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ANKLE DEEP IN NUGGETS: CURSED CANYON OF GOLD

BY B.G. REVIS

The weather was so miserable and visibility so poor that he had to pack his camp with him wherever he went to keep from becoming separated from it. For weeks on end he climbed up one steep slope laden with heavy timber and wet underbrush and down the other—a gruelling endeavour. Then one day without warning he slid down the wall of a steep canyon right into a stream littered with gold nuggets—gold such as he had never seen—“ankle-deep gold.”

Shortly before 8 a.m. on Jan. 16, 1891, Peter Slumach stood on the gallows staring at the crowd gathered below, sentenced to hang for the murder of Louis Bee, a half-breed Indian. Scowling as the hangman adjusted the noose around his neck Slumach uttered his final words, a curse on his gold mine, “Nika memloose, mine memloose— When I die, mine dies.” With that the trapdoor sprung and Slumach hit the end of the rope with a thud, taking with him forever the secret to the location of one of the most incredibly wealthy mines on this planet. This execution was reported in the New Westminster Daily Columbian.

New Westminster was a boom town in those days with hell-raising miners pouring in from all points of the compass to siphon their wealth from the rich gold fields of British Columbia. But none was more notorious than one Peter Slumach, an old Salish Indian who blew into town one day packing thousands of dollars in gold and went on a drunken spending spree that lasted for weeks on end, dragging behind him from bar to bar an entourage of miners, gamblers, prostitutes and anyone who was just thirsty, setting up drinks for all and paying for them with walnut-sized gold nuggets. <P> Slumach was nearly 60, no Adonis and mean spirited, but handfuls of raw gold turned him to handsome and personable in the eyes of the barroom prostitutes who were more than willing to offer up their favours for the golden metal.

After a few weeks of blowing thousands of dollars on wild parties, Slumach was ready to head back to his mine. He persuaded one of the “ladies of the evening” to return with him as cook and companion with the promise of more gold than she could spend. Having watched Slumach throw money around as if it was nothing, the woman never balked.

Weeks later Slumach was back loaded with gold but minus the prostitute. When asked about her he claimed she had fallen into the Fraser River and drowned. Since no one would miss a prostitute his explanation was accepted, and he set

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out on another drunken spree.

The miners in town knew Slumach had hit it big and they were straining at the bit to discover the whereabouts of his mine, watched him closely and followed him each time he headed back. They even talked of abducting him, torturing the secret out of him, then killing him, but thought better of this as they figured the crafty old coot would give them a phony location before they killed him and die laughing, leaving them hanging out to dry. So they decided to just follow him.

When Slumach had blown his poke he picked up another woman and headed into the wilderness via canoe with hundreds of miners tailing him in their canoes. Turning out of the Fraser River into the Pitt River the savvy old Indian soon lost his pursuers in the maze of brushy sloughs. In a few weeks he was back loaded with gold, minus another woman and ready with another phony explanation as to her absence. <P> Over the next two years Slumach would repeat this scenario, taking a total of nine women off into the wilderness with him — nine women who never returned, but no one seriously questioned him as they didn't give a hoot about the prostitutes: they just wanted to find the mine, and they couldn't trail him if he was in jail or hanged.

The miners conjured up every trick in the book, including posting lookouts all along Slumach's alleged route, trailing him by canoe, and badgering the Indians along the river in an attempt to garner information from them, but every ruse failed. The Indians had lost several of their members to the bloodthirsty old Slumach in the past, considered him a dangerous wacko and did not wish to arouse his vindictiveness. <P> The man that was Slumach's undoing was Louis Bee, a big, muscular, half-breed who liked nothing better than a rip-roaring barroom brawl. He and Slumach had engaged in heated arguments in the past, and there was bad blood between them.

On Sept. 9, 1890, Bee and three Indian companions paddled their canoes to the junction of the Pitt River and Allouette Slough for a day of salmon fishing. The foursome beached their canoe on the north shore of the slough near a hill of granite that stood several hundred feet high and covered about 200 acres — and was thought by many to be the spot where Slumach stashed caches of gold between trips to his mine. The Indians beached their canoes just a short way from this hill.

Bee stepped ashore and began to wander along the beach

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when he heard a noise in the brush. Turning to investigate, he spotted Slumach emerging from the bushes scowling and armed with a shotgun. Since there was already bad blood between them and Louis had probably unknowingly wandered dangerously close to the granite mound where Slumach allegedly stashed his gold, a heated argument erupted, and Slumach shouldered the shotgun. Bee turned to flee but died in his tracks as the shotgun blasted point-blank and a full load of shot smashed into Bee ripping his lungs and heart out.

Bee's companions fled for their lives, hopping into their canoe and paddling frantically to safety. They paddled around a bend, beached the canoe and hid behind some bushes where they could still see Slumach at the murder scene, and elected one member to run three miles to the nearest settlement to get the police.

They watched as Slumach dragged Bee's still twitching body to his canoe, loaded the body into the canoe, weighted it with rocks, then paddled out to deep water and dumped it overboard. The Sept. 9, 1890, edition of the local paper carried a graphic account of this murder and is available in the files of the New Westminster Public Library.

Many have searched for this incredible mine, but only two are believed to have found it. One such searcher was John Jackson who arrived in New Westminster in the spring of 1903, listened to all the tales of Slumach's mine, then in July employed two Indians with canoes to take him and supplies to the head of Pitt Lake and drop him off, where he disappeared into the fog-shrouded mountains. <P> The weather was so miserable and visibility so poor that he had to pack his camp with him wherever he went to keep from becoming separated from it. For weeks on end he climbed up one steep slope laden with heavy timber and wet underbrush and down the other — a gruelling endeavour. Then one day without warning he slid down the wall of a steep canyon right into a stream littered with gold nuggets — gold such as he had never seen — “ankle-deep gold.”

Instantly stricken with gold madness he began to frantically scrape up all the gold he could get his hands on and started cramming his pack, only to discover it was now too heavy to carry. To show what gold madness does to a man, with millions in gold laying everywhere in plain sight, Jackson dug a hole under a rock and buried his excess gold.

Taking what gold he could carry Jackson struggled up out of the canyon and headed back to his camp where he huddled

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around the fire all night too excited to do anything other than marvel at his discovery. At daylight he packed up his gold and only the barest of necessities and headed for Pitt Lake. Three days later a sick and exhausted Jackson, dragging a broken leg, stumbled into an Indian camp at the north end of the lake where the friendly Indians took him in, fed him and gave him a place to sleep. Suffering from extreme paranoia he clutched his gold to him and even slept with it. The Indians recognized his madness and avoided him.

Days later, still sick and too weak to travel, Jackson hired some Indians to take him back to New Westminster where he remained for a short time then hopped the first ship to San Francisco. Upon arriving there he deposited \$8,000 in the Bank of British North America. His discovery was a closely guarded secret as he planned on returning to it when he was better.

But fate was to deal Jackson the Joker in the deck and he never recovered from his ordeal. In September 1904, knowing his days were numbered and having no relatives, he wrote to an old friend in Seattle, revealing his secret and enclosing a map. By the time his friend James R. Shotwell received the letter, Jackson had cashed in his chips.

Shotwell organized an expedition and in the spring of 1905 set out to search for the mine. The effort was fruitless, and subsequent searches met equal failure, due mostly to the vagueness of Jackson's description and lack of detail, although the geological details were remarkably accurate.

In 1924, R.A. "Volcanic" Brown, a seasoned prospector from Grand Forks, British Columbia who had spent close to 50 years stomping through the wilderness came into possession of Jackson's map, and believing it to be genuine set out to search in the Pitt Lake mountains. He was convinced the mine was up high, based on a passage in Jackson's letter, "I kept high up."

For seven long years Brown combed the mountains, then in September 1930 he failed to return as he did each year and was reported missing.

In early November two officials and two trappers set out to search for Brown. The going was tough, and two of the members had to return due to injuries. The others pressed on and 27 days later, including being snowbound for five days, they found Brown's camp near the headwaters of the Stave River where it foams out of seven-mile-wide Stave Glacier.

The camp was a chaotic mess. The tent was collapsed and

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around it lay cooking utensils, a notebook of herbal cures and a shotgun. Looking through the tent the men made an amazing discovery, a small glass jar containing 11 ounces of rough-edged raw gold that had been hammered out of a quartz vein, but there was no trace of Volcanic Brown. Had Brown discovered Slumach's lost gold? All indications were that he had stumbled upon the fabled gold-lined canyon. The gold brought in by Slumach and Jackson was slightly water-worn while Brown's gold was rough with broken crystals of quartz imbedded in it, indicating it had been plucked from a quartz vein.

Geologically, any vein of quartz containing visible hunks of raw free gold is incredibly rich and obviously Brown had discovered just such a vein, probably the vein that snaked through the wall of the canyon of gold.

Brown's skeleton may still be in a crevasse somewhere around Stave Glacier. It will not be difficult to identify as Brown wore a set of solid gold false teeth.

It is unknown how many lives this mine has claimed. It was during the Great Depression that the word of Brown's discovery hit. Men desperate for any money trekked into the wilderness with hopes of finding this fabled mine. No one knows how many inexperienced, poorly equipped souls went into this unforgiving wilderness and never returned. Many died alone and unmissed, and their bones are scattered where they fell.

Does this mine exist? Most probably it does, and many lives have been sacrificed in that belief. Slumach was purported to have killed 19 people to protect the secret to this mine. You don't indiscriminately knock off 19 people to protect something that doesn't exist.

If you plan to search for this treasure you must be thoroughly researched and prepared, well equipped, physically fit, wilderness savvy, have full knowledge of what you will be up against, and preferably have someone totally familiar with the area to guide you — unless you wish to go it alone. Searching for this mine is not for the faint of heart. It lies in some of the most incredibly unforgiving country on this planet.