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THE FABULOUS TALE OF SLUMACH'S GOLD

BY ALAN JAY

"When I die, my mine dies with me—and all those who try to find it will die also." These were the last words uttered by Salish Indian John Slumach before he was executed for murder in New Westminster, B.C., in 1891.

Slumach was supposed to have discovered a gold mine in the Pitt River area, but the secret of its location went with him to the grave—and 25 people have died trying to discover the Indian's secret.

A few weeks ago the legend of the Slumach curse was suddenly revived when Vancouver Film Producer Hugh Creig announced plans to make a television film based on the Slumach story. He will start shooting early this June in New Westminster and on location as near as possible to where the Slumach mine is thought to be. Although the Slumach curse doesn't worry him, he is taking no chances.

"I shan't actually be looking for the mine; just for a suitable location for filming in the general area, so perhaps Slumach will take it easy on me," he says.

The Slumach story starts in New Westminster in 1889. British Columbia's Royal City was a small town and the Fraser River gold rush was at its height.

One day Slumach, a Salish Indian, burst into a saloon and ordered a round of drinks for everybody present. And lie paid for them with a handful of gold nuggets.

He was carrying a haversack packed with nuggets "the size of walnuts" and scattered them liberally in all directions as he painted the town red for the next two days. When the time came for his departure, the town was ringed with people lying in wait for him. "A mouse couldn't have got through the cordon," says a report in the local newspaper, "but John Slumach did. And he just vanished."

A few weeks later the Indian reappeared in New Westminster, again with a haversack full of nuggets. He again threw a party in the saloon that went on for three days.

Then he slipped out of town and vanished. This went on for 16 months—with the parties getting bigger and wilder all the time.

But each time Slumach left town to return to his mine, lie took a girl with him. None was ever seen again. When the score totalled three white girls and five Indian girls, the police stepped into the picture. Slumach told them he

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employed the girls to cook for him and mend his clothes but paid them off when he returned to town.

When the body of one of the girls was found on the river bottom, with one of Slumach's nets wrapped around her, Slumach told the police that the girl had fallen overboard from his canoe but that he hadn't bothered to report it. He was arrested, but released three days later because of lack of evidence.

Slumach again vanished into the wilderness of the Pitt River area and stayed there for six weeks. When he returned with his customary load of nuggets, the carousing started again.

During the party, Slumach met an attractive, half-Irish, half-Chinese girl called Molly Tynan. She had arrived in New Westminster while Slumach was at his mine and announced her intention of claiming the Indian as her own personal property despite warnings that eight other girls had vanished trying to do just that.

Six weeks after Molly and Slumach left New Westminster for the mine, her body was found in the Fraser River. She had been stabbed to death. When he returned to town Slumach was arrested and questioned about her death. He told police he had paid her off and had last seen her heading in the direction of Vancouver. A week later, police released him for lack of evidence. Once again the Indian evaded his trackers and vanished. But his career was coming to an end.

Slumach was hunting around Lillooet Slough, near the Pitt River, when he came across a half-breed by the name of Louis Bee. For some reason that remains unexplained to this day, Slumach shot Bee through the chest at point-blank range, killing the half-breed instantly. He was arrested and tried for Bee's murder in New Westminster in January 1891.

Throughout the trial, Slumach refused to reveal the location of his mine, despite inducements offered him privately by police and citizens of the town. He was found guilty and sentenced to hang. On the 16, 1891 he was taken into the yard of the provincial jail to be executed.

Slumach stood on the gallows with the rope around his neck. Asked if he had any last statement to make, he surveyed the watching crowd, a look of hatred etched on his face. "When I die, my mine dies with me—and all those who try to find it will die also," he snarled in the Chinook language. Three minutes and 58 seconds later he was dead, taking the secret of the location of the mine with him to the grave.

The secret died with him. The curse lived on.

The following year, a man from San Francisco arrived in New

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Westminster, announced his intention of finding the lost Slumach mine, and went into the mountains of the Pitt River area. He returned five months later, a pain-wracked skeleton, and told a story of incredible hardships. He died of his injuries a few months later.

In the years since, 25 people have died trying to locate the dead Indian's mine. Some of the bodies were never recovered. The last victim of the Slumach curse was Lewis E. Hagbo of Bremerton, Washington. He left New Westminster in the summer of 1961 for the Pitt River area vowing he would not return until he had found Slumach's gold. He didn't return—and he didn't find the mine. His son-in-law followed his trail and found Hagbo's body at the foot of the mountain. He had dropped dead of a heart attack.

After that, nobody showed any inclination to brave Slumach's curse. But Greig's plans to film the Slumach story have revived interest in the mine and already several speculative expeditions are planned.

But obtaining guides is a problem. Although it is said that some of the older Indians living in the area have a good idea of where the mine is, none of them is willing to take expeditions there. "Mine memloose," they say in Chinook. "It is a dead man's mine."

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