Miscellania

Transcription of part of chapter "A Lesson" from *Twelve O'clock Sharp* by Michael Eisele

Source: Google Book Search

On a late afternoon in January 1891 feverish hammering could be heard near the banks of the Fraser River. Despite high winds and driving rain the gallows had to be finished before nightfall. All hands were busy, for above the snow-covered mountains the evening colours had appeared. Anxious glances were cast over shoulders towards the river, tossed up by contrary winds, rolling irresistibly seawards. All signs pointed to a continuous rainstorm coming from the Strait of Georgia.

Tomorrow was an important day. Slumach, a Katzi [sic] Indian, was scheduled to be hanged, weather permitting or not. His execution had been postponed twice already: Once, because the hangman, blind drunk, fell into the icy water of the Fraser where he nearly lost his life in the impetuous current. The second time Slumach outwitted the expertly tied and tested rope; he suddenly became ill. Sick men in those days were not executed, they needed to be sound as a bell.

Tomorrow should be the day, all signs pointed to favourable ending. Slumach showed symptoms of good health; the hangman had pledged not even to smell a cork three days prior to Slumach's death walk. Therefore the only thing trembling in the balance were the gallows. But with much heave, and more ho, the workers managed to drive the last spike before darkness descended.

Next morning the first spectators showed up at the gates, prior to the crack of dawn. Slumach was led down the slopes ten minutes ahead of the fatal hour. Two sturdy men guided him towards the gallows. They were neither armed, nor laid a hand on him. Despite his robust build and fierce demeanour no one worried about a possible escape. Let him try, was the prevailing attitude, we will fix his hash in a twinkle. These men were of a school which considered wrestling down and overpowering a prisoner as part of the job. Besides, matching one's strength with that of another man always tickled their sporting instincts.

On Slumach's left tripped a praying priest, who he entirely ignored. On his right strode a bailiff holding an open umbrella over the doomed man's head to protect him from the rain. The executioner appeared to be in fine fettle. He and Slumach knew each other well; they could look back on more than a few adventures experienced together. Many a day and more nights were spend in each other's company, carous-

ing, hunting, or prospecting. Untold hours they sat in the ubiquitous taverns of New Westminster, clinking glasses, egging each other on to raise Cain. There existed not a whiff of enmity between them.

"Nothing personal, Slumack," he said as he shook his hand; then added: "Have a nice trip."

The next moment the noose lay around Slumach's neck.

"Any last wishes?" the bailiff asked. He had none. "Some last words?" "Yes." "Go ahead." "The devil fetch you all."

Just as the executioner reached for the handle to open the trap door, Slumach raised a hand while beckoning to his nephew with the other. Bending his head as far as the noose allowed, he whispered something in his ear. A moment later he swung in the morning breeze.

Slumach's reputation grew after his death; his name acquired notoriety beyond British Columbia's borders. Not because of the murders he committed, of a woman to boot, even less for swinging in that morning breeze, but chiefly on account of strident rumours about a fabulous gold discovery, "Slumach's bonanza" it was called, a veritable Eldorado judging by the description. Where exactly this fabulous hoard lay seemed not to be known, yet it must have existed.

The grapevine telegraph kept humming about Peter Slumach, the nephew and inheritor on the secret mine. He could forever be seen walking the streets of New Westminster wit bulging pockets, seldom sober, always boisterous. Many a man, and woman for that matter, received standing offers to carouse with him, at which time he regaled royally.

Every month or so he disappeared for several days. On his return gold nuggets once more jingled in every pocket. Quite a few men tailed him; all lost his tracks, their eyes never feasted on the rich veins in the forbidden mountains. Some returned with puckered brows and dismayed countenances, maintaining to have been scared away by shots from ambush. It was a wild region, still is, wild and inaccessible. Rattling hail, crackling cold even in midsummer caused several fortune hunters' untimely end for which the younger Slumach received the blame.

Peter Slumach's inheritance brought him nothing but grief. Like the hoard of the Nibelungen, it turned out to be a bane. Over time he degenerated into a loafer and a drunk. Trips to the mountains became rarer; they proved more strenuous than he appreciated. In his near constant state of inebriation some ticklish moments ensued. To survive in that lonesome,

inhospitable region, a man needs all his faculties intact. Weakened and confused by repeated swigs from an ever-present bottle, Slumach slipped occasionally, stumbled into deep gulches, or lost his way in broad delight.

Once he was saved by sheer luck when he was found unconscious by two scouts who had followed his tracks, and resuscitated him. After that he changed his mode of operation to less dangerous enterprises, by fobbing off plans of his fabled mine, which were crude and divergent. He was much abroad, on the lam as it were, to avoid the purchasers' wrath, in case they compared notes.

Some years had passed since the uncle's meeting with the hempen collar, years in which the legendary discovery took on enormous proportions in people's imagination, but also went on extensive journeys. Upriver to the mouth of the untamed Thompson River it wandered, all the way to Kamloops where the initial murmur soon attained stentorian strength. The grapevine grew; its tendrils pushed along the banks of the Thompson River right into Ashcroft where it reached the attention of two German tourists.

A barren region that is, nearly treeless, arid in summer, hardly less dry in winter. Few roads, pathways, or other amenities could be found in those days. Slumach's fabulous mine, originally said to be located in the Pitt Lake district, somehow managed to relocate to an area north of Ashcroft, between Deadman and Bonaparte Rivers, home of rattling snakes, howling coyotes, and screaming eagles. A more desolate place could not have been imagined, yet insistent stories circulated that an immense treasure lay hidden there.

Some reports, oral and written, sounded credible enough to fight a fire under the soles of adventurers, or men motivated by greed. Why Horst Koppel and Rainer Munk ended up wandering around that no-man's land, neither one could have said: yet both learned to regret it. Did it happen out of boredom to satisfy an adventurous propensity perhaps? Or fortuitously? One fact could not be denied; they were losing their characteristic gaiety at a rapid pace. Both seemed to be plagued by a growing anxiety, an inexplicable discontent that had no name. One as the other were well-to-do bachelors, neither prone to fret nor shy to laugh, and healthy besides.

Their initial contentment, bordering on jubilation at times, was on the wane for no visible reasons. The resort, remote, yet not lacking amenities, situated amid a vast wilderness, possessed a charm not easily forgotten. Strolling around, or roving on horseback amid a world of fragrant sagebrush,

watching the bunch grass bend in the wind, while listening to rustle of ponderosa pine trees, could surely reinstate a man's lost equilibrium.

Yet, the contrary happened to Horst Koppel and Rainer Munk; they were in the throes of loosing theirs. The reason? A .....