

THE FIRE FLOWER

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CHAPTER I: SOLITUDE.

Sheldon had plunged on into this new country rather recklessly, being in reckless mood. Now, five days northward of Belle Fortune, he knew that he had somewhere taken the wrong trail.

The knowledge came upon him gradually. There was the suspicion before ten o'clock that morning, when the stream he followed seemed to him to be running a little too much to the northwest. But he had pushed on, watchful of every step, seeking a blazed tree or the monument of a stone set upon a rock.

When he made camp at noon he was still undecided, inclined to believe that the wise thing would be to turn back. But he did not turn back. He was his own man now; all time was before him; the gigantic wilderness about him was grateful. At night, when he had yanked his small pack down from his horse's saddle, suspicion had grown into certainty. He smoked his good-night pipe in deep content.

If you could run a line straight from Belle Fortune to Ruminoff Shanty—and you'd want both tunnel and aeroplane to do the job nicely!—your line would measure exactly two hundred and forty miles. It would cut almost in halves the Sasnookee-keewan, the country into which few men come, let entirely alone by the Indians who with simple emphasis term it "Bad Country."

Men have found gold on Gold River, where the Russian camp of Ruminoff Shanty made history half a century ago; they have taken out the pay-dirt at Belle Fortune. Between the two points they have made many trails during fifty years, trails which invariably turn to

east or west of the Sasnooke-keewan. For here is a land of fierce, iron-boweled mountains, of tangled brush which grows thick and defies the traveler, of long reaches, of lava-rock and granite, of mad, white, raging winters.

“Leave it alone,” men say down in Belle Fortune and up in Ruminoff. “It’s No-Luck Land. Many a poor devil’s gone in that never came out. And never a man brought a show of color out of it.”

Since Belle Fortune had dropped one day behind him, it had all been new country to Sheldon. Although summer was on its way, there had been few men before him since the winter had torn out the trails. Here and there, upon the north slopes and in the shaded cañons, patches and mounds of snow were thawing slowly.

More than once had he come to a forking of the ways, but he had pushed on without hesitating, content to be driving ever deeper into the wilderness. He planned vaguely on reaching French Meadows by way of the upper waters of the Little Smoky, climbing the ridge whence rumor had it you could see fifteen small lakes at once. But what mattered it, French Meadows or the very heart of the Sasnooke-keewan?

A man who took life as it came, was John Sheldon; who lived joyously, heedlessly, often enough recklessly. When other men grumbled he had been known to laugh. While these last lean, hard years had toughened both physical and mental fiber, they had not hardened his heart. And yet, a short five days ago, he had had murder in his heart.

He had just made his “pile”; he, with Charlie Ward, who, Sheldon had thought, was straight. And straight the poor devil would have

been had it not been that he was weak and there was a woman. He wanted her; she wanted his money. It's an old story.

Sheldon for once was roused from his careless, good-natured acceptance of what the day might bring. He had befriended Ward, and Ward had robbed him. In the first flare of wrath he took up the man's trail. He followed the two for ten days, coming up with them then at Belle Fortune.

There had been ten days of riot, wine and cards and roulette-wheel, for Charlie Ward and the woman. Sheldon, getting word here and there, had had little hope of recovering his money. But he did not expect what he did find. Charlie was dying—had shot himself in a fit of remorseful despondency. The woman was staring at him, grief-stricken, stunned, utterly human after all.

She had loved him, it seemed; that was the strange part of it. The few gold pieces which were left she hurled at Sheldon as he stood in the door, cursing him. He turned, heard Charlie's gasps through the chink of the coins, went out, tossed his revolver into the road, bought a pack outfit, shouldered a rifle, and left Belle Fortune "for a hunting trip," as he explained it to himself. He had never got a bear in his life and—

And there is nothing in all the world like the deepest solitude of the woods to take out of a man's heart the bitterness of revenge. Sheldon was a little ashamed of himself. He wanted to forget gold and the seeking thereof. And therefore, perhaps, his fate took it upon herself to hide a certain forking of the trails under a patch of snow so that he turned away from French Meadows and into the Sasnooke-keewan.

Now he was lost. Lost merely in so far as he did not know where he was; not that he need worry about being able to retrace his steps. He had provisions, ammunition, fishing tackle, bedding; was in a corner of the world where men did not frequently come, and could stay here the whole summer if he saw fit. He had been hunting gold all the years of his life, it seemed to him. What had it brought him? What good had it done him? Never was man in better mood to be lost than was John Sheldon as he knocked out his pipe, rolled into his blankets, and went to sleep.

Now, the sixth day out he watched his way warily. If he were not already in the Sasnookee-keewan, he should to-day, or by to-morrow noon at the latest, come to the first of the Nine Lakes. He had studied the stars last night; he had watched the sun to-day. It was guesswork at best, since he had had no thought to prick his way by map.

Night came again, and he looked from a ridge down upon other ridges, some bare and granite-topped, some timbered, with here and there a tall peak looking out across the broken miles, with no hint of Lake Nopong. He made his way down a long slope in the thickening dusk, seeking a grassy spot to tether his packhorse. That night the animal crunched sunflower leaves and the tenderer shoots of the mountain bushes. With the dawn Sheldon again pushed on, seeking better pasture.

Late that afternoon he came into a delightfully green meadow, where a raging creek grew suddenly gentle and wandered through crisp herbage and little white flowers. There was a confusion of deer-tracks where a narrow trail slipped through the alders of the creek banks. Upon the rim of the meadow was a great log freshly torn into bits, as though by the great paws of a bear.

Under a tall, isolated cedar about whose base there was dry ground, Sheldon removed the canvas-rolled pack and the pack-saddle, turning his horse into an alder-surrounded arm of the meadow where the grass was thickest and tallest. While the sun was still high he cut the branches which he would throw his blankets upon, fried his bacon and potatoes, boiled his coffee, and ate heartily.

Then he sat upon the log at which the bear had torn, saw the tracks and nodded over them, noting that they were only a few days old—smoked his pipe, and out of the fulness of content watched his hungry horse ripping away at the lush grass.

“Take your time, Buck, old boy,” he said gently. “We’ll stay right here until you get a bellyful. We don’t have to move on until snow flies, if we don’t want to. I think that this is one of the spots of the world we’ve been looking for a long time. I’d lay a man a bet, two to one and he names the stakes, that there’s not another human being in three days’ walk.”

And a very little after sunset, with the same thought soothing him, he went to sleep.

CHAPTER II. BONES.

The seventh day out Sheldon began in practical manner by shaving. His beard was beginning to turn in and itch. And, even upon trips like this, he had yet to understand why a fellow shouldn't include in his pack the razor, brush, and soap, which, altogether, occupied no more space than a pocket tin of tobacco.

He was up and about in the full glory of the morning, before the last star had gone. A grub from a fallen log went onto a hook, into the creek, and down a trout's eager throat, and the trout itself was brown in the pan almost as the coffee began to bubble over. Thirty minutes after he had waked, he was leading the full-stomached Buck northward along the stream's grassy banks.

The world seemed a good place to live in this morning, clean and sweet, blown through with the scents of green growing things. The ravine widened before him; the timber was big boled with grassy, open spaces; though there was no sign of a trail other than the tracks left by wild things coming to feed and water, he swung on briskly.

"If I really am in the Sasnokee-keewan," he told himself early in the day, "Then men have maligned it, or else I have stumbled into a corner of it they have missed somehow. It strikes me as the nearest thing imaginable to the earthly paradise."

He had turned out to the right, following the open, coming close under a line of cliffs which stood up, sheer and formidable, along the edge of the meadow. And then, suddenly, unexpectedly, he came upon the first sign he had had for three days that a man had

ever been before him in these endless woods. Upon the rocky ground at the foot of the cliffs was a man's skeleton.

Sheldon stopped and stared. The thing shocked him. It seemed inconceivable that a man could have died here, miserably as this poor fellow had done, alone, crying out aloud to the solitudes which answered him softly with gently stirring branches and murmuring water. Sheldon's mood, one of serene, ineffable peace, had had so strong a grasp upon him that this sign of tragedy and death was hard to grasp.

He stood long, staring down at the heap of bones. They were tumbled this way and that. He shuddered. And yet he stood there, fascinated, wondering, letting his suddenly awakened, overstimulated imagination have its way.

There came the query: "What killed him?"

Sheldon looked up at the cliffs. The man might have fallen. But the skull was intact; there had been no fracture there. Nor—Sheldon forgot his previous revulsion of feeling in his strong curiosity—nor was there a broken bone of arm or leg to indicate a fall. The bones were large; it had been a big man, six feet or over, and heavy. No; in spite of the position of the disordered skeleton, death had not come that way.

For half an hour Sheldon lingered here, restrained a little by the thoughts rising naturally to the occasion, seeking to read the riddle set before him. There were no rattlesnakes here, no poisonous insects at these altitudes. The man had not fallen. To come here at all he must have been one who knew the mountains; then he had not starved, for the streams were filled with trout, and he would

know the way to trap small game enough to keep life in him. And what man ever came so deep into the wild without a rifle?

It seemed to Sheldon that there was only one answer. The man must have got caught here in an early snowstorm; he must have lost his head; instead of going calmly about preparing shelter and laying up provisions for the winter, he must have raced on madly, getting more hopelessly lost at every bewildered step—and then the end had come, hideously.

At last Sheldon moved on, pondering the thoughts which centered about the white pile of bones which once, perhaps four or five or six years ago, had been a man. How the poor devil must have cursed the nights that blotted the world out, the winds which shrieked of snow, the mountains which rose like walls about a convict.

“What became of his gun?” cried Sheldon suddenly, speaking aloud. “The buckle from his belt, the metal things in his pockets, knife, coins, cartridges? The things which prowling animals can’t eat! They don’t carry such things off!”

He came back, walking swiftly. There was little grass so close to the cliffs; nothing but bare, rocky ground and a few bits of dry wood, two or three old cones dropped from a pine; nothing to hide the articles which Sheldon sought. But, although he made assurance doubly sure by searching carefully for more than an hour, back and forth along the cliffs, out among the trees, he found nothing. Not so much as the sole of a boot.

“And that,” muttered Sheldon, taking up Buck’s lead rope, “if a man asked me, is infernally strange.”

As he went on he strove frowningly for an explanation and found none. The man had not been alone? He had had a companion? This companion had taken his rifle, his knife and watch, or whatever might have been in his pockets, and had gone on. Possibly. But, then, why had he not taken the time to bury the body? And how was it that there was not a single shred of clothing?

“Coyotes may be so everlastingly hungry up here that they eat a man’s boots, soles, nails and all!” grunted Sheldon. “Only—I am not the kind of a tenderfoot to believe that particular brand of fairy tale. There’s not even a button!”

It is the way of the human intellect to contend with locks upon doors which shut on secrets. The mind, given half of the story, demands the remainder. John Sheldon, as he trudged on, grew half angry with himself because he could not answer the questions which insisted upon having answers. But before noon he had almost forgotten the scattered bones under the cliffs, the matter thrust to one rim of his thoughts which must now be given over almost entirely to finding trail.

For no longer was there meadow-land under foot. The strip of fairly level, grassy land was gone abruptly; beyond lay boulder-strewn slopes, fringed with dense brush, all but impassable to the packhorse.

Often the man must leave the animal while he went ahead seeking a way; often must the two of them turn back for some unexpected fall of cliff, all unseen until they were close to the edge, compelling them to retrace their steps perhaps a hundred yards, or five hundred, and many a time did Sheldon begin to think that the way was shut to the plucky brute that labored on under his pack.

But always he found a way on, a way down. And always, being a man used to the woods, did he keep in mind that the time might come when he'd have to turn back for good. If he could in time win on through, come out at the north end of the Sasnokee-keewan, then he would have had a trip which left nothing to be desired.

If, on the other hand, there came cliffs across the trail which Buck could not make his way down, around which they could not go—why, then, it was as well to have the way open this way. For Sheldon had no thought to desert the horse, without which just now he'd make far better time.

It was the hardest day he had had. That means that half a dozen times between dawn and dark the man hesitated, on the verge of turning back. Alone, he could have gone on, and with twice the speed; leading Buck, he wondered many a time if he could push on another mile without rewarding his horse with a broken leg. And yet, being a man who disliked turning back, and having to do with a horse that put all of his faith in his master unquestioningly, he put another ten miles between him and Belle Fortune that long, hard day.

In the afternoon he was forced to leave the creek which was rapidly growing into a river which shot shouting down through a rocky gorge, narrow and steep-sided. As the stream began turning off to the west, Sheldon climbed out of its cañon, made a wide détour to avoid a string of bare peaks lifting against the northern sky-line, and made a slow and difficult way over the ridge. In a sort of saddle he left his panting horse, while he clambered to a spire of rock lifted a score of feet above the pass.

He could look back from here and see the stream he had left. Here and there he caught a glimpse of the water, slipping away between the trees or flashing over a boulder as it sped down toward the gorge. He was glad that he had turned aside as soon as he had done; there would have been no getting out of that chasm unless a man came back here, and he had lost enough time as it was.

He turned his eyes toward the north. A true wilderness, if God ever made one to defy the taming hand of man—a wilderness of mountains, an endless stretch of bare ridges and snow-capped peaks, a maze of steep-sided gorges like the one he had just quitted, a stern, all but trackless labyrinth in which a man, if he were not a fool, must keep his wits about him.

“Gods knows,” meditated Sheldon, his spirit touched with that awe which comes to a man who stands alone as he stood, looking down upon the world where the Deity has builded in fierce, untrammelled majesty, “a man is a little thing in a place like this. I suppose, if I were wise, I would turn tail and get out while I can.”

And again he pushed on, northward. There was little feed here for Buck; both horse and man wanted water. Though they had left the creek but two hours ago, the dry air and summer sun had stirred in them the thirst which sleeps so little out on the trail.

Sheldon knew that they had but to make their way down into another ravine to find water. In these mountains, especially at this early season, there was no need for one to suffer from thirst. From his vantage-point, his eyes sweeping back and forth among the peaks and ridges, he picked out the way he should go for the rest of the day, the general direction for to-morrow. And then, Buck’s lead-rope again in his hand, he turned down, gradually seeking the

headwaters of the next stream, hoping for one of the tiny meadows like the one in which he had camped last night.

It was four o'clock when he started downward. It was nearly dark when he came to water. It was such country as he had never seen before. He fully expected to start back to-morrow. He had seen no game all day; he didn't believe that either deer or bear came here. What the deuce would they come for? They had more brains than a man. Besides, two or three times Buck had fallen; the next thing would be a broken leg, and no excuse for it.

But, nevertheless, he must find pasturage for the night. The horse had had nothing but the tenderer twigs of young bushes all day, with now and then a handful of sunflower leaves. The dark had fallen; the moon was up before Sheldon found what he sought. And he admitted that he was in luck to find it at all.

The rocky slope, broken into little falls of cliff, had ended abruptly. There was an open space, timbered only by a few water-loving trees, the red willow and alder, and tall grass. Sheldon yanked off pack and pack saddle, tethered his horse, and went to drink.

The beauty of the brook—it was scarcely more here near the source—with the moonlight upon it, impressed him, tired as he was. There was a sandy bed, gravel strewn, unusual here, where the thing to be expected was the water-worn rocks. The current ran placidly, widening out to a willow-fringed pool. The grass stood six inches tall everywhere, straight, untrampled.

Sheldon threw himself down to drink. What he had thought the dead white limb of a tree, lying close to the water's edge, was a bone. He found another. Then the skull, half buried in mud and grass. It was the skeleton of a man. The second in one day's travel!

And, though Sheldon looked that night and again the next morning, there was nothing to hint at the cause of this man's death. Nor was there a gun, an ax, a pocket knife or watch or strip of boot leather—nothing but the bones which the seasons had whitened, here and there discolored by the soil into which they had sunk.

When a man is as hungry and tired as Sheldon was that night, he does not squander time in fruitless fancies. He made a rude meal swiftly, rolled into his blankets, and went to sleep. But he had muttered as he rolled over to keep the moonlight out of his eyes:

“We're not going back yet, Buck, old horse. If other men got this far, we can go a little farther.”

And, though he was too tired to lie awake and think, he could not shut out of his dreams the fancies bred of the two discoveries. The stories which men told of the Sasnokee-keewan, the superstition-twisted tales of the Indians, came and went through his brain, distorted into a hundred guises. This was No-Luck Land—the land into which few men came; the land from which those few did not return. What got them? What killed them?

Out of a vision of some great, hideous, ghoulish being which robbed the dead, even to stripping the bodies of their clothing, Sheldon woke with a start. The moon shone full in his eyes. Something had wakened him. He heard it moving there, softly. He sat up, grasping his rifle. It was very still again suddenly. He could not locate the sound. Maybe it had been Buck, browsing. No; Buck was tethered beyond the alders, out of sight. No sound came from there; the horse no doubt was dozing.

He even got up, vaguely uneasy. He had awakened with the decidedly uncomfortable feeling that something was above him,

staring down into his face. That, on top of the sort of dream which had been with him all night, bred in him a stubborn curiosity to know what the something was.

He went quietly and cautiously back and forth; to where Buck stood, hidden beyond the trees, dozing, as he had anticipated, across the brook. He lifted his shoulders distastefully as he stepped by the little pile of bones.

There was nothing. It might have been a cat, even a night bird breaking a twig in the nearest pine. Sheldon went back to his bed. But he was wide awake now. He lighted his pipe and for an hour sat up, smoking, his blanket about his shoulders.

He experienced a strange emotion—something defying analysis—that he could catalogue only uncertainly as loneliness. It was not fear—not strong enough for that. He wanted company; it was with a frown that he checked himself from going to bring his horse close in to his camp. That would have been childish.

He moved a little, sitting so that his back was against the tree.

CHAPTER III. FOOTPRINTS AND MONUMENTS.

It had been in the small hours of the night that Sheldon woke. The fire he had replenished before turning in was a mere bed of coals. He threw a log across it, and at last dozed. Again he was up and about with the first streaks of dawn. The sky was pearl-pink when he threw the diamond hitch and was ready to take up the trail again.

And now, calm-thoughted with the light of day, he hesitated. Should he go on? Or should he turn back?

As though for an answer, he went to the crossing where the scattered bones lay close to the water. And the answer to his question came to him, presenting him a fresh riddle. If he had stared wonderingly when he came upon the skull at the cliffs back yonder, now did he stare stupefied. There came a vague, misty fear that he was growing fanciful, that he was seeing things which did not exist. He got down on his knees, his face not two feet from the track in the sandy margin of the creek.

Something had passed there last night; the track was very fresh. Whatever it was that had wakened him had crossed here. And what was it? He sought to be certain; he must be conservative. The track was imperfect; the lapping of the water broke down the little ridges of sand the passing foot had pushed up; the imprint would be gone entirely in a few hours. And there was no other here, for the grass came close down to the water.

He looked quickly across the stream. There there was a little strip of wet soil. The water boiling unheeded about his boots, he strode

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