

THE LOST GOLD MINE

THIS soldier of fortune was searching for some stray asphalt bed in one of the wooded wildernesses of Venezuela. Accompanied by two native servants, a half-breed guide, and a young companion from "The States," who knew little of roughing it, he had left the dingy old river steamer at the point where the Caura flows into the Orinoco and rowed slowly up the smaller stream into the province of Guiana.

The chief adventurer had heard, in his rambles among the old inhabitants of Caracas, of lakes of bitumen in this region which had never been discovered by the all-consuming companies which were creating such disturbance by their disagreements. This was the land of the Parabana Indians, descendants of the ancient Toltecs, quiet and gregarious. It was probably through some wandering trapper from these Indians that the story of the asphalt beds had reached the country of civilization.

But the chief of this expedition had read of the strange discovery of the diamond mines of Colombia, of the gold of the Transvaal, and he was willing to risk something to find the hidden asphalt beds of Venezuela. He and his companions rowed up the Caura for three days, camping by night in their little boat, as a partial protection against the fauna that abounded on shore.

On the night of the third day they found a clear space by the side of the stream, and there they decided to land. They slept that night in their boat again, but were up early next morning, ready for the explorations of the day. The boat was snugly moored under a clump of trees whose luxuriant boughs overhung the water, and the travelers started out.

The soldier of fortune found that he was near Mount Chanaro, right in the heart of the Parabana country. As he had been told that these Indians were very docile, like the North American Lenapes, he was rather curious than otherwise to meet one of them. But he encountered no sign of habitation or trail on that day. It was all a wild country, covered with high underbrush and an abundance of trees. The trees, however, were not very close together, and travel was made correspondingly easy.

It was late in the afternoon. Allison Glenn and his party were walking along the mountainside, about a hundred yards from where the earth begins to ascend. No asphalt had been found. Suddenly, the leader of the party espied a curious projection of leaves, stone, and dirt rising some six feet, not far ahead.

An examination was made, more as a matter of curiosity than anything else. The dead leaves were brushed away, and at one end of this long projection there was found a carving that resembled closely the head of a hugh fish. The carving was so accurate that Glenn made up his mind that this was not a mere freak of nature, and he ordered his men to completely uncover the rock, for the entire projection appeared to be a rock covered over with the fallen vegetation of years upon years.

The sight that met the eyes of the travelers, when all was made bare, was a startling one. It was a carved piece of solid stone, some twenty feet long and about four feet from the ground at the highest point. The lines of the fish were carefully reproduced, although with the hand of an amateur. The years that had passed had disintegrated parts of the huge rock, but enough was there to make it certain that this was the handiwork of human beings.

What is still more convincing of the fact that man had been there was a line of hieroglyphics on one side and near the head of the fish. These crude letters closely resembled inscriptions Glenn had observed on old Toltec relics preserved in Caracas. But they meant nothing to him then, except the belief that became firmly rooted in his mind at once that he had encountered an unusual mystery.

The next day the adventurers were early at work clearing away the debris from around the stone fish, cutting down the trees and digging into the surrounding earth. Surely something must be in this neighborhood, it was reasoned. But nothing was found. Glenn then determined to clear away the trees and get a good photograph of the object with the small camera he carried. This was done.

No trace of asphalt had been found. The soldier of fortune, like all his ilk at times of uncertainty, was restless. He longed to have the mystery of Mount Chanaro solved. He decided at once to return to Caracas and there to report his curious find.

Glenn was a taciturn, inquiring kind of fellow. He liked to ask questions, but little relished the answering of them. He had no intention of making any formal report of his discovery. He had little opinion, anyway, of the aristocracy of the Venezuelan capital upon matters of archaeological interest, and so he determined once again to seek his old friends of the suburbs of the town, quiet individuals who lived in the past, whose language was still quite as much Indian as Spanish.

An aged woman had told the soldier of fortune that she had seen the fish in the mountainside.

possessed of the stoicism of her race, was little surprised, apparently, to see the adventurer back in the city so soon.

"Ah, Sir, I fear you did not find the lake of tar," she observed in her native vernacular.

"No," Glenn responded, "but there are other mysteries in that land."

"Yes, yes, Signor; it is a strange country, weird country. Long has Mount Chanaro been shunned."

"Why should that small mountain be feared by the natives?" he persisted.

It was not long before this line of inquiry, with no revelation on Glenn's part of the find he had made, drew forth from the aged woman one of the strangest traditions of Venezuelan folklore. She told the story as though it was a settled part of the history of her people, a chapter in the life of her ancestors which was sacred for its antiquity and inspiring for the incentive it gave to ceaseless search, ceaseless persistence.

Generations ago, she said, there dwelt near Mount Chanaro a family of hardy woodsmen, half-breeds—sons of Spanish adventurers, who knew that jewels were valuable in the world of commerce, sons of Indian women, not afraid of the woods, not afraid to fight intruders upon their settlement.

This family was secretive, and when any of its members reached the frontiers had little to say of the lands they had come to inhabit. The family increased, and in time there was a small tribe huddled around the base of the mountain. The Indians who lived nearest seldom observed these settlers hunting or fishing, although it was done occasionally. Their settlement was developed to an unusual degree, and signs of civilization were apparent at many places.

It was not long before members of this family began appearing periodically at the mouth of the Orinoco with gold nuggets to exchange with foreign traders for what they wanted at home. Even in its undeveloped form this gold was almost pure. It was sent to civilized countries and assayed, and all who examined it pronounced it to be the purest gold ever mined.

The ancient Venezuelans heard of this rich treasure, and some of them sought to find out its secret source and share in the riches it was sure to bring. But the old family would brook no intruder. Lines were carefully drawn and guarded. The gold would go to market and all who saw it would be astonished, but no outsider was permitted to see the wonderful mine.

Often while on their way to the frontier or to the mouth of the river, in spite of all the secrecy and efforts to hide that might be observed, members of the family would be attacked and robbed, sometimes killed. But the treasure continued to flow out of that region, seemingly inexhaustible. The fame of the mine spread abroad, and the tradition grew that here was the richest gold mine in the world.

Long years afterward, when the story of the mine became better known, it was revealed that only a few members of the old tribe really knew where the mine was located. The secret was hidden from all except the few whose assistance was necessary in mining the treasure. But the whole tribe knew that the vein that had been found was a continuous one, very near the surface of the earth, and very easily mined.

It was not possible that a great treasure of this kind should be heralded abroad and the cupidity of neighbors not be excited. It took years for this to be done to such an extent that the security of the growing tribe would be disturbed. But the time came, and all the resources of the settlement were necessary to repel the invaders.

But, like the Goths and Vandals, the invaders continued to come with ever-increasing frequency and strength. The little tribe was diminishing, and there were walls in the cabins of the Gold Tribe, as they had come to be called. The struggle became so fierce that the boats no longer wended their sinuous way down the Chanaro and the Orinoco. Lest outsiders should finally force their way through, the mouth of the mine was covered up, and every effort made to destroy trace of it to all except the initiated.

At last the final struggle came. Indians broke through the fortifications that had been erected, and the settlement was overrun. Most of the old tribe were ruthlessly killed, and only one of the miners survived. He lurked about the neighborhood for several days after the massacre had taken place, saw the homes burned, and saw the invaders take away gold in great quantities, for the tribe had used gold to make the simple necessities of the hearth and the table.

But the lurking miner saw that the source of his treasure was not found. He saw, too, that the secret marks had not been discovered, and his heart rejoiced. Then he started on a journey toward civilization. He now and then met strange Indians, but successfully passed by them, in many cases winning their friendship. At last he reached the mouth of the Orinoco, and told the story of his travels to the settlers there. But he would never tell the story of the mine, nor where it was to be found.

Every inducement was made to this old miner to reveal the secret of the mine, but he refused.

by, and the settlers petted the aged frontiersman, cajoled him, took every means to prolong his life in the hope that some day he would tell the story; that he would reveal the sesame that would open the door to the lost treasure.

But, no, he would tell all but the whereabouts of that gold. His years were drawing to an end. One day death came. Just before the end arrived, the old miner arose from his couch, and grasping a support to hold him up, exclaimed:

"Find the fish, the fish! Read it, read it!"

"The fish?" asked Glenn, when the aged woman had reached this point in the story, his enthusiasm having been aroused as the narrative progressed. "Did you say the fish?"

"Yes," she answered, "that was the dying gasp of the old settler. He said no more."

"I have found it," exclaimed Glenn. "I have found it, but I cannot read the writing. Who can read it?—Where can I find some one that can read it?"

"Ah, Sir, that I do not know. I have told you the story of the secret mine. It is rich beyond all value, and if it could be found, Venezuela would be a Klondike, a South Africa, and a California all in one."

Glenn showed his pictures to the old woman, and asked her if she recognized the inscription.

"No, Signor," she replied, "that is something like Toltec, but I can't read it. Perhaps the man who knows that language is dead, too. It was written years and years ago, you know."

The narrator continued on her story. She said that after the miner's death adventurers had gone inland to search for the fish, but had found nothing. Many of them had caught the fever and died. In the surrounding country remains of settlers were found here and there, people murdered doubtless by the Gold Tribe. Bad luck seemed to attend all who sought for the treasure.

The search was kept up. Throughout all the country the story went, and men sought Mount Chanaro to die or to come back broken hearted. Finally the tradition spread that there were infernal agencies at work at the place, that the hand of fate was against the finding of the long lost secret. Mount Chanaro's name became an object of dread throughout all the land.

But Glenn was little affected by this superstition. He admonished the old woman to keep the secret of his discovery, urging her by a small gift of money. She promised faithfully to do it, but said:

"Remember, Signor, that you found Mount Chanaro by chance. All who go there to seek the gold have met ill fates. Remember this."

But the soldier of fortune, feeling that great riches lay within his grasp, began seeking persons who might be able to read the inscription. He felt that this writing without doubt contained directions for locating the lost gold mine. But no such one could be found in the Venezuelan capital. Having inquired of every one possible, he went to Brazil, inquiring of all the archaeologists in Rio de Janeiro, but with no success. He kept the secret of his find to himself, endeavoring alone to find some one to read the writing without telling them what it was for. But everywhere he met with failure.

He still seeks the solution of that secret. He has gone back to Mount Chanaro, and carefully covered up the stone fish. He has made many additional photographs of it. He has come to the United States and visited college professors and archaeologists in all parts of the country.

"I am sure that this is the secret of one of the greatest gold mines in the world," he always says.

"Well, Sir," he is encouraged, "the obelisks of Egypt and the cuneiform writings of Babylon were read. Perhaps those surrounding your fish may yet be deciphered."