





THE QUEST FOR THE LAKE OF GOLD

They went off to find a lake filled with gold, and were never heard from again.

The search for yet another group of explorers has been called off just weeks after they disappeared into the Amazon jungle, looking for the famous lost treasure of El Dorado.

"They were swallowed by the jungle, by their greed, and by the story," said an old man from the village they were last seen in.

Like many of those in whose footsteps they followed, they had heard the famous tale. It was about the South American tribe that would pick a new leader every year and, in an elaborate ritual, turn him into a "Golden Man", or "El Dorado" in Spanish.

They would smear his body with a sticky layer of plant gum and blow powdered gold dust onto his skin so that he looked like a living golden statue.

Glittering in this magnificence, he would then lead a procession to the shores of the lake, paddle out on a raft and, while people chanted and prayed, dive into the waters.

The lake washed away the precious metal coat, which then became an offering to the gods and symbol of the cleansing of sins. Over the years, the pile of gold at the bottom of the lake grew into a small fortune, and the rich little city built beside it burst at the seams with jewels and other treasures.

Eventually the tribe broke up and the ceremony was lost. But it was too brilliant a spectacle to be forgotten, and the story was passed through the generations, told and retold by those who had never seen it themselves.

Later, when the Spanish came and conquered these lands, searching for gold and other riches, they too heard the tale. For many, the idea of a fortune lying hidden was too tempting to resist.

A series of fortune hunters tried their luck searching for El Dorado's gold. Many spent years combing the insect- and disease-ridden jungle, navigating treacherous rivers such as the Amazon and Orinoco, often ending up lost.

One of them found some members of the lost tribe and tortured them into revealing the location of the lake. They did find some gold when they got there, but it was nothing like the amount described in the legend.

But none of this is stopping Sir Walter Raleigh, the English explorer and poet, from launching his own expedition to find El Dorado.

"If the English can find it before the Spanish, how cool that would be," he said. He and his team are preparing to set off next week.

Like others, Sir Walter draws encouragement from accounts such as the one given by Mr. Juan Martinez, a Spaniard who a few months ago emerged from the forest dishevelled and barely alive, the sole survivor of an earlier expedition.

"I saw it, I saw the city of El Dorado," he said, claiming to have been given jewels and gold by the tribal chief himself.

Unfortunately, he died soon after from a fever he caught during the trip.

Meanwhile, the local villagers seem quite happy to continue telling the story to the never-ending stream of eager fortune hunters.

"These crazy foreigners," said one.

"But it's better that they go running off into the jungle than bothering us."

BACKGROUND

"El Dorado" means "the golden man" in Spanish. The legend may have come from the custom of a tribe in Colombia, South America, who would roll their king in gold dust which he then washed off in a lake.

The Conquistadors — Spaniards who arrived to conquer and settle in parts of Central and South America in the 16th century — became obsessed with finding this treasure and lake.

They were preceded by the explorer Christopher Columbus, who discovered gold in San Salvador and Hispaniola. The news soon spread throughout Europe, causing much excitement among the adventurous and greedy. They launched many explorations and trips, claiming to be spreading their faith and religion when many were just out for gold.

Some of these expeditions failed quite spectacularly. For example, Sir Walter Raleigh's unsuccessful search for the treasure ruined his reputation in Europe.

No one has ever found El Dorado's riches, and some think the story was made up by the locals to lead the foreigners to their deaths in the dense Amazon jungle.

Today, the phrase "to search for El Dorado" is used to describe a blind hunt for wealth that cannot be achieved.

FAB VOCAB

ELABORATE

Detailed and complicated

MAGNIFICENCE

Brilliance or splendour

SPECTACLE

A grand public show or scene

GENERATION

All the people born or living at the same time; or, the average period in which children grow up and have children of their own, usually about 30 years

TEMPTING

Attractive or enticing

TORTURED

Made someone suffer or feel a lot of pain to force him to do or say something

EXPEDITION

A journey made by a group of people for a special purpose

ACCOUNTS

Stories or descriptions

DISHEVELLED

Untidy

SOLE SURVIVOR

The only one left alive

IF YOU ENJOYED THIS, READ

The El Dorado Adventure

By Lloyd Alexander

The Girl, The Fish And The Crown: A Spanish Folktale

By Marl Lee Heyer

Leprechaun Gold

By Teresa Bateman And Rosanne Litzinger

The Little Big Story Book: Tall Tales That Made The News by Alison de Souza
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