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“HOODOO GOLD”

BY C.V. TENCH

The fascinating story of a long-lost mine which superstitious prospectors declare to be under a curse. Its original discoverer was hanged, taking the secret with him to eternity, and since then several other men have been killed while searching for it. But the hunt still continues!

Dimly revealed by the grey light of early dawn was a new inch-thick rope with a black hood hanging on its loop. Directly below the noose was a double door, with a long lever at the side. Grouped about the crude wooden gallows in the yard of the old Provincial Jail at New Westminster, British Columbia, on that cold morning in November, 1903, were policemen, newspapermen, and officials.

A moment later, escorted by two wardens and a Salvation Army chaplain, the doomed man—an Indian named Slummock—appeared. His face completely expressionless, he mounted the steps of the gallows, and, pushing the rope aside with his head, stood stoically erect on the trap.

The hangman worked lightning-fast; then he stepped back and glanced significantly at the warden. In sonorous tones the warden asked: “Have you any last message, Slummock?”

In tense, breathless silence all present awaited the condemned man’s reply. Would he now, on the brink of eternity, divulge the knowledge many had tried to persuade him to reveal during his brief lifetime? But Slummock doggedly refused to speak. At the end of a brief pause which seemed interminable the black cloth in front of his face billowed slightly as he spoke his final word: “No.”

The warden made a sign, the hangman pulled the lever, and the Indian dropped to his death, taking with him the secret of the exact location of what is now referred to as “Lost Creek Mine.” All that is known about this rich gold-deposit is that it is situated on a stream which tumbles riotously through the rocky canyon somewhere in the maze of snow-capped peaks and wooded slopes called Pitt Lake Mountains, an offshoot of the Coast Range of British Columbia.

Since that day, thirty-eight years ago, scores of men have hunted high and low in effort to find the creek, which undoubtedly contains gold beyond the most optimistic prospector’s wildest dreams; but to date, however, only one man has succeeded—a veteran prospector named John Jackson. He is now dead, his death brought about by the terrible hardships he endured during his lonely sojourn in the mountain

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*The Wide World Magazine
June 1941 Australia Edition*

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wilderness.

Before Jackson died he wrote a lengthy letter and drew a rough map showing the position of Lost Creek. His statement proved beyond doubt the truth of what Slummock had often boasted in his cups—that the banks of this watercourse are literally lined with gold that can be gathered in handfuls in pieces as large as walnuts! Owing to Jackson's story, the lure of Lost Creek continues to appeal to men who are not afraid to take risks and at the moment of writing lone prospectors are still combing the Pitt Lake Mountains in hopeful, arduous search.

Many mining men, however, will have nothing to do with the quest, asserting that Lost Creek is "hoodoed." They point out that it was because of the gold he found at Lost Creek that Slummock became a murderer, while John Jackson, the only white man known to have reached this wilderness El Dorado, came out so utterly wrecked, physically and mentally, that he lived but a few short weeks after his return to civilization.

Other prospectors, who have gone in search of Lost Creek, they add, have never been heard of again.

There is one man living to-day who knows the whole story of Lost Creek Mine—right from the day, now almost forty years ago, when the Indian, Slummock, paid his first visit to the settlement of New Westminster with a knapsack bulging with gold nuggets and proceeded to commence a wild debauch.

That man is Mr. Hugh Murray, who has lived in the vicinity of New Westminster for over fifty years and he merely smiles tolerantly at the wildly-extravagant legends concerning Lost Creek. Mr. Murray now resides on the north shore of the mighty Fraser River, about twenty miles from Vancouver, and I journeyed out to see him in order to get the full facts for this narrative.

Mr. Murray is still hale and hearty and in full possession of all his faculties. He is one of British Columbia's pioneers, having led a colourful life as stage-coach driver, Indian scout and fighter, prospector, and adventurer.

Like many others, Murray made several attempts to locate Lost Creek Mine, and one of his most highly treasured possessions is a copy of the letter and map left by John Jackson. Here is his story, set down without any attempt at embellishment:

The first indication of the existence of a rich gold-deposit on Lost Creek came to light some forty years ago when the

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Indian, Slummock, arrived in New Westminster carrying a knapsack bulging with nuggets. In those days raw gold was accepted at any store or saloon just like currency, and Slummock forthwith commenced a wild orgy of drinking and spending.

An Indian with a lot of raw gold naturally became the centre of attraction in the then small trading-settlement of New Westminster, and men of all types flocked about him endeavouring to discover the location of his "strike." Every known trick was tried—doped drinks, the flattering attention of dance-hall girls, offers of secrecy and undying friendship, and so on. But Slummock, even when intoxicated, stubbornly refused to divulge the source of his new-found wealth.

Although short in stature, and of slight build, like the majority of the Coast Indians, Slummock was exceptionally "tough" and not merely resisted blandishments but also threats. And then, just as suddenly as he had appeared, he vanished, leaving behind him a crowd of irate fortune-seekers who had intended to trail him back into the wilds when he had used up the last of the gold.

Less than three months later Slummock again arrived in New Westminster and once more he had as much raw gold as a man could carry comfortably. Excitement ran high; the Indian had undoubtedly happened upon a real mine. Slummock smilingly admitted the fact, boasting that he knew of a creek somewhere in the Pitt Lake Mountains where he "could pick up gold in pieces as large as walnuts!"

But once more, in spite of all kinds of pressure he declined to divulge the location of this El Dorado. It was his, he declared, and he meant to keep it. If he gave away the secret to white men they would probably take it all, he added, for whites were wasteful. Indians were different; they believed in conserving that which a bountiful Nature provided, taking from time to time only enough for their immediate needs, whether it be fish, meat, or gold with which to buy the things white traders had to sell.

Unable to secure the information they sought, the conspirators settled down to a waiting game, determined that this time the Indian should not be permitted to slip away unobserved.

But slip away unobserved he did, all the same. One night he was drinking with a crowd of hangers-on in the old Frontier Saloon. Next morning he was gone!

In due course he showed up for the third time with more raw

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gold. Always hard-eyed and tight-lipped, there now seemed to be something almost furtive about his demeanour.

A week later a fishing vessel, trawling off the mouth of the Fraser River, brought up in its Seine-net the dead body of a young Indian woman. The corpse was badly battered, but seeing that, in places, the Fraser fights its way through the rock-girt canyons, there was nothing unusual about that fact. On searching the dead squaw's clothing, however, the police came across several nuggets of raw gold! Putting two-and-two together, and pursuing further investigations, they eventually picked up Slummock, took him to the mortuary to view the body, and proceeded to ask him a few direct questions.

Some of the questions were: Would Slummock, an Indian, venture into the woods alone? Would not he, following the custom of his race, take a squaw along to make moccasins and other articles of clothing, gather fuel, cook, help with the packing-in of supplies, and the making and breaking of camp? Had he not had a woman with him on his last trip into the mountains? Was this dead squaw the one? He had returned with gold, and gold nuggets had been found on the deceased's person. Could Slummock offer an explanation?

It was sheer bluff on the part of the police, but it brought results. Slummock stated that he had not always been able to persuade a squaw to accompany him, but admitted that the dead girl had been his helper on his last trip and that he had rewarded her with a few nuggets. On the return journey, whilst drifting down the swift-running Fraser River on a hastily constructed raft, the woman had been swept away and drowned.

Although convinced that Slummock had done his part in seeing that the girl was "swept away," in order to prevent her divulging the location of Lost Creek Mine, the authorities could not prove anything, so the Indian was allowed to go free. Everyone wondered, however, how many other native women helpers this beady-eyed Red man had done away with, and the police determined that from then on they would endeavour to keep a close watch on his movements.

Matters rested there until the early summer of 1903, when Slummock again appeared in New Westminster with yet another small fortune in gold, which he commenced to dissipate in his usual manner.

This was to prove his final "spree," for, whilst he was in the midst of a hectic orgy, the waters of the Fraser River cast up the dead body of another young Indian woman with a long-

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bladed hunting knife embedded in her heart! At once the police got busy.

The upshot of their investigation was that the knife was positively identified as Slummock's, and other evidence they unearthed resulted in the Indian being brought to trial, convicted, and sentenced to be hanged. He accepted his fate with the stoic calm of his race and, during his brief imprisonment, coolly admitted having murdered no less than eight squaws who at various times had accompanied him on trips to Lost Creek Mine! The promise of gold made them easy to persuade, and on each return trip, once they arrived at the fringe of civilization, he had callously got rid of them to remove all possible danger of their ever divulging the situation of his "strike." But, as already related, Slummock refused to reveal the exact whereabouts of Lost Creek Mine, and took the secret with him to eternity.

A few months 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 Slummock and his bonanza. Finally, after outfitting himself carefully, and hiring two native helpers, he headed for the heart of the Pitt Lake Mountain Range.

When Jackson returned, a few months later, he was an utterly broken man, mentally and physically; but he brought with him a heavy pack-sack which he guarded closely day and night. Naturally taciturn, he had very little to say about his trip excepting to admit that never in the whole of his life had he encountered such hardships. Fish and game had been very scarce, hordes of flies exceptionally numerous, and the Pitt Lake Mountain district, in places, well nigh impossible.

A few days later Jackson departed for San Francisco.

Years passed, and Lost Creek Mine had been almost forgotten when, in 1912, the representatives of three prominent Seattle financial men approached Mr. Hugh Murray.

They stated briefly that, having been informed Murray was an old-timer in B.C., and well acquainted with the topography of the Pitt Lake Mountain Range, they had come to hire his services as a guide. Their objective was Lost Creek Mine!

At first Murray demurred, whereupon they showed him a letter and a map which John Jackson had sent to a Seattle resident named Shotwell. After reading the letter and studying the map Murray became fired, with the true prospector's fervour, for John Jackson had indisputable discovered Lost

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Creek Mine! Jackson, on his death-bed, had passed on the information to his old friend Shotwell. Shotwell, getting on in years and unwilling to go gold-seeking himself, later sold the map to another Seattle man for a thousand dollars. This man set out alone, but had returned empty-handed after coming within an ace of losing his life whilst endeavouring to cross a ranging mountain torrent. In his frantic attempts to save his life his clothing was ripped and torn and the precious map partially destroyed.

After that, the letter and the mutilated map changed hands several times, the last purchaser contriving to interest the Seattle financiers.

Mr. Murray still has a copy of Jackson's letter and the rough map, and showed them to me. In part the letter reads:

After reaching the head waters of the Pitt Lake I discharged my two native guides and headed into the mountains. I had been out about two months when, my health 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 lying in 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 a place 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 any doubt I had found Slummock'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.

Mr. Murray agreed to join the searchers, and guided a four-man party into the heart of the Pitt Lake Mountain Range. For over two months they combed the mountains, but failed to find Lost Creek. They did discover additional evidence, however to strengthen their firm belief in the actual existence of the mysterious mine. At the head of Pitt

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Lake they came across an aged Indian woman who told them that she well remembered a prospector called Jackson. Bent over with the weight of his pack-sack he had camped close beside her one night. While he slept she had peered inside his pack-sack, which contained much raw gold.

In the summer of 1937 there drifted into New Westminster a colourful, talkative, boastful old prospector of the true “desert rat” type, known as “Volcanic” Brown. He called on Mr. Murray, had several long talks with him, studied the map from all angles, and finally decided to have a try on his own.

But the “Hoodoo” still appeared to be on the job, for several months later, Brown, who had been caught in the mountains by the swift onslaught of winter, returned to New Westminster with his feet so badly frozen that he had to have several toes amputated.

It was the spring of 1938 before he was again able to walk. Then, still undaunted, he announced that he was going into the Pitt Lake Mountain Range again; and this time, by Heaven! he’d stay until he either found Lost Creek Mine or passed out.

He must have met a lonely death out there for he never returned.

In view of the number of men who have lost their lives in the search, and the time, energy and money others have expended uselessly, it is easy to understand why so many superstitious folk declare that the Lost Creek gold is under a curse and best left alone. Actually, however, there is a logical reason for the many failures to re-locate Slummock’s El Dorado.

Firstly, it must be remembered that John Jackson was a very sick man when he returned to civilization and drew his rough map. It may have been more or less accurate, but one slight error might send searcher miles in the wrong direction. And now, of course, the map is incomplete, for it was partially destroyed.

Secondly, one must consider the immensity of British Columbia’s desolate mountain regions. A hundred men, for instance, could spend whole lifetimes combing the tremendous wilderness of rocky canyons, tumbling streams, wooded slopes and cloud-enveloped peaks represented by the Pitt Lake Range without doing more than barely scratching the surface.

Thirdly, any old prospector will tell you that luck—pure, undeluted LUCK—plays by far the biggest part in any hunt for

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gold. As witness, trace the beginning of any one of Canada's rich mines of today. A man may hunt for years and miss the one spot he is seeking; on the other hand, if Lady Luck smiles upon him he may find it the first day out.

And that is how prospecting goes. Even as I write, seasoned, well-equipped men are out in the Pitt Lake Mountains determinedly hunting for Lost Creek Mine. Eventually, no doubt, it will be rediscovered—as likely as not by some utter greenhorn, astray in the hills, and stumbling on the gold-bearing creek accidentally while in search of a drink of water!

So far, however, Lost Creek Mine has been well guarded by its “hoodoo!”