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THE MYSTERY OF “LOST CREEK MINE”

BY C.V. TENCH

A remarkable Wide World “sequel.” In 1941 we published the story of a “lost” gold mine in the wilds of British Columbia. The Indian who found it doggedly refused to disclose its location, and was later hanged for murder. Before his execution he solemnly cursed the gold and anyone rash enough to go in search of it. Since then over a score of experienced prospectors have perished in the mountains while seeking the vanished Golconda. Now the “hoodoo” mine is in the news again, for yet another man has mysteriously disappeared without trace.

In November 1891, at the Provincial Jail, New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada, they hanged a full-blooded Salish Indian named John Slumach, who had been found guilty of the callous murder of no fewer than eight attractive young women, both Indian and white. The credit for ending the brief career of this “Indian Bluebeard,” as he was called, was due to the patient, painstaking work of the British Columbian Provincial Police.

The Slumach affair, despite the lapse of time, is still vividly remembered and often discussed by local people. The Indian became a multiple murderer through greed of gold, and he went to the gallows vehemently cursing the sudden wealth that had brought about his downfall. Almost with his last breath he announced that any other man who sought the rich “strike” which had ruined him would likewise come to an untimely end. Furthermore, he took with him to the grave the secret of the exact location of what has ever since been referred to as “Lost Creek Mine.”

In consequence, all that is known concerning this obviously valuable gold-deposit is that it is situated beside a stream which tumbles riotously through a rocky canyon somewhere amid the maze of snow-capped peaks and wooded slopes called Pitt Lake Mountains, an offshoot of the Coast Range of British Columbia. This area, oddly enough, is not far from the haunts of man, but lies less than sixty miles from fast-growing metropolis of Vancouver, and can be reached be reached by boat or aeroplane.

Slumach’s dying curse, however, seemingly remains potent. Since those far-off days, sixty years ago, many men have hunted high and low in efforts to discover the golden creek, but all in vain. More than a score of these fortune-seekers have lost their lives, and only one achieved any success. This was a veteran prospector named John Jackson, but—like Slumach himself—he took the secret with him to the grave,

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his early death being brought about by the terrible hardship endured during his lonely months-long sojourn in the heart of the mountains.

Before Jackson died he wrote a lengthy letter to a friend and drew a rough map showing the exact location of the Lost Creek Mine. His statement corroborated a fact which Slumach, when in his cups, had often stressed—that the banks of Lost Creek are literally lined with gold, in pieces as large as walnuts! Because of that letter, solitary prospectors are still patiently combing the mountains in quest of the Indian's elusive bonanza.

I wrote much of the foregoing in a previous article—"Hoodoo Gold,"—published in the Wide World for June 1941—but as it is essential to refresh the reader's memory is setting forth this "sequel" I must necessarily recapitulate to a certain extent. Recently yet another man has lost his life while hunting for Slumach's gold. The "lost" El Dorado, therefore is in the news again, and once more the superstitious are asking one another "Can this mine really have a curse on it?" You will be able to form your own conclusions after reading the facts.

I happen to live in Vancouver, and after the appearance of the original story, I received many letters; two or three people also called upon me personally. One of these, Harold Claxton by name, had journeyed all the way from Montreal; he was very keen to go in search of lost Creek. I took him out to New Westminster, thirteen miles from Vancouver—the starting place for a boat-trip down the Fraser River—gave him all the information I possessed, and then bid him farewell. I have heard nothing from him since, and cannot say whether he went to the mountains or decided to abandon the venture.

Most experienced prospectors, however, will have nothing to do with Lost Creek; they have too much respect for its sinister reputation!

Some years ago, after exhaustive investigation, I discovered that there was only one man still living who knew the full history of this remarkable case. This was Mr. Hugh Murray, who had resided for over seventy years in the vicinity of New Westminster. In order to get the "inside" facts for my own narrative I paid a visit to the old gentleman. Although then in his early eighties, Mr. Murray was still hale and healthy—one of British Columbia's typical pioneers. He had led an adventurous life and an Indian fighter and scout, stage-coach driver and prospector. Like so many others, he had made several attempts to locate Lost Creek Mine, and treasured a copy

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of the letter and map left by the ill-fated John Jackson.

As we sat talking in Mr. Murray's home we could see through the window, in the hazy distance, the mountains I had come to discuss. To reach them by surface-travel entails a boat-journey of about forty miles up the Fraser River to the outlet of Pitt Lake, a fifteen-mile trip along the lake to the mouth of Pitt River, and an eighteen-mile run up this stream to a point where navigation becomes impossible. Then the search must be continued afoot over rugged peaks where the going is so difficult that a man can only carry an 80lb. pack containing his food, bedding and tools.

By 'plane of course, the location can be reached from Vancouver in a matter of minutes.

"It's interesting to think that, somewhere out there, gold lies in handfuls just waiting to be picked up," remarked Mr. Murray, gazing thoughtfully at the peaks. "Yet nobody can find Slumach's claim! It is indeed a strange business."

Lost Creek Mine, he went on to tell me, lies above the four-thousand-foot level on an unnamed mountain, and to reach this altitude one must cross snowfields and glaciers. Camping out under such conditions is an arduous undertaking, particularly when the difficulties of transport limit a man's bedding to a single blanket. No much food can be carried, moreover, and so prospectors supplement their scanty meals by shooting "whistlers," a species of large marmot.

A bag of gold

The first hint as to the existence of Lost Creek Mine was given in 1890, when the Indian John Slumach, arrived in New Westminster with a knapsack bulging with gold nuggets. Naturally enough, an Indian with a lot of raw gold became the centre of attraction; men and women of all types flocked about him, eager to learn the location of his "strike." Liquor was pressed upon him, and innumerable attempts were made to discover his secret. But the taciturn, lean-faced stranger doggedly resisted all overtures; he just wouldn't talk. Although he greedily accepted the hospitality that was lavished on him, he said not one word as to the source of his new-found wealth. Then, just as sudden as he had appeared, he vanished, leaving behind him many irate get-rich-quick schemers who had planned to secretly trail him when he went back to the wilds.

Less than three months later Slumach again appeared in New Westminster, once more laden with as much raw gold as a man could comfortably carry. Excitement ran high; there

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could now be no doubt that the Indian had happened on a really worth-while “find.” This time he smilingly admitted the fact, boasting that he knew of a creek, somewhere in the Pitt Lake Mountains, where he could “pick up gold in handfuls, in pieces as large as walnuts.”

Once more, however, in spite of the urging of his new-found friends, he refused to divulge the site of the El Dorado. The place was his, he declared, and he meant to keep it. If he once revealed the secret to the white men they would take all the gold, for whites were invariable greedy and wasteful. Indians were different; they believed in conserving the gifts of Nature, taking from time to time only enough for their immediate needs, whether it be fish, meat, or gold wherewith to buy luxuries from the white traders.

Unable to secure the information they sought, the conspirators settled down to a waiting game, determined that, on this occasion, Slumach should not be permitted to steal away unobserved.

All the same, that is exactly what the wily fellow did. One night he was drinking with a crowd of hangers-on in the old Frontier Saloon; the following morning he was missing—and nobody knew whither he had gone!

In due course he showed up for the third time—with yet more raw gold. Always hard-eyed and tight-lipped, there now seemed to be something almost furtive about his demeanour.

A few days later a fishing-boat trawling off the mouth of the Fraser River brought up in its nets the dead body of a young Indian girl. The corpse was badly battered, having evidently been swept against the rocks and floating logs. Search of the poor girl’s clothing revealed several golden nuggets—a fact which caused the police to do some hard thinking. The girl was young and had gold in her possession, making her temporarily wealthy. As far as they could discover there was no reason why she should have committed suicide. Had she come to her death accidentally, or had she been deliberately drowned by some person or persons unknown?

The police take action

On account of the publicity accorded to him by the daily newspapers, and because of the wild orgies he habitually staged when in town, Slumach had naturally attracted a certain amount of police attention. Moreover, he was a Salish Indian, and it was an established fact that he knew where to obtain raw gold. The dead girl was likewise a Salish, and had

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raw gold in her possession. Concluding that there might be some link between the couple, the authorities gathered in Slumach, took him to view the corpse, and then asked him a few pointed questions. The interrogation was somewhat on the following line.

As a full-blooded Indian, would he venture into the mountain wilds alone? Would he not, following the custom of his race, take a squaw with him to make and repair moccasins and clothing, gather fuel, cook meals, and help with the packing-in of supplies and the making and breaking of camps? Had he not, as a matter of fact, been accompanied by a young squaw on his last trip to the gold-mine? He had returned with much gold, and similar gold had been found on the person of the dead girl. Could he offer any explanation?

It was sheer bluff on the part of the authorities, but it brought results. Under pressure, Slumach reluctantly admitted that the deceased had been his helper on his last trip. But he knew nothing at all about her; he had met her quite by chance, and she had offered to go with him as companion-assistant. He had rewarded her with a few nuggets. On the return journey their canoe had been wrecked on a submerged rock. He had then built a raft, and while floating down the swift-flowing Fraser on this hastily constructed affair, the squaw had been swept away and drowned.

Although they strongly suspected that Slumach had made sure the hapless girl was “swept away” in order to prevent her disclosing the whereabouts of the Lost Creek Mine, the police could not prove anything at that time, so the Indian was allowed to depart. The officers, however, were left wondering how many other female associates and helpers this beady-eyed mystery-man had secretly disposed of. Henceforth, they determined, they would keep a close watch on his movements.

With this end in view Constable Grainger was detailed to the task of shadowing the Indian. Posing as a prospector, and dressed for the part, Grainger sought his man out in the drinking-dives and other low haunts which he frequented when in town. Although he scraped up a friendship with Slumach, all Grainger learned was that, drunk or sober, the suspect invariably guarded his tongue; he never gave anything away. The constable did his honest best to keep in touch with Slumach, but his best wasn't good enough; he awoke one morning to discover that once again the Indian had disappeared! Greatly chagrined, the young officer reported his failure and was taken off the case. There matters rested until

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Slumach returned with a fresh supply of gold and, as usual, started another orgy of dissipation.

Thereupon Constable Grainger donned his prospector's disguise once more and resumed his association with the Indian. Meanwhile, Sergeant Nichol, in charge of the Missing Persons Bureau, had started some quiet checking-up on his own account. Of the many young women listed in his files as "missing" he noted that eight—six Indians and two whites, including the native girl whose body the police had recovered—had disappeared on approximately the same dates as Slumach stole away on one or other of his periodical trips to his secret gold-claim. Was this merely coincidence, or had each of the vanished girls accompanied the Indian into the wilds in the hope of learning the exact location of his "strike"?

Sergeant Nichol decided that the matter warranted further investigation, and accordingly turned his attention to Grainger's daily reports. From these he learned that the suspect, although uncouth in manner and physically unattractive, seemed to possess a curious fascination for young women; he could take his pick of many, all willing to act as helpers on his trips. Grainger also stressed Slumach's unusual ability to imbibe large quantities of liquor without becoming talkative or incapable.

The police were now in a quandary. They could not arrest the Indian on mere conjecture; on the other hand they were reluctant, in view of their suspicions, to sit back and allow him to carry on indefinitely with what seemed to have become a settled programme—occasional visits to his hidden claim, followed by orgies in town. They were now convinced that Slumach persuaded some hapless girl to accompany him every time he went out into the mountains and, on the return journey, once they reached the fringe of civilization, cold-bloodedly mad away with her to ensure her silence concerning the location of his treasure-ground. A Red Indian "Bluebeard" was carrying out a series of murders under their very noses, yet the police, so far, were powerless to halt his dreadful career.

Another tragedy

But the end was close at hand; Fate now intervened in dramatic fashion. While Slumach was in the midst of a hectic orgy, and the perturbed authorities were trying to decide on a course of action, the waters of the Fraser cast up the dead body of yet another young Indian girl, with a long-bladed hunting-knife still embedded in her heart! The police immediately got busy.

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As a result of patient investigations the knife was positively identified as Slumach's. Other evidence, equally damning, resulted in the Indian being brought to trial, convicted, and sentenced to be hanged.

A few month later the veteran prospector John Jackson arrived at New Westminster. A quiet man, who had spent most of his life gold-hunting in the wilds, he listened with keen interest to the many stories that were circulating regarding Slumach and his bonanza. Finally after outfitting himself carefully and hiring two native helpers, Jackson headed for the heart of the Pitt Lake Mountain Range.

When he returned, some months later, he was an utter wreck, mentally and physically; but he brought with him a heavy packsack which he guarded closely day and night. Naturally taciturn, he had very little to say about his trip excepting to state that never in the whole of his life had he encountered such hardships. Fish and game had been very scarce and hordes of flies numerous, while the mountains, in many places, proved well-nigh impassable. A few days later he left for San Francisco.

Years passed and, excepting lone prospectors who entered the Pitt Lake Mountain region, and failed to return, little was heard of Lost Creek Mine. Then, in 1912, representatives of three prominent Seattle financiers approached Mr. Hugh Murray. They told him briefly that, having been informed he was familiar with the Pitt Lake area, they had come to engage his services as a guide. Their objective was Lost Creek Mine.

At first Murray demurred, whereupon the callers showed him a letter and map which John Jackson had undoubtedly had sent to a Seattle resident named Shotwell, a close friend. After reading the letter and studying the map, Murray became fired with the true prospector's fervour, for he came to the conclusion that John Jackson had undoubtedly discovered Slumach's Lost Creek Mine. It appeared that Jackson, on his death bed, had passed on the information to an old comrade named Shotwell. The latter, getting on in years and reluctant to go gold-seeking himself, eventually sold the letter and map to another Seattle man for a thousand dollars. This individual set out alone, but returned empty-handed after coming within an ace of losing his life while fording a raging mountain torrent. In his desperate attempts to save himself his closing was torn, and the precious map partly destroyed. The letter and the mutilated map later changed hands several times, the last purchaser contriving to interest the Seattle financiers.

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The letter

Mr. Murray had a copy of Jackson's letter and the map and showed them to me. Part of the letter read:

"After reaching the headwaters of Pitt Lake I discharged my two native guides and headed into the mountains. I had been out about two months when, my health being seriously affected by short rations, I decided to turn back.

"I climbed to the top of a sharp ridge to get my bearings and found myself looking down into a little valley or canyon I had not seen previously. With some difficulty, I reached the little creek running through the valley.

"Now comes the interesting part. I had only a small prospector's pan, but I found 'colours' immediately. I knew I had struck it rich. In going up the creek I came to spot where the bedrock is bare. Here I gathered gold by the handful, some pieces as large as walnuts. I sized up the creek, and learned that beyond doubt I had found Slumach's Lost Creek Mine.

"I traced the course of the creek to where it flows into a subterranean tunnel and is lost.

"I then packed out all the gold I could carry. It brought me around ten thousand dollars when I sold it in 'Frisco.

"Now the doctor has told me that I am liable to go at any time.

"Don't give up, Shotwell. You will be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams. Don't give up!"

In due course Murray agreed to guide the searchers and conducted a four-man party into the very heart of the Pitt Lake Mountain Range. For over two months they combed the area, but—like their predecessors—failed to find Lost Creek Mine. They did come upon evidence of the "hoodoo" claim. At the head of Pitt Lake they encountered an aged Indian woman who told them that she well remembered a prospector named Jackson. Bent over by the weight of his knapsack, he had camped nearby one night. While he slept she had ventured to peep inside his packsack, discovering that it contained much raw gold.

Mr. Murray returned home, and several years went by. The he had another visitor in the person of picturesque, loquacious, and rather boastful prospector known as "Volcanic" Brown. This man had a long chat with Murray, took a copy of the map, and announced that he intended to "have a try" at finding the lost bonanza.

But Slumach's "hoodoo" was apparently still working, for

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some months later, Brown—caught in the mountains by the swift onslaught of an early winter, returned to New Westminster with his feet so badly frozen that he had to have several toes amputated. It was spring before he was able to walk again. Then, still undaunted, he declared he would make another trip into the Pitt Lake Mountains. This time, he said, he meant to stay until he either found the “lost” mine or perished. Poor “Volcanic” Brown must have met a lonely end out there, for he never came back.

During the years that followed many other fortune-hunters sought Slumach’s claim, and quite a number mysteriously vanished. These repeated disappearances cost the Provincial Government so many thousands of dollars for search-parties that for a while, attempts to visit the area were severely frowned upon by the authorities. Exceptions were made, however in the case of experienced men able to satisfy the police that they were physically fit, well-equipped, and qualified to take care of themselves.

What happened to Gaspard?

Such a man was Alfred Gaspard, the last prospector known to have entered the district. Although close on sixty, he was a hefty six-footer in splendid condition, a seasoned and experienced outdoor man. Fascinated by the stories he had heard concerning Slumach’s mysterious mine, Gaspard planned a well-organized and well-financed search. First of all, he spent several weeks in visiting everyone able to give reliable information about the mine and the terrain. Then, marshalling all the facts available, he studied them long and carefully. Finally he collected enough supplies to last him for several months and hired two light ‘planes to take himself and his food and equipment to a point which, according to Jackson’s map, was only a few miles from the “lost” claim. This was none too easy, for the peaks and valleys of the Pitt Lake area are eternally shrouded in mist and fog, making approach and landing from the air somewhat hazardous. Nevertheless, there are a number of lakes large enough for small pontoon-equipped aircraft to alight and take off.

Being bush-wise Gaspard first established a permanent base-camp where he cached everything he could not carry on his back. Several local residents later testified to this fact, adding that when they had last seen the prospector he was fit and well and confident of success.

Gaspard started off on his quest on July 20th, 1950. Although satisfied that he would return safely, even if he failed to locate the mine, he was sufficiently prudent to deposit suf-

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ficient money with a friend to hire helicopters to search for him if he failed to show up by the end of November. When he did not reappear by the date named the machines were duly chartered, and spent several days hovering low over the whole district. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police also launched a search by air and land—entirely without result. Up to the moment of writing no trace of Gaspard has ever come to light. Like so many others before him, he probably met a lonely death.

There is a lesson to be learned from the fate of the unfortunates who have lost their lives hunting for Lost Creek Mine. No man, however experienced or well-equipped, should ever venture far into the wilds alone! Serious illness, or an accident which prevents travel for any lengthy period, means inevitable death. But when fortune-hunters fare forth in quest of gold they are usually ready to take the risk of travelling alone so that, if successful, they will not have to share the prize with a companion. This is a very short-sighted policy—yet another example of greed for gold—because the presence of a mate often means all the difference between timely help and lingering death.

In view of the number of prospectors who have lost their lives in the search, and the time, energy, and money fruitlessly expended by others, it is easy to understand why so many superstitiously inclined folk believe Slumach's curse was no idle threat. There are, however, logical reasons for the many failures to rediscover the Indian's "strike."

Let us consider, first of all, the case of John Jackson, the only person, apparently, who actually found Slumach's claim. Why, with his letter and map to guide them, did those who followed in his footsteps fail to reach their goal? It must be remembered that he was a very sick man when he returned to civilization. His map may have been more accurate, but even a slight error could send a searcher miles in the wrong direction. Now, of course, the map is incomplete, part of it having been destroyed when the man who carried it fell into the torrent.

Another reason for the non-success of the gold seekers is the immensity of the mountain region concerned. A hundred men could spend the whole of their lives systematically combing the tremendous maze of canyons, tumbling streams, wooded slopes, and cloud-enveloped peaks represented by the Pitt Lake Mountains without achieving anything like a systematic survey. People living in the densely-populated countries can have little conception of the

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difficulties of locating a particular point in so vast and rugged an area. Some day, perhaps, the secret of Lost Creek may be revealed—but that day has not yet dawned!