

RAINCOAST CHRONICLES SIX/TEN
Collector's Edition II



'Lost in the Rain Forest'

By Alex Kean
Circa 1918

LOST IN THE RAIN FOREST



Alex Kean

Illustrated by Belinda McLeod

MY NAME IS ALEX KEAN. I'M SIXTEEN YEARS OLD. I'm rooming in Vancouver. This is 1918, the year of the big flu epidemic. People are dying by the hundreds. I decide to leave the city before it gets me too. I hire out as signalman for the Robert Dollar Logging Co. at Union Bay on Vancouver Island. On arrival, I hand my workslip to the timekeeper. "Okay," he says, "go over to Number Six bunkhouse, you'll find an empty bed there."

Next morning we take the logging train to the woods and it lets us off at the spartree. I head out with the rigging crew. Soon the mainline is coming back with the chokers dangling. The rigging-slinger hollers to the punk to stop. I blow the whistle. The crew hooks the chokers onto a couple of logs and jumps out of the way. He yells for me to go ahead.

This half of the setting, the logs have to be yarded over a deep ravine. As the turns are yarded in, they shoot into the ravine and hang up on the other bank. The donkey-puncher opens the throttle of that powerful compound machine. She winds herself right off the ground in line with the bull-block. This is damn dangerous.

The donkey-puncher calls in the hooktender and says, "When in hell are you going to do something to stop this machine lifting off the ground?"

The hooker goes over to the loading-crew and points to a big fir butt-log lying in the pile. They throw the tongs on it, pick it up and swing it across the front of the yarder's sled. This done, the donkey-puncher is much happier.

The hooker comes back to the woods and stops to talk. "How's she going, kid?"

"Fine," I say. "By the way, Red, how's the hunting

around here?"

"Real good," he says. "I'm going hunting Sunday. Want to come along?"

"Damn right."

We log right through to the end of the week and after supper Saturday night Big Red the hooker says, "Come on punk, we're going to town."

We land up at the old Union Bay bar. Big Red calls for drinks on the house. I sip mine. Dave the rigging-slinger says, "Drink up, kid," and pushes me over another shot. Down it goes. Somebody pushes me two more drinks. Slowly I get them down. Feeling awfully groggy, I go over to a corner of the barroom, sit down against the wall and fall asleep. When the boys are through drinking, they pick me up and throw me into the taxi they've hired to get back to camp. Arriving there, we stagger into the bunkhouse, throw our clothes off and roll into our bunks. I fall instantly asleep.

Sunday morning we are awakened by the breakfast bell. It's raining cats and dogs. Getting up, we dress, run over to the bathhouse and have a good wash. Again we run to the cookhouse to get breakfast. When I'm finished, I ask Big Red if he's going hunting today.

"Hell, its too damn wet. You going, Alex?"

"Sure," I say, "I've got the clothes for it."

Before I start out he says, "Remember what I told you about me getting turned around back in that valley. Better keep out of there."

"Sure," I say and off I go up the railroad track, through the logging slash and into the tall timber. After a bit I sit down for a rest. On a ridge about a hundred yards away, I spot a big buck deer. Bringing the rifle quickly to my shoulder, I take aim and fire. Down he goes. I climb up to the ridge but there's no deer. Looking around, I see blood spots on the moss. I follow the spots along the ridge, through some snow and down into the valley.

The snow peters out and so do the blood-spots. I decide to give up. Turning around to go back, I get the shock of my life. There are mountains all around me and all the same size. Just where in hell did I come in here? If I hadn't been so eager hunting for that deer, I might have known my way out. I take the draw directly behind me, follow it up to the top of the mountain and run into snow. I hear a whooping sound and know it's connected with civilization. It seems to come from the right. I walk that way for a while and listen again. Dammit all! now it seems to come from the left. Back and forth I go and decide at last that the sound must be echoing all through the woods. To hell with it! What I want most right now is a drink of water. Ahead, I see a grassy clearing and a beautiful pool with ferns growing round it. As I come close to the spot, it disappears. I can't believe my eyes. Either I'm going crazy or it was some kind of mirage. Off I go again and again run into snow. I fill my mouth with it and keep on going. Suddenly I come across footprints. Somebody must be around here. I fire three shots and wait. No answer. That gets me thinking. I place my boots in the marks and they fit perfectly. I've just crossed my own tracks.

I look at my watch. It's four o'clock and the rain's coming down in buckets. I should have reached the logging-slash by now. I come to a big windfall with

enough room at the butt end to crawl under. Beneath it, I find enough dry twigs to make a fire. I bring out my matches, strike one on a dry rock and the head comes off. They are all soaking wet. Disgusted, I crawl under the windfall. Placing my rifle handy, I curl up and go to sleep.

In the night I am awakened by something prowling around. I grab my rifle and wait. Whatever it is gradually moves off into the darkness. I fall asleep again. In the early hours of the morning I wake once more, this time from the cold. I'm damn stiff and sore. Looking at my watch, I see it has stopped.

Rolling out from under the windfall, I stagger to my feet and jump around a bit to warm up. Then I head downhill. Shortly, I come to a river deep down in a gorge. To the left and above me is a beautiful falls. As I stand there watching the tumbling water, I make up my mind to follow this river. It's got to lead to a lake or the saltchuck. Maybe a prospector's or trapper's cabin. I head downstream and run into a valley, thickly overgrown with giant devil's club eight feet tall. I don't want any of those thorns in me. I know they are like fishhooks and just as hard to get out. Gingerly I work my way between the prickly stems and under the giant leaves for what seems like hours. Eventually, I manage to move sideways up a hill and get above the devil's club. I'm back in big timber again. The ground is covered with moss four inches deep and it's a lot better going. After a long time, it begins to get dark again. I come to another huge tree that has fallen with age and decide this is as far as I'm going today. I'm damn tired. Stacking some of the moss on the lee side of the windfall, I lie down on it and am asleep before I know it.

I wake the following morning, stiff, cold, hungry and damn sore. I try to get up from my moss bed. Nothing doing. Trying again, I get on one knee, bring up the other leg and down I go. Good God! I think, surely this can't be it. Reaching up, I get my fingers in a deep crevice of the thick fir bark and manage to pull myself to my knees. Reaching higher, I get a new hold, pull with my arms, push with my feet and finally manage to get up. Leaned against the log, I kick my feet to get some blood circulating again. Keeping a hold on the log I work my way along to the end. Letting the log go, I take a few shaky steps. I feel like a robot.

Gradually I manage to get going and soon come to the river again. The rock ridges on the opposite side are quite high. I figure if I could get over on top of them, I ought to be able to see right down the valley. Following the river down, I reach a place where it widens out. This usually means shallow water. I wade across to within eight feet of the other side. The water's above my waist and doing its damndest to sweep me off my feet. I notice something here I don't like. The river has dug a deep channel against the bank and the water is rushing through at terrific speed. It sure looks dangerous but, dammit all, I'm not going back if I can help it. I spot a willow-root sticking out of the bank about three feet. It looks solid. I back up against the current ten feet or so, throw my rifle-strap over my shoulder, hit the water and manage to catch the root on the way by. The current swings me into the bank. Pulling

myself out, I just lie there for a minute. My God, that water's cold! I have to get up or I'll freeze to death. I force myself to rise and slowly make my way up the high ridge till I reach the top. Exhausted, I collapse on the rock. Lifting my head, I take a look down the valley, rub my eyes and look again. Sure enough there's a log house away off in the distance.

Getting up, I work my way down to the river's edge, pushing my way through the thick brush. Suddenly I break into a small clearing and there's the log house. It's small and, looking inside, I can see it hasn't been used for years. Going around the back, I discover a trail. Someone has walked over it recently with caulk-shoes. This cheers me up. Following it, I come out on a sandstone bluff and right below me is the small coal town of Cumberland. I'm out of that damn valley at last.

Climbing down to a gravel road, I follow it to the Island Highway. I'm awful thirsty. Noticing a woman working in her garden, I go over and ask her for a drink of water.

"You wouldn't by any chance be the signalman from the Robert Dollar camp, would you?" she asks, looking at me curious.

"That's right," I say. "Why?"

"My husband came in Monday morning to get his rifle. He was going out with the crew to look for you." She invites me inside. "Guess your clothes must be soaked."

Sure are."

She offers me a chair and goes into a back room. "I've laid out underwear, a shirt, pants and a jacket for you," she says returning. "Go change."

I sure don't argue. Putting on the dry clothes, I

roll the wet gear in my rainiest jacket. I go back to the kitchen and she hands me a glass of hot rum. I drink it down, feeling the nice hot glow of it in my body.

"How does that feel?"

"Gosh lady, you've saved my life. Thanks a lot."

"You must be hungry too." She makes two big sandwiches of homemade bread with lettuce and boiled ham. I'm sure not long in finishing them up. We sit talking. Suddenly she jumps up and runs out the front door. Curious, I look out the window. She is on the side of the highway talking to somebody in a car. She comes back and says: "There's a ride for you to Union Bay. Leave the clothes you got on at the company office. My husband will pick them up."

I thank her again, carry my damp bundle out to the car and get in. The driver is a Jap. He drives along the highway for a bit and stops at a crossroad. "Me no go any further," he says.

I look at him. "You told that lady you were going to Union Bay."

"No go."

I start to climb out with my bundle of clothes. "You give me money, I take you to Union Bay," he says.

I can hardly believe what I hear. When people go hunting they don't pack money. "If you take me to the logging camp, I'll pay you what you want."

"No take camp."

I feel like punching him in the nose but I realize I have to play it his way. "You know John, the owner of the store at Union Bay? Well he's my friend. You take me there, I'll get him to pay you."

"Okay, you jump in."

Away we go again. I think, "What a dirty son of





a bitch he turned out to be!" We reach the Bay and I get out of the car.

"You get money now."

"You go to hell!" I say. "Two can play at this game, feller!"

He jumps out of the car and comes at me. I swing my rifle straight at him. "One more step and I'll blow a hole right through your belly!"

I've got him scared. He stops and stands looking at me. I tell him to climb in his car and get the hell out of there. He does too — digs holes in the road getting away. I try to call a taxi but they're both out. I phone the camp. Let them know I'm back in civilization again. Tell them I'll be back in an hour.

After another long hike up the camp road, I arrive at the bunkhouse. Inside of ten minutes, the place is plugged with men and a lot more standing outside. They want to know where I've been and what the hell happened. I tell them quick as I can. Then I escape to the bathhouse for a good hot shower. When I come back, I roll right into bed. It sure feels good. I sleep through till the breakfast-gong, roll over and go right back to sleep. Sometime later the camp cook comes in and asks if I want something to eat. I tell him I'm too tired to eat but maybe I'll feel better by noon. I go over at noon and have lunch with the cook. Back at the bunkhouse, I climb back in bed and sleep till the crew comes home at five-thirty. Feeling better, I get up and go eat supper with them.

Later in the bunkhouse, I talk with the boys who tell me what happened while I was gone. When I didn't show up Sunday evening, Big Red had told the super. He'd got the engineer to go out to the yarder and blow the whistle three times every fifteen minutes on the chance I might hear. They'd done this for the next couple of days. Monday, forty-five men had gone looking for me and the super had sent a telegram to my parents telling them I was lost. He'd also phoned my brother Bob at Cowichan Lake but he was out hunting for one of his own crew.

Big Red comes in. "Guess you got into that valley, eh?" he says.

"Yes," I tell him, "but it was accidental." I tell him about the deer.

"Consider yourself lucky you got out of there," he comments. "Never forget the day I got turned round in that valley."

I remember the whooping sound I'd heard on the first day and ask Red if he knows what it was.

"Sure, that's the big air-fan down at the Cumberland mine." He goes out.

A few minutes later, the blacksmith comes in. "Old Bob and Jim are coming down the railroad tracks," he says. "Get under the bunk, Alex, we'll have some fun with the old fellows."

I roll under the bunk and Bob and Jim enter. "Where's the kid?" they ask, looking around.

"We don't know yet," says the blacksmith straight-faced.

All of a sudden Old Bob throws the bedspread back, catches me by the legs and pulls me out. I get up and he hugs me like I was his own son.

"How in hell did you know he was there?" asks the blacksmith.

"Easy," says Bob. "His clothes are hanging on the line over the heater."

Bob and Jim go trapping every winter after the camp closes down. They know the country. The super had asked them to go back to the mountains and try to head me off from crossing the range. If I'd done that, it would have been the last of me. The oldtimers had heard the arranged whistle signal that I'd been found so they'd come back.

About a week later I'm giving signals for the crew when I begin to feel dizzy. I fall off the stump I'm standing on. The rigging's coming back with the chokers swinging. The rigging slinger hollers stop but there's no whistle. Everyone on the rigging crew starts yelling and waving. At last the chaser sees them and hand signals the engineer to stop. Catches her just short of tearing out the tail-block.

The hooktender comes over hollering his head off. "Hey punk, you asleep or pulling your goddamn wire?" Then he sees me laying there and he knows there's something wrong.

The rigging slinger and his chokermen come over. "What's the matter with him?"

"Don't know, Oley," Red says. "Better go down to the tree and get the engineer to phone for the locie. And fetch back the stretcher."

The boys lay me on the stretcher and pack me in to the spartree. The locie comes up with one flatcar. Red tells the brakeman to watch me till they get to camp and hand me over to the first-aid man. The first-aid man can't figure what's wrong so he phones the sawbones at Union Bay. Up he comes and has a look at me. Then he heads for the office to see the super.

"Have you got any empty bunkhouses?"

"We got three just built," says the push.

"Well you're sure going to need them. The kid's got that bad flu that's going around the city."

The sawbones is right. Damn near the whole camp goes down with it.

About ten days later I'm feeling better aside from being a little weak. After all the tough luck I've been having, I decide to go over and draw my time. The cheque's not very big but its enough to get me home to Sechelt.

My father, Alex Kean, passed away very suddenly on December 21st. In the past weeks, remembering Dad's last few years and of the things that were important to him, you came to mind many times.

The day he received your letter to say you had accepted his story "Lost in the Rain Forest" for the *Chronicles*, he was elated and from that day on his interest in writing grew, which gave him a lot of pleasure. Also many proud times, when people read the story and asked for his autograph.

I just had to thank you for giving him those special times and thank you also for giving him the interest to write many more pages, which have given me a look into his youth which many parents never get around to telling their children.

Kathy Fraser (nee Kean)

West Vancouver, B.C.