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Slumach's Ghost Still Laughs

By T.W. Patterson

Nuggets the size of walnuts, a jinx, and death: such are the ingredients of British Columbia's greatest tale of lost treasure.

But there is quite another story behind the fabled, and oft-told Lost Creek Mine of Pitt Meadows which has so long intrigued fortune hunters and armchair adventurers. This story also involved death: the one, in the heat of a moment; the other on a cold grey dawn in a prison courtyard.

The man who sparked this tragic, and tantalizing chain of events was an old Salish Indian named Slumach (also called "Slummock" and "Slummack"). Little is known of him before the fateful day of September 8, 1890, when the authorities were notified that Slumach had shot and killed a halfbreed named Louis Bee. According to the Columbian: "A deliberate was committed at Pitt River yesterday by an old Indian named Slumach, who, while fishing with other Indians, picked up a gun and shot Louis Bee, a halfbreed, through the breast killing him instantly. After the killing, Slumach reloaded his gun and went into the woods where he now is. The other Indians present were too frightened to detain him. Word was immediately brought to the city, and today Mr. Moresby and Capt. Pittendrigh went to the tragedy. Slumach will make a fight before he is captured, but Mr. Moresby is not the sort of man to let possible risk interfere, and will bring him in dead or alive."

Ironically, although there were sufficient witnesses to give a detailed account of Bee's murder (on the banks of nearby Aloutte River, rather than the Pitt), the reason of the shooting remains a mystery. Even when taken into custody, Slumach refuses to say. It is known that, the day after Bee's murder, and before the police could reach the site, Slumach returned to the scene of the crime, and, after driving away the Indians guarding Bee's body away, unceremoniously dumped the corpus delecti into the middle of the river. When, at last, Coroner Pittendrigh and company arrived, they had to drag for Bee's corpse, which was recovered the following morning.

In the meantime, William Moresby, warden of the New Westminster penitentiary and deputy sheriff, had mounted an intensive hunt for the killer. But it soon became apparent that the posse had little hope of running the old Salish, who

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was widely respected by his tribesmen for his bush savvy, to ground. The authorities reluctantly conceded that the best chance lay in waiting him out as, come winter, even the great Slumach must be "driven by starvation to the haunts of man."

Adding insult to injury, Slumach had even troubled to call at his cabin, and prompted Moresby to burn the shack to deny the outlaw its shelter and content. Unwilling to wait for winter, Moresby returned to New Westminster for more men and supplies, then took to the trail again, it being reported that he is "determined to bring Slumach to justice and will, if he can, obtain the resistance required. "The Indians are all afraid of the murderer and decline to assist in beating the bush for him, as he is well armed and has lots of ammunition. Slumach is a desperate character and is credited by the Indians with another murder, committed years ago. Although a few of the murderer's friends say he is insane, dozens of Indians who know him say otherwise and say he is only a blood-thirsty old villain."

Constable Anderson, at least, succeeded in coming upon the slayer at Pitt Lake, when four long-range shots drove Slumach into the trees and out of sight. Making matters all the more difficult for the lawmen was the fact that Slumach's relatives had assisted him in his escape, when an exasperated Moresby removed them to Coquitlam reserve with threats of dire punishment if they left the reserve before Slumach was captured.

As, with each passing day, Slumach remained at large, his list of "victims" grew, it being rumoured that he had killed five men in a quarter of a century, his fourth victim having been the original owner of the cabin he had occupied.

When, for all of Moresby's efforts, Slumach continued to elude capture, his stature among his tribesmen also increased, the Columbian reporting that he was looked upon by most Indians as being "a very wonderful person, being able to endure the greatest hardship without apparent inconvenience. As a hunter he is without an equal, and he is adept at making fires in the primitive manner, using two sticks by rubbing the same together until the friction ignites the wood. He is said to be without fear of man or beast and to be possessed of a nature vicious to the extreme."

Again, Moresby headed into the bush. This time, Const. Anderson was rewarded with a second long-distance glimpse of the murderer before he once more vanished into the impregnable fastnesses among the stupendous precipices"

beyond Pitt Lake. As the case became something of a sensation, sightseers visited the murder scene. The Colombian had to remind them that the "maniac" was yet in the vicinity, and that such frivolity could result in further tragedy. Slumach, it was now learned, had long been in the habit of disappearing into the wilderness for weeks at a time, when he would reappear: "looking haggard, and more like a savage beast than a human being." One Indian who had encountered Slumach in the woods had been terrified by the other's demonical expression and had considered himself to escape unharmed.

By this time further particulars had been learned about Louis Bee. Described as having been a "splendid specimen of the halfbreed," he was said to have been incredibly strong and with a thirst and temper to match. Although generally considered to have been quiet and respectable, he had on at least one occasion gone berserk when drunk when it had taken six strong men to force him into a cell.

Weeks passed, and Slumach remained at large despite the Indians of Pitt Lake having joined the manhunt. Yet the old warrior kept his distance. With the first snowfall, however, his days of freedom were numbered. His relatives interned, his friends having forsaken him, Slumach could not replenish his food or ammunition.

Finally, on October 24, he sent word, through his nephew, to Indian Agent P. McTiernan that he was ready to give himself up. With two native constables McTiernan made the arrest himself, Slumach surrendering without incident.

Obviously starving (he was after all an old man) he was said to be "in a terrible state of emaciation and thoroughly exhausted." Out of ammunition and with his clothing in rags, he "presented a very wild and weatherworn aspect" to the Royal City jailers. Because of his age and condition the prison doctors were initially reluctant to predict his recovery.

Again Slumach fooled all by recovering sufficiently within nine days to appear before Capt. Pittendrigh, coroner and justice of the peace, for a preliminary hearing.

These proceedings were straightforward and resulted in his being committed for trial at the November assizes, one newspaper reporter describing the celebrated outlaw as being "rather an intelligent looking man of about 60 years of age. His face expressed a great deal of determination, even ferocity. He sat in court listening to the evidence this morning with utmost apathy." Yet, by the time of his trial, and

despite the tender ministrations of the prison medical staff, Slumach's condition had deteriorated to the point that fears were expressed that he would not live to die on the gallows. Among those who shared this view was Indian Agent McTiernan.

Nevertheless, Slumach appeared before the bench on schedule, when his council, T.S. Anderson, requested and adjournment until the spring assizes, as two of the most important witnesses were unavailable. When this request was denied, Sheriff Moresby having assured the court that both witnesses would be in attendance the next morning, Anderson had the affidavits of Slumach and his daughter, Mary, read into the record.

The next day, eyewitnesses described Bee's shooting through the interpreter. Among the new evidence gleaned was an interesting portrait of the murder victim. For one thing, there had been bad blood between victim and slayer. Bee, apparently, having "indulged something like a grudge" for some time previous to the shooting. Not only this, but Bee had the habit of "blustering at, and threatening almost everyone with whom he came in contact." On the day of his death, he had been fishing with several friends when approached by his enemy, who, after a "slight altercation," ended the feud once and for all with a single shot from his rifle.

After retiring for 15 minutes, the jury returned with a verdict of guilty, and Justice Drake sentenced Slumach to hang on January 16, 1891.

In the following months, Slumach awaited his fate stoically, the Colonist's New Westminster correspondent reporting that on Christmas Eve, he was in good spirits, having become more receptive to his spiritual advisor, and having inquired as to which of the prison staff would hang him. On January 15, a prison work gang had completed the scaffold, most of which had to be built from scratch, all but the crossbeam, which had been used for such purpose before. Throughout their noisy preparations, Slumach had watched attentively through his tiny cell window. Rather than being unnerved or depressed, he had given every appearance of being intrigued by the project.

By this time, also, he had fully accepted the attendance of Father Morgan, who, through an interpreter, prepared him to meet his fate; Slumach having promised to die bravely. Outside his cell door two guards remained on duty around the clock. Although numerous persons had requested an

audience with the condemned man, the sheriff had forbidden all but immediate relatives and his religious instructors. Earlier, Moresby had confirmed a report that, upon searching Slumach's cabin, he had discovered some prison uniform. The sheriff-warden considered it possible that Slumach had given sanctuary to two convicts who had escaped from the prison two years before. Moresby and prison officials had also come to another conclusion by this time, that Slumach, rather than being 60 years of age, was 80!

The guess as to his age was based upon a report that, upon the arrival of Col. Richard Moody and the Royal Engineers, some 30 years before, Slumach had been a "full grown man."

Although popular rumour had by this time increased Slumach's victims to 10, he refused to discuss Bee's slayings; Moresby reporting with awe, that, during the slayer's final hours, he "betrayed no symptoms of alarm or care at the sight of the scaffold, and evidently does not give subject very much consideration."

Then it was morning, January 16. After further attendance by Father Morgan, and two assistants, he was led to the scaffold. According to one account, he was so weak that he had had to be helped to the scaffold. The Colonist's men on the scene, however, stated the reverse. Slumach, he wrote, was cheerful to the end, had slept well the night before, and enjoyed a hearty breakfast before striding to the gallows without so much as a tremor. But minutes before, Father Morgan had succeeded in converting him to Christianity, the baptism being completed but moments before the drop. Before the hood was in place, Slumach casually eyed the 50 spectators, who had been admitted after presenting special tickets. Then the trap was sprung. Death, it was reported, was instantaneous, Slumach's neck being broken by the fall.

After hanging for 20 minutes, his body was cut down and buried. Immediately upon his being pronounced dead, a black flag had been hoisted atop the prison and the large crowd which had gathered outside dispersed. The actual execution had taken but three minutes and 58 seconds. Sheriff Armstrong and staff being commended for a grim duty "excellently conducted, (without) a hitch of any kind."

With Slumach's death, the real mystery of Bee's shooting was consigned to history. According to the initial Columbian account, Bee and several Indians were fishing for trout in Lillooet Slough (Alouette River), two-and-a-half miles above Pitt River bridge, when approached by Slumach, who had been hunting. Upon his old enemy's approach, Bee "saun-

tered up to (him) and asked him in a casual way what he was shooting around there. Without a moment's warning, or any preliminary sign of anger, Slumach instantly levelled his gun at Bee and fired."

As Slumach raised his gun, Bee, suddenly realizing his intention, raised his hands and begged him not to shoot. But the cold-hearted Slumach pressed the muzzle to his victim's chest and squeezed the trigger. The bullet entered Bee's body just under his right armpit killing him instantly. And the great manhunt was on.

Further investigation revealed that Bee and Slumach had feuded for some time prior to the shooting and a second, popularized version of their fateful encounter on the banks of the Alouette River sounds more probable. According to this version, Slumach approached the fishermen, when Bee, the hard-drinking, two-fisted brawler, sneered: "Well, you devil and pagan, what are you shooting here?"

His answer, alas, was swift and fatal.

Such is the true story behind the legendary Lost Creek Mine, that long-lost El Dorado which has hunted the minds of adventurers (more than once with fatal results) ever since. For it was after Slumach's hanging that the legends of his "lost mine"—a legend involving mass murder, nuggets the size of walnuts, a creek lined with gold, and a deadly curse—began.

But that is another story, and one which has been often told in these pages. To date, the so-called bonanza remains unclaimed. And Slumach's ghost must be laughing yet.