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THE MYSTERIOUS MINE

The story of pioneer days in British Columbia teems with romance. As you sit and listen to the bare and halting recital of the early adventures of some old-timer and pals, your imagination is strangely quickened, and you can visualize those rich and string times once more. Wherever you meet old-timers, whether it be up in the country, on the coast, or up in the inlands, you find well-authenticated stories of "lost mines" in the Kootenays and in Cariboo, there are others in Similkameen, and others again back of the Cascades, up the coast, in the north country, and even in the islands.

The "Mysterious Mine" of our story is hidden away somewhere among that sea of mountains and valleys behind Squamish, at the head of Howe Sound. An old-timer who has spent the last forty years of his life on the Coast told me he had heard of this mine over twenty years ago. The two original discoverers kept their secret well hidden. For years these two men appeared at the head of the sound every spring, then leaving the beaten paths of men, turned off into the wilderness and were seen no more until fall, when they came out with their pack ponies laden with sacks of mysterious import and were heard of no more until the following spring. Only a few of the coast Indians seemed to be aware of their existence. No hint of their find was ever given. After a few years the Indians noticed that only one man came and went out laden as before. Then he ceased to come, in fact, they could not say as to whether he had ever returned from the last trip. Then it began to be whispered around that these men had made a fortune of immense richness and had either died or retired with their secret un-exhausted and undisclosed. Expeditions were fitted out to discover the "mysterious mine," and after suffering untold hardship in the wild country "back of beyant," were compelled to return unsuccessful.

Years after, an old-timer, chatting with an old Indian about the days that would return no more, referred to the old legend of the "mysterious mine" and was amazed to hear the old man relate how, years before, he had tramped through that country, and one year, after setting out his long line of traps, he had taken the notion to try a short cut across the high ridges instead of taking the longer way back and how he had been compelled to traverse a deep gully on the far side of the ridge, and there he had discovered the mouldering remains of a miner's tent, and nearby, carefully screened with brush, which had withered away and had been beaten down with the

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snow of many winters, he had discovered a deep shaft and, peering down with, he could see that a tunnel had been driven into the rock. The wooden ladder had long since crumbled away, there were no tools in sight and, as a storm was coming up, he had hastened away and had never returned.

Vainly the old-timer tried to persuade the Indian to join with him and guide him to the shaft. The old man gravely shook his head, saying: "Me too old, too much climb, too far, no can do." Gathering a few other old-timers together—of whom my informant was one—the old prospector revived their memory of the story, told them of the old Indian's discovery, and aroused their enthusiasm by showing them a rough map he had worked out from the descriptions and landmarks given by the old trapper, and enlisted them for one last "voyage of discovery."

The expedition was dogged by misfortune from the start. The men were old, and the season was late up in the mountains. One of the pack ponies was swept away and lost in an avalanche which nearly wiped them out. Then one of the most active members broke his ankle in a fall, and another became sick with a malady that robbed him of all strength and desire to live. There were only four in the party, so, after gloomy consultation, it was decided to leave one sound man in charge of the two cripples, the remaining member to push ahead to solve the mystery. With indomitable courage, the old-timer who had heard the story from the Indian's lips decided to make the venture alone.

For a long time, he searched and struggled in vain. The descriptions and landmarks were far from accurate, and much valuable time was lost in searching for guiding points which had disappeared or never existed. Provisions had dwindled, and hope was almost gone when, one day, the old man looked up from the rough valley he was traversing and saw a high ridge with surrounding peaks which looked strangely familiar.

Sitting down, he studied his rough map, remembered the landmarks he had so often conned over, and came to the exultant conclusion that "The Mysterious Mine" lay just over the ridge. Slowly and painfully climbing the ridge next morning, he was astonished to find how weak he had become. Exposure and insufficient food were taking toll of the wiry frame which had no longer the buoyancy of youth. Excitement and expectancy gave him new strength and courage and he pursued his way down the rugged slope with eager footsteps,

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until with palpitating heart he came to the hidden shaft and found it just as the Indian had described. Dropping a stone down, he heard a splash of water, then a sudden faintness seized him—he rolled away from the shaft—and darkness fell upon him!

When he awoke, clear stars were glittering from a frosty sky, and it was far on in the night. He thought with horror of how near he had come to ending it all in the hidden shaft, and the superstitious soul was shaken with the thought that some sinister vapour from below had emanated. That some dread influence sat waiting at the bottom of the shaft to strike him dead if he should again approach!

Next morning, weak, shaken and trembling, he climbed the slope, crossed the ridge and trekked for the base camp. He was “all in” when he arrived three days later to tell his story. It was then too late in the season to go up again, and as the old man died that winter, “The Mysterious Mine” still guards its secrets undisturbed, for no one has ventured into the wilderness to seek it since.

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