' twice all is cold cream, milk-shakes, an' calico horses. You've got a system. Figgers beat the figgerin'. What ain't is, an' what isn't has to be. The sun rises in the west, the moon's a paystreak, the stars is canned corn-beef, scurvy's the blessin' of God, him that dies kicks again, rocks floats, water's gas, I ain't me, you're somebody else, an' mebbe we're twins if we ain't hashed-brown potatoes fried in verdigris. Wake me up! Somebody! Oh! Wake me up!"

VII.

The next morning a visitor came to the cabin. Smoke knew him, Harvey Moran, the owner of all the games in the Tivoli. There was a note of appeal in his deep gruff voice as he plunged into his business.

"It's like this, Smoke," he began. "You've got us all guessing. I'm representing nine other game-owners and myself from all the saloons in town. We don't understand. We know that no system ever worked against roulette. All the mathematic sharps in the colleges have told us gamblers the same thing. They say that roulette itself is the system, the one and only system, and, therefore, that no system can beat it, for that would mean arithmetic has gone bug-house."

Shorty nodded his head violently.

"If a system can beat a system, then there's no such thing as system," the gambler went on. "In such a case anything could be possible--a thing could be in two different places at once, or two things could be in the same place that's only large enough for one at the same time."

"Well, you've seen me play," Smoke answered defiantly; "and if you think it's only a string of luck on my part, why worry?"

"That's the trouble. We can't help worrying. It's a system you've got, and all the time we know it can't be. I've watched you five nights now, and all I can make out is that you favour certain numbers and keep on winning. Now the ten of us game-owners have got together, and we want to make a friendly proposition. We'll put a roulette table in a back room of the Elkhorn, pool the bank against you, and have you buck us. It will be all quiet and private. Just you and Shorty and us. What do you say?"

"I think it's the other way around," Smoke answered. "It's up to you to come and see me. I'll be playing in the bar-room of the Elkhorn to-night. You can watch me there just as well."

VIII.

That night, when Smoke took up his customary place at the table, the keeper shut down the game.

"The game's closed," he said. "Boss's orders."

But the assembled game-owners were not to be balked. In a few minutes they arranged a pool, each putting in a thousand, and took over the table.

"Come on and buck us," Harvey Moran challenged, as the keeper sent the ball on its first whirl around.

"Give me the twenty-five limit," Smoke suggested.

"Sure; go to it."

Smoke immediately placed twenty-five chips on the 'double nought,' and won.

Moran wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Go on," he said. "We got ten thousand in this bank."

At the end of an hour and a half, the ten thousand was Smoke's.

"The bank's bust," the keeper announced.

"Got enough?" Smoke asked.

The game-owners looked at one another. They were awed. They, the fatted proteges of the laws of chance, were undone. They were up against one who had more intimate access to those laws, or who had invoked higher and undreamed laws.

"We quit," Moran said. "Ain't that right, Burke?"

Big Burke, who owned the games in the M. and G. Saloon, nodded.

"The impossible has happened," he said. "This Smoke here has got a system all right. If we let him go on we'll all bust. All I can see, if we're goin' to keep our tables running, is to cut down the limit to a dollar, or to ten cents, or a cent. He won't win much in a night with such stakes."

All looked at Smoke. He shrugged his shoulders.

"In that case, gentlemen, I'll have to hire a gang of men to play at all your tables. I can pay them ten dollars for a four-hour shift and make money."

"Then we'll shut down our tables," Big Burke replied. "Unless--"
He hesitated and ran his eye over his fellows to see that they were with him. "Unless you're willing to talk business. What will you sell the system for?"

"Thirty thousand dollars," Smoke answered. "That's a tax of three thousand apiece."

They debated and nodded.

"And you'll tell us your system?"

"Surely."

"And you'll promise not to play roulette in Dawson ever again?"

"No, sir," Smoke said positively. "I'll promise not to play this system again."

"My God!" Moran exploded. "You haven't got other systems, have you?"

"Hold on!" Shorty cried. "I want to talk to my pardner. Come over here, Smoke, on the side."

Smoke followed into a quiet corner of the room, while hundreds of

curious eyes centred on him and Shorty.

"Look here, Smoke," Shorty whispered hoarsely. "Mebbe it ain't a dream. In which case you're sellin' out almighty cheap. You've sure got the world by the slack of its pants. They's millions in it. Shake it! Shake it hard!"

"But if it's a dream?" Smoke queried softly.

"Then, for the sake of the dream an' the love of Mike, stick them gamblers up good and plenty. What's the good of dreamin' if you can't dream to the real right, dead sure, eternal finish?"

"Fortunately, this isn't a dream, Shorty."

"Then if you sell out for thirty thousan', I'll never forgive you."

"When I sell out for thirty thousand, you'll fall on my neck an' wake up to find out that you haven't been dreaming at all. This is no dream, Shorty. In about two minutes you'll see you have been wide awake all the time. Let me tell you that when I sell out it's because I've got to sell out."

Back at the table, Smoke informed the game-owners that his offer still held. They proffered him their paper to the extent of three thousand each.

"Hold out for the dust," Shorty cautioned.

"I was about to intimate that I'd take the money weighed out," Smoke said.

The owner of the Elkhorn cashed their paper, and Shorty took possession of the gold-dust.

"Now, I don't want to wake up," he chortled, as he hefted the various sacks. "Toted up, it's a seventy thousan' dream. It's be too blamed expensive to open my eyes, roll out of the blankets, an' start breakfast."

"What's your system?" Big Burke demanded. "We've paid for it, and we want it."

Smoke led the way to the table.

"Now, gentlemen, bear with me a moment. This isn't an ordinary system. It can scarcely be called legitimate, but its one great virtue is that it works. I've got my suspicious, but I'm not saying anything. You watch. Mr Keeper, be ready with the ball. Wait, I am going to pick '26.' Consider I've bet on it. Be ready, Mr Keeper--Now!"

The ball whirled around.

"You observe," Smoke went on, "that '9' was directly opposite."

The ball finished in '26.'

Big Burke swore deep in his chest, and all waited.

"For 'double nought' to win, '11' must be opposite. Try it yourself and see."

"But the system?" Moran demanded impatiently. "We know you can pick winning numbers, and we know what those numbers are; but how do you do it?"

"By observed sequences. By accident I chanced twice to notice the ball whirled when '9' was opposite. Both times '26' won. After that I saw it happen again. Then I looked for other sequences, and found them. 'Double nought' opposite fetches '32,' and '11' fetches 'double nought.' It doesn't always happen, but it USUALLY happens. You notice, I say 'usually.' As I said before, I have my suspicions, but I'm not saying anything."

Big Burke, with a sudden dawn of comprehension reached over, stopped the wheel, and examined it carefully. The heads of the nine other game-owners bent over and joined in the examination. Big Burke

straightened up and cast a glance at the near-by stove.

"Hell," he said. "It wasn't any system at all. The table stood close to the fire, and the blamed wheel's warped. And we've been worked to a frazzle. No wonder he liked this table. He couldn't have bucked for sour apples at any other table."

Harvey Moran gave a great sigh of relief and wiped his forehead.

"Well, anyway," he said, "it's cheap at the price just to find out that it wasn't a system." His face began to work, and then he broke into laughter and slapped Smoke on the shoulder. "Smoke, you had us going for a while, and we patting ourselves on the back because you were letting our tables alone! Say, I've got some real fizz I'll open if all you'll come over to the Tivoli with me."

Later, back in the cabin, Shorty silently overhauled and hefted the various bulging gold-sacks. He finally piled them on the table, sat down on the edge of his bunk, and began taking off his moccasins.

"Seventy thousan'," he calculated. "It weighs three hundred and fifty pounds. And all out of a warped wheel an' a quick eye. Smoke, you eat'm raw, you eat'm alive, you work under water, you've given me the jim-jams; but just the same I know it's a dream. It's only in dreams that the good things comes true. I'm almighty unanxious to wake up. I hope I never wake up."

"Cheer up," Smoke answered. "You won't. There are a lot of philosophy sharps that think men are sleep-walkers. You're in good company."

Shorty got up, went to the table, selected the heaviest sack, and cuddled it in his arms as if it were a baby.

"I may be sleep-walkin'," he said, "but as you say, I'm sure in mighty good company."