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THE LOST GOLD MINE—A LEGEND GROWN FROM FACTS

BY JANET GUPPY

There has always been magic in gold. For gold men penetrated the wilderness to find that the riches they thought lay not in the shining nuggets but in the civilization that they brought with them. For gold men have suffered hunger and heartbreak and for gold men have died. Gold was an important factor in moulding our province and the tales that grew out of man's lust for the shining metal still live as a colourful part of our history.

On January 16, 1891 an Indian known as Slumach dropped to his death on the gallows in the old New Westminster jail, taking with him, as the story goes, the secret of a lost gold mine. So strong was the belief in this mine that it was said his jailers pleaded with him to the last but to no avail. But over the years, the story has persisted so that a number of men have ventured into the rough Pitt Lake country at the foot of the Golden Ears where the mine is supposedly located, many never to be heard from again. To this day the lost mine remains a mystery.

The facts for the murder for which Slumach died are simple enough as given in the account of the hanging in *The British Columbian* at that time. In the words of *The Columbia* reporter.

"On September 18, 1890 a number of Indians, among the Louis Bee, were fishing for trout in the Lilloouette Slough and while thus engaged Slumach came from the bush and approached them. Without warning Slumach levelled his gun at Bee and fired. Just before the discharge Bee held up his hands and begged Slumach not to shoot. The distance was so short that the whole discharge entered Bee's body. Death was instantaneous."

The *Columbian* goes on to say that one of the Indians, apparently for personal safety, fled for help and later described the countenance of the murderer as "that of an incarnate demon."

Later, according to the report, Slumach carried the body of Bee in his canoe, paddled out into the river, and sank it before he disappeared, not to be apprehended for two months.

Slumach was tried at the assizes before Justice Drake and sentenced to hang. It came out at the trial that Bee had been in the habit of taunting Slumach with being a sorcerer and devil—which in Chinook is the worst epitaph to be applied to any person, and was the principal reason for the murder.

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Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

All through the imprisonment that followed the Rev. Father Morgan, OMI, and Pitrie [Pierre] the Indian catechist sought to convert the murderer to the Christian faith. Efforts were also made to have the sentence commuted but with failure due to the number of Indian murders that had occurred during that period.

The Columbian reports in detail on the actual hanging, which Coroner Pittendrigh termed "well managed and painless," having taken place before 50 witnesses with crowds outside waiting until the black flag was hoisted over the jail.

To the end Slumach declared himself innocent of the other murders which many declared he had also committed. It is with these words that fact ends and hearsay begins for much more is laid to Slumach than the crime for which he died.

According to popular belief Slumach was in the habit of making furtive trips into the wilds of Pitt Lake during August, when the mountain snows were melted enough to make travel possible. He was always accompanied by one or two Indian women, none of whom were ever seen again. The popular suspicion was that the Indian used the women to transport his gold, and then dropped their weighted bodies into Pitt River to prevent them exposing his secret mine. However this may be, it is said that after his trips Slumach was always well supplied with gold which he made no particular effort to hide. It led to the belief in the fabulous mine that still remains a will-o'-the-wisp to those who seek gold or adventure.

It is said that over 20 men and perhaps many more have disappeared in the search for the mine that is supposed to be near a mountain in the shape of a sleeping woman. The fate of these prospectors may well lie in the deep ravines criss-crossed by fallen logs that make up the rough terrain in this mountainous region.

ONE MAN, accompanied by another white man and an Indian guide are said to have reached the mine, where, according to a story reportedly told by an inmate of a mental hospital in the United States, he as leader of the expedition murdered his white companion, buried his body under a large rock with his rifle to mark the spot and later also disposed of the Indian who had guided him back to civilization. He then fled across the border, intending to return for more gold. Due to his mental condition the story may be considered doubtful, although it is certain that he had an exceptional knowledge of the country, and some claim to have seen a rusted rifle

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

leaning against a large rock.

Despite every effort to discredit such tales, the belief in the lost mine persists. Some believe, that it is not a mine at all but a cache of gold stolen from a stagecoach coming down from the Cariboo gold fields. Whatever it may be, men still search even in the face of death and always some experience, true or imaginary, crops up to keep the tale alive.

Hikers in the mountains of Garibaldi Park near the Golden Ears claim to have seen a hermit who lives somewhere, perhaps near Mt. Robie Reid, and avoids all contact with the outside world except to ask for salt. The man would then refuse to answer questions except to say that where he lived there was no vegetation under the trees, indicating a high level. The supposition is that he, too, is either searching for the mine or possibly working it in secret.

A party of riders, camping near Gold Creek also claim to have seen a peak, caught in the rays of the setting sun, like a sleeping woman with her hands folded over her breast. Although familiar with the mountains for years, they had never seen such a peak before and have never seen it since. The explanation may lie in the season with snows melted down or in the position of the sun or perhaps in the trickery of man's imagination.

Perhaps a dream is worth more than a gold mine and it may be a better thing if the jealous mountains continue to guard their secret and Slumach the Indian be left to lie in peace.