

# **The Treasure Trail**

BY  
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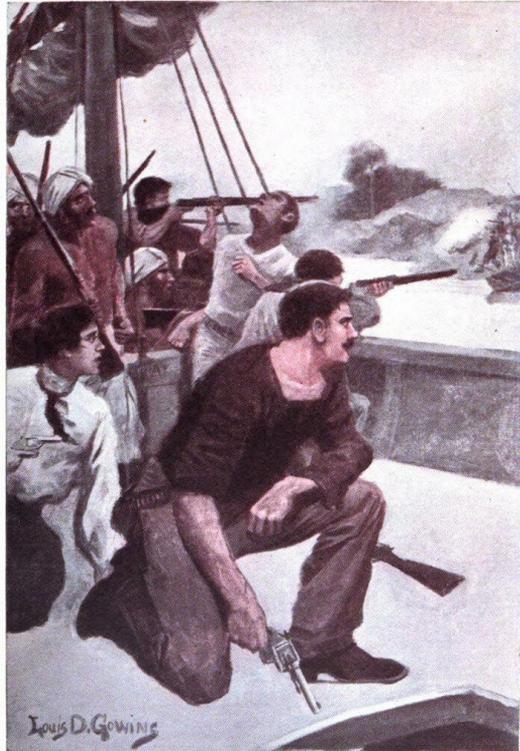
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## THE TREASURE TRAIL



*"Suddenly Sullivan stood up jerkily on the deck."*

# THE TREASURE TRAIL

## CHAPTER I. THE NEW LEAF

“Lord! what a haul!” Elliott murmured to himself, glancing over his letter while he waited with the horses for Margaret, who had said that she would be just twelve minutes in putting on her riding-costume. The letter was from an old-time Colorado acquaintance who was then superintending a Transvaal gold mine, and, probably by reason of the exigencies of war, the epistle had taken over two months to come from Pretoria. Elliott had been able to peruse it only by snatches, for the pinto horse with the side-saddle was fidgety, communicating its uneasiness to his own mount.

“And managed to loot the treasury of over a million in gold, they say, and got away with it all. The regular members of the Treasury Department were at the front, I suppose, with green hands in their places,” he read.

It was a great haul, indeed. Elliott glanced absently along the muddy street of the Nebraska capital, and his face hardened into an expression that was not usual. It was on the whole a good-looking face, deeply tanned, with a pleasant mouth and a small yellowish moustache that lent a boyishness to his whole countenance, belied by the mesh of fine lines about the eyes that come only of years upon the great plains. The eyes were gray, keen, and alive with a spirit of enterprise that might go the length of recklessness; and their owner was, in fact, reflecting rather bitterly that during the past ten years all his enterprises had been too reckless, or perhaps not reckless enough. He had not had the convictions of his courage. The

story of the stealings of a ring of Boer ex-officials had made him momentarily regret his own passable honesty; and it struck him that in his present strait he would not care to meet the temptation of even less than a million in gold, with a reasonable chance of getting away with it.

This subjective dishonesty was cut short by Margaret, who hurried down the veranda steps, holding up her brown riding-skirt. She surveyed the pinto with critical consideration.

“Warranted not to pitch,” Elliott remarked. “The livery-stable man said a child could ride him.”

“You’d better take him, then. I don’t want him,” retorted Margaret

“This one may be even more domestic. What in the world are you going to do with that gun?”

“Don’t let Aunt Louisa see it; she’s looking out the window,” implored Margaret, her eyes dancing. “I want to shoot when we get out of town. Put it in your pocket, please,—that’s against the law, you know. You’re not afraid of the law, are you?”

“I am, indeed. I’ve seen it work,” Elliott replied; but he slipped the black, serviceable revolver into his hip pocket, and reined round to follow her. She had scrambled into the saddle without assistance, and was already twenty yards down the street, scampering away at a speed unexpected from the maligned pinto, and she had crossed the Union Pacific tracks before he overtook her. From that point it was not far to the prairie fields and the barbed-wire fences. The brown Nebraska plains rolled undulating in scallops against the clear horizon; in the rear the

great State House dome began to disengage itself from a mass of bare branches. The road was of black, half-dried muck, the potent black earth of the wheat belt, without a pebble in it, and deep ruts showed where wagons had sunk hub-deep a few days before.

A fresh wind blew in their faces, coming strong and pure from the leagues and leagues of moist March prairie, full of the thrill of spring. Riding a little in the rear, Elliott watched it flutter the brown curls under Margaret's grey felt hat, creased in rakish affectation of the cow-puncher's fashion. Now that he was about to lose her, he seemed to see her all at once with new eyes, and all at once he realized how much her companionship had meant to him during these past six months in Lincoln,—a half-year that had just come to so disastrous an end.

Margaret Laurie lived with her aunt on T Street, and gave lessons in piano and vocal music at seventy-five cents an hour. Her mother had been dead so long that Elliott had never heard her mentioned; the father was a Methodist missionary in foreign parts. During the whole winter Elliott had seen her almost daily. They had walked together, ridden together, skated together when there was ice, and had fired off some twenty boxes of cartridges at pistol practice, for which diversion Margaret had a pronounced aptitude as well as taste. She had taught him something of good music, and he confided to her the vicissitudes of the real estate business in a city where a boom is trembling between inflation and premature extinction. It had all been as stimulating as it had been delightful; and part of its charm lay in the fact that there had always been the frankest camaraderie between them, and

nothing else. Elliott wished for nothing else; he told himself that he had known enough of the love of women to value a woman's friendship. But on this last ride together he felt as if saturated with failure—and it was to be the last ride.

Margaret broke in upon his meditations. "Please give me the gun," she commanded. "And if it's not too much trouble, I wish you'd get one of those empty tomato-cans by the road."

"You can't hit it," ventured Elliott, as he dismounted and tossed the can high in the air. The pistol banged, but the can fell untouched, and the pinto pony capered at the report.

"Better let me hold your horse for you," Elliott commented, with a grin.

"No, thank you," she retorted, setting her teeth. "Now,—throw it up again."

This time, at the crack of the revolver, the can leaped a couple of feet higher, and as it poised she hit it again. Two more shots missed, and the pinto, becoming uncontrollable, bolted down the road, scattering the black earth in great flakes. Elliott galloped in pursuit, but she was perfectly capable of reducing the animal to submission, and she had him subjected before he overtook her.

"It's easier than it looks," Margaret instructed him, kindly. "You shoot when the can poises to fall, when it's really stationary for a second."

"Thank you—I've tried it," Elliott responded, as they rode on side by side, at the easy lope of the Western horse. The wind

sang in their ears, though it was warm and sunny, and it was bringing a yellowish haze up the blue sky.

“Weh, weh, der Wind!”

hummed Margaret, softly.

“Frisch weht der Wind der Heimath zu;

Mein Irisch Kind, wo weilest Du——?”

“What a truly Western combination,—horses, Wagner, and gun-play!” remarked Elliott.

“Of course it is. Where else in the world could you find anything like it? It’s the Greek ideal—action and culture at once.”

“It may be Greek. But I know it would startle the Atlantic coast.”

“I don’t care for the Atlantic coast. Or—yes, I do. I’m going to tell you a great secret. Do you know what I’ve wanted more than anything else in life?”

“Your father must be coming home from the South Seas,” Elliott hazarded.

“Dear old father! He isn’t in the South Seas now; he’s in South Africa. No, it isn’t that. I’m going to Baltimore this fall to study music. I’ve been arguing it for weeks with Aunt Louisa. I wanted to go to New York or Boston, but she said the Boston winter would kill me, and New York was too big and dangerous. So we compromised on Baltimore.”

“Hurrah!” said Elliott, with some lack of enthusiasm. “Baltimore is a delightful town. I used to be a newspaper man there before I came West and became an adventurer. I wish I were going to anything half so good.”

“You’re not leaving Lincoln, are you?” she inquired, turning quickly to look at him.

“I’m afraid I must.”

“When are you going, and where?” she demanded, almost peremptorily.

“I don’t exactly know. I had thought of trying mining again,” with a certain air of discouragement.

Margaret looked the other way, out across the muddy sheet of water known locally as Salt Lake, where a flock of wild ducks was fluttering aimlessly over the surface; and she said nothing.

“I suppose you know that the bottom’s dropped out of the land boom in Lincoln,” Elliott pursued. “I’ve seen it dropping for a month; in fact, there never was any real boom at all. Anyhow, the real estate office of Wingate Elliott, Desirable City Property Bought and Sold, closed up yesterday.”

“You don’t mean that you have—”

“Failed? Busted? I do. I’ve got exactly eighty-two dollars in the world.”

She began to laugh, and then stopped, looking at him half-incredulously.

“You don’t appear to mind it much, at least.”

“No? Well, you see it’s happened so often before that I’m used to it. Good Lord! it seems to me that I’ve left a trail of ineffectual dollars all over the West!”

“You do mind it—a great deal!” exclaimed Margaret, impulsively putting a hand upon his bridle. “Please tell me all about it. We’re good friends—the very best, aren’t we?—but you’ve told me hardly anything about your life.”

“There’s nothing interesting about it; nothing but looking for easy money and not finding it,” replied Elliott. He was scrutinizing the sky ahead. “Don’t you think we had better turn back? Look at those clouds.”

The firmament had darkened to the zenith with a livid purple tinge low in the west, and the wind was blowing in jerky, powerful gusts. A growl of thunder rumbled overhead.

“It’s too early for a twister, and I don’t mind rain. I’ve nothing on that will spoil,” said Margaret, almost abstractedly. She had scarcely spoken when there was a sharp patter, and then a blast of drops driven by the wind. A vivid flash split the clouds, and with the instantaneous thunder the patter of the rain changed to a rattle, and the black road whitened with hail. The horses plunged as the hard pellets rebounded from hide and saddle.

“We must get shelter. The beasts won’t stand this,” cried Elliott, reining round. The lumps of ice drove in cutting gusts, and the frightened horses broke into a gallop toward the city. For a few moments the storm slackened; then a second explosion of

thunder seemed to bring a second fusillade, driving almost horizontally under the violent wind, stinging like shot.

Across an unfenced strip of pasture Elliott's eye fell upon the Salt Lake spur of the Union Pacific tracks, where a mile of rails is used for the storage of empty freight-cars. He pulled his horse round and galloped across the intervening space, with Margaret at his heels, and in half a minute they had reached the lee of the line of cars, where there was shelter. He hooked the bridles over the iron handle of a box-car door that stood open, and scrambled into the car, swinging Margaret from her saddle to the doorway.

It was a perfect refuge. The storm rattled like buckshot on the roof and swept in cloudy pillars across the Salt Lake, where the wild ducks flew to and fro, quacking from sheer joy, but the car was clean and dry, slightly dusted with flour. They sat down in the door with their feet dangling out beside the horses, that shivered and stamped at the stroke of chance pellets of hail.

"This is splendid!" said Margaret, looking curiously about the planked interior of the car. "Why do you want to leave Lincoln?" she went on in a lower tone, after a pause.

"I don't want to leave Lincoln."

"But you said just now—"

"It seems to me, by Jove, that I've done nothing but leave places ever since I came West!" Elliott exclaimed, impatiently. "That was ten years ago. I came out from Baltimore, you know. I was born there, and I learned newspaper work on the *Despatch*

there, and then I came West and got a job on the Denver *Telegraph*.”

“At a high salary, I suppose.”

“So high that it seemed a sort of gold mine, after Eastern rates. But it didn’t last. The paper was sold and remodelled inside a year, and most of the reporters fired. I couldn’t find another newspaper job just then, so I went out with a survey party in Dakota for the winter and nearly froze to death, but when I got back and drew all my accumulated salary, I bought a half-interest in a gold claim in the Black Hills. Mining in the Black Hills was just beginning to boom then, and I sold my claim in a couple of months for three thousand. I made another three thousand in freighting that summer, and if I had stayed at it I might have got rich, but I came down to Omaha and lost it all playing the wheat market. I had a sure tip.”

“Six thousand dollars! That’s more money than I ever saw all at once,” Margaret commented.

“It was more money than I saw for some time after that; but that’s a fair specimen of the way I did things. Once I walked into Seattle broke, and came out with four thousand dollars. I cleaned up nearly twenty thousand once on real estate in San Francisco. Afterwards I went down to Colorado, mining. I could almost have bought up the whole Cripple Creek district when I got there, if I had had savvy enough, but I let the chance slip, and when I did go to speculating my capital went off like smoke. The end of it was that I had to go into the mines and swing a pick myself.”

“You were game, it seems, anyway,” said Margaret, who was listening with absorbed interest. The sky was clearing a little, and the hail had ceased, but the rain still swept in gusty clouds over the brown prairie.

“I had to be. It did me good, and I got four dollars a day, and in six months I was working a claim of my own. By this time I thought I was wise, and I sold it as soon as I found a sucker. I got ten thousand for it, and I heard afterwards that he took fifty thousand out of it.”

“What a fraud!” cried Margaret, indignantly.

“Anyhow, I bought a little newspaper in a Kansas town that was just drawing its breath for a boom. I worked for it till I almost got to believe in that town myself. At one time my profits in corner lots and things—on paper, you know—were up in the hundreds of thousands. In the end, I had to sell for less than one thousand, and then I came to Lincoln and worked for the paper here. That was two years ago, when I first met you. Do you remember?”

“I remember. You only stayed about four months. What did you do then?”

“Yes, it seemed too slow here, too far east. I went back to North Dakota, mining and country journalism. I did pretty well too, but for the life of me I don’t know what became of the money. After that I did—oh, everything. I rode a line on a ranch in Wyoming; I worked in a sawmill in Oregon; I made money in some places and lost it in others. Eight months ago I had a nice

little pile, and I heard that there was a big opening in real estate here in Lincoln, so I came.”

“And wasn’t there an opening?”

“There must have been. It swallowed up all my little pile without any perceptible effect, all but eighty-two dollars.”

“And now—?”

“And now—I don’t know. I was reading a letter just now from a man I know in South Africa telling of a theft of a million in gold from the Pretoria treasury during the confusion of the war. Do you know, I half-envied those thieves; I did, honour bright. A quick million is what I’ve always been chasing, and I’d almost steal it if I got the chance.”

“You wouldn’t do any thing of the sort. I know you better than that. You’re going to do something sensible and strong and brave. What is it to be?”

“But I don’t know,” cried Elliott. “There are heaps of things that I can do, but I tell you I feel sick of the whole game. I feel as if I’d been wasting time and money and everything.”

“So you have, dear boy, so you have,” agreed Margaret. “And now, if you’d let me advise you, I’d tell you to find out what you like best and what you can do best, and settle down to that. You’ve had no definite purpose at all.”

“I have. It was always a quick fortune,” Elliott remonstrated. “I’ve got it yet. There are plenty of chances in the West for a man to make a million with less capital than I’ve got now. This isn’t a country of small change.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve heard men talk like that,” said Margaret, more thoughtfully. “But it seems to me that you’ve been doing nothing but gamble all your life, hoping for a big haul. Of course, I’ve no right to advise you. Nebraska is all I know of the world, but I don’t like to think of you going back to the ‘game,’ as you call it. Do you know that it hurts me to think of you making money and losing it again, year after year, and neglecting all your real chances? Too many men have done that. A few of them won, but nobody knows where most of them died. There are such chances to do good in the world, to be happy ourselves and make others happy, and when I think of a man like my father—”

“You wouldn’t want me to go to Fiji as a missionary?” Elliott interrupted. He was shy on the subject of her father, whom Margaret had seen scarcely a dozen times since she could remember, but who was her constant ideal of heroism, energy, and virtue.

“Of course not. But don’t you like newspaper work?”

“I like it very much.”

“And isn’t it a good profession?”

“Very fair, if one works like a slave. That is, I might reach a salary of five thousand dollars a year. The best way is to buy out a small country daily and build it up as the town grows. There’s money in that sometimes.”

“Why not do it, then? It’s not for the sake of the money. I hate money; I’ve never had any. But I don’t believe any one can be

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