

River of Gold

An Excerpt from “Inca Gold” by Clive Cussler

“... some pretty interesting tales about the dunes around here,” he said, making idle conversation. “A lot of bones lie in them, remains of pioneers and miners who tried to cross four hundred kilometers of desert from Yuma to Borrego Springs in the middle of summer.”

“Once they passed the Colorado River, there was no water?,” asked Loren.

“Not a drop, not until Borrego. That was long before the valley was irrigated. Only after them old boys died from the sun did they learn their bodies lay not five meters from water. The trauma was so great they’ve all come back as ghosts to haunt the desert.”

Loren looked perplexed. “I think I missed something.”

“There’s no water on the surface,” the old fellow explained. “But underground there’s whole rivers of it, some as wide and deep as the Colorado.”

Pitt was curious. “I’ve never heard of large bodies of water running under the desert.”

“There’s two for sure. One, a really big sucker, runs from upper Nevada south into the Mojave Desert and then west, where it empties into the Pacific below Los Angeles. The other flows west under the Imperial Valley of California before curling south and spilling into the Sea of Cortez.”

“What proof do you have these rivers actually exist?,” asked Loren. “Has anyone seen them?”

“The underground stream that flows into the Pacific,” answered the cook, as he prepared Loren’s chiliburger, “was supposedly found by an engineer searching for oil. He alleged his geophysical instruments detected the river and tracked it across the Mojave and under the town of Laguna Beach into the ocean. So far nobody has proved or disproved his claim. The river traveling to the Sea of Cortez comes from an old story about a prospector who discovered a cave that led down into a deep cavern with a river running through it.”

Pitt tensed as Yaeger's translation of the *quipu* suddenly flashed through his mind. "This prospector, how did he describe this underground river?"

The diner's owner talked without turning from his stove. "His name was Leigh Hunt, and he was probably a very inventive liar. But he swore up and down that back in 1942 he discovered a cave in the Castle Dome Mountains not too far northeast of here. From the mouth of the cave, through a chain of caverns, he descended two kilometers deep into the earth until he encountered an underground river rushing through a vast canyon. It was there Hunt claims he found rich deposits of placer gold."

"I think I saw the movie," said Loren skeptically.

The old cook turned and waved a spatula in the air. "People at the assay office stated that the sand Hunt carried back from the underground canyon assayed at three thousand dollars per ton. A mighty good recovery rate when you remember that gold was only twenty dollars and sixty-five cents an ounce back then."

"Did Hunt ever return to the canyon and the river?" asked Pitt.

"He tried, but a whole army of scavengers followed him back to the mountain, hungering for a piece of the River of Gold, as it became known. He got mad and dynamited a narrow part of the passage about a hundred meters inside the entrance. Brought down half the mountain. Neither Hunt nor those who followed him were ever able to dig through the rubble or find another cave leading inside."

"With today's mining technology," said Pitt, "reexcavating the passage should be a viable project."

"Sure, if you want to spend about two million dollars," snorted the cook. "Nobody I ever heard about was willing to gamble that much money on a story that might be pure hokum."

Editorial Note: Apparently Clive Cussler has never heard of Larry Hahn's Explorations Inc., of Nevada.

He paused to set the chiliburger and cole slaw dishes on the counter. Then he drew a mug of beer from a tap, walked around the bar and sat down on a stool next to Pitt.

“They say old Hunt somehow made it back inside the mountain but never came out. He disappeared right after he blew the cave and was not seen again. There was talk that he found another way inside and died there. A few people believe in a great river that flows through a canyon deep beneath the sands, but most think it’s only another tall tale of the desert.”

“Such things do exist,” said Pitt. “A few years ago I was on an expedition that found an underground stream.”

“Somewhere in the desert Southwest?,” inquired the cook.

“No, the Sahara. It flowed under a hazardous waste plant and carried pollutants to the Niger River, and then into the Atlantic where it caused a proliferation of red tides.”

“The Mojave River north of here goes underground after running above the surface for a considerable distance. Nobody knows for certain where it ends up.”

Between bites of the chiliburger Loren asked, “You seem convinced that Hunt’s river flows into the Sea of Cortez. How do you know it doesn’t enter the Pacific off California?”

“Because of Hunt’s backpack and canteen. He lost them in the cave and they were found six months later, having drifted up on a beach in the Gulf.”

“Don’t you think that’s highly improbable? The pack and canteen could have belonged to anyone. Why would anyone believe they were his?,” Loren questioned the cook as if she was sitting on a congressional investigation committee.

“I guess because his name was stenciled on them.”

The unexpected obstacle did not deter Loren. She simply sidestepped it. “There could be a good twenty or more logical explanations for his effects being in the Gulf. They could have been lost or thrown there by someone who found or stole them from Hunt, or more likely, he never died in the cave and dropped them from a boat himself.”

“Could be he lost them in the sea,” admitted the cook, “but then how do you explain the other bodies?”

Pitt looked at him. “What other bodies?”

“The fisherman who disappeared in Lake Cocopah,” replied the cook in a hushed voice, as if he was afraid of being overheard. “And the two divers that vanished into Satan’s Sink. What was left of their bodies was found floating in the Gulf.”

“And the desert telegraph sends out another pair of tall tales,” suggested Loren dryly.

The cook held up his right hand. “God’s truth. You can check the stories out with the sheriff’s department.”

“Where are the sink and lake located?,” asked Pitt.

“Lake Cocopah, the spot where the fisherman was lost, is southeast of Yuma. Satan’s Sink lies in Mexico at the northern foot of the Sierra el Mayor Mountains. You can draw a line from Hunt’s mountain through Lake Cocopah and then Satan’s Sink right into the Sea of Cortez.”

Loren continued the interrogation. “Who’s to say they didn’t drown while fishing and diving in the Gulf?”

“The fisherman and his wife were out on the lake for the better part of the day when she wanted to head back to their camper to start dinner. He rowed her ashore and then continued trolling around the lake. An hour later, when she looked for him, all she could see was his overturned boat. Three weeks later a water skier spotted his body floating in the Gulf a hundred and fifty kilometers from the lake.”

“I’m more inclined to believe his wife did him in, dumped his remains in the sea and threw off suspicion by claiming he was sucked into an underground waterway.”

“What about the divers?,” Pitt queried.

“Not much to tell. They dove into Satan’s Sink, a flooded pool in an earthquake fault, and never came out. A month later, battered to a pulp, they were also pulled out of the Gulf.”

Pitt stabbed a fork at his cole slaw, but he was no longer hungry. His mind was shifting gears. “Do you happen to know approximately where Hunt’s gear and the bodies were found?”

“I haven’t made a detailed study of the phenomena,” answered the diner’s owner, staring thoughtfully at the heavily scarred wooden floor. “But as I recollect most of them were found in the waters off Punta el Macharro.”

“What part of the Gulf would that be?”

“On the western shore. Macharro Point, as we call it in English, is two or three kilometers above San Felipe.”

Loren looked at Pitt. “Our destination.”

Pitt made a wry smile. “Remind me to keep a sharp eye for dead bodies.”

The cook finished off his beer. “You folks heading for San Felipe to do a little fishing?”

Pitt nodded. “I guess you might call it a fishing expedition.”

“The scenery ain’t much to look at once you drop below Mexicali. The desert seems desolate and barren to most folks, but it has countless paradoxes. There are more ghosts, skeletons, and myths per kilometer than any jungle or mountains on earth. Keep that in mind and you’ll see them as sure as the Irish see leprechauns.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Loren said, smiling, “when we cross over Leigh Hunt’s underground River of Gold.”

“Oh, you’ll cross it all right,” said the cook. “The sad fact is you won’t know it.”

After Pitt paid for the gas and the meal, he went outside and checked the Pierce Arrow’s oil and water. The old cook accompanied Loren onto the dining car’s observation platform. He was carrying a bowl of carrots and lettuce. “Have a good trip,” he said, cheerfully.

“Thank you.” Loren nodded at the vegetables. “Feeding a rabbit?”

“No, my burro. Mr. Periwinkle is getting up there in age and can’t graze too well on his own.”

Loren held out her hand. “It’s been fun listening to your stories, Mr”

“Cussler, Clive Cussler. Mighty nice to have met you, ma’am.”

When they were on the road again, the Pierce Arrow and its trailer smoothly rolling toward the border crossing, Pitt turned to Loren. “For a moment there, I thought the old geezer might have given me a clue to the treasure site.”

“You mean Yaeger’s far-out translation about a river running under an island?”

“It still doesn’t seem geologically possible.” Loren turned the rearview mirror to reapply her lipstick. “If the river flowed deep enough it might conceivably pass under the Gulf.”

“Maybe, but there’s no way in hell to know for certain without drilling through several kilometers of hard rock.”

“You’ll be lucky just to find your way to the treasure cavern without a major excavation.” Pitt smiled as he stared at the road ahead. “He could really spin the yams, couldn’t he?”

“The old cook? He certainly had an active imagination.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get his name.”

Loren settled back in the seat and gazed out her window as the dunes gave way to a tapestry of mesquite and cactus. “He told me what it was.”

“And?”

“It was an odd name.” She paused, trying to remember. Then she shrugged in defeat.

“Funny thing ... I’ve already forgotten it.”