

THE RIVALS OF THE TRAIL

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649514328

The Rivals of the Trail by Lawrence J. Leslie

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

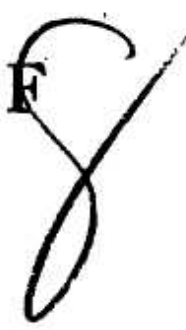
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LAWRENCE J. LESLIE

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OF THE TRAIL**

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BY

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M. A. DONOHUE & COMPANY
CHICAGO

NEW YORK

2-1913
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Leslie

THE NEW YORK
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MAY 1941

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THE RIVALS OF THE TRAIL

CHAPTER I.

UNDER THE SPREADING OAK.

"Hold up, Toby Jucklin; we might as well settle the thing right here and now, under the shade of this bully old big tree!"

"S-s-say, S-s-steve Dowdy, I tell you I did s-s-see that heading on the l-l-letter Ted got out of the m-m-mails; and it was from the b-b-biggest buyers of m-m-medicine roots in the w-w-whole country, too. It had g-g-g-g——"

"Hold on, Toby; give a whistle and quiet down. When you get excited you just can't do anything but hiss and get red in the face. Whistle *three* times, and make sure of it. It gives me a pain to see you look like that, sure thing."

The boy addressed, and who seemed to answer to the name of Toby Jucklin, evidently knew that the advice was good. Strange to say, when he began to stutter at a tremendous rate, if he only remembered himself, drew up short, and gave a whistle, it seemed to clear the obstruction to his free speech.

So now he went through the ridiculous performance, and with a grin actually managed to utter a complete sentence without once stammering.

"I say it had the one word 'ginseng' in big letters at the top of the page; get that, Steve?"

"Sure I do," replied the other, who was a rather fiery fellow, good-natured in his way, but so peppery that his chums had long since dubbed him "Touch-and-go-Steve"; "and it sounds like Ted hasn't been as much asleep all this while as we had an idea."

"Y-y-you just b-b-bet he ain't," asserted the first speaker, shaking his head as if deep down in his heart he feared the boy in question about as much as he disliked him.

"Ginseng, eh?" muttered Steve; "I've heard a whole lot about that plant; seems to me they dry the roots, and pretty much all of it is sent over to China, where the slant-eyed heathen use it for some sort of medicine. Brings a big price, too, the account I read in a magazine went on. Say, I take back all I said about you being on the wrong track, Toby."

"Huh! I r-r-reckon you b-b-better," grinned the other, amiably.

"I've heard our chum Owen Hastings speak about ginseng, when we first got that idea in our heads of trying out the mussels in the Big Sunflower River, to see if they had any fresh-water pearls in 'em."

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"They did, too!" exclaimed Toby, without any hesitation, and a ring of triumph in his boyish tones.

"Say, they did, all right," continued Steve, also smiling broadly; "but as I was saying, I remember Owen and his cousin Max talking it over, and wondering whether we could find a paying patch or so of wild ginseng around Carson. So far as I know it's never been hunted much about this region. But you see, we hit up with such bully good success in the pearl business, that it just knocked the other right out of our chums' heads."

"P'r'aps that m-m-measly old Ted was hanging around, and heard w-w-what was s-s-said about the g-g-g——"

"Ginseng!" roared Steve, afraid that his companion might have a fit in the endeavor to get that particular word, which somehow twisted up his vocal cords worse than anything he tried to say.

"That's it," cried the other, triumphantly. "P'r'aps Ted heard about it, and g-g-got his crowd out in the w-w-woods huntin' for the p-p-plant. Must 'a' f-f-found a bunch of it, too."

"Go slow now, Toby, and get the thing straight," cautioned Steve. "You just rush along like an old hurricane. No wonder you get tumbling all over yourself."

"C-c-couldn't b-b-beat you if I t-t-tried," burst out the other, indignantly.

"Well," drawled Steve, with a smirk, "that's a

fact, I am a little quick on the trigger, and go off before I had ought to, lots of times; but then you see, I c'n speak straight, and it don't matter much. But to get down to business again, don't you remember Bandy-legs telling us a week or more ago that he saw Ted down at the railroad station, and he was folding up a bill of lading like he'd been shipping something out? We talked it over at the time, and allowed Ted h'd been sending his old wheel to the factory to get it japanned over again."

"But now we know b-b-better!" ejaculated Toby, puffing out his cheeks in the effort to talk with as little stumbling as possible. "It wasn't his w-w-wheel 'tall, but a package of—you know what, Steve!"

"That was real cute of you, Toby, getting around the rocks like you did," remarked the admiring Steve. "Best to always avoid trouble, when you can. It comes more'n halfway to meet a feller mostly, anyhow. Yes, ten to one it was a bundle of dried ginseng roots Ted Shafter was sending away. And if they've been doing this same right along, and struck a soft thing—say, old boy, they may get their motorcycles as soon as our crowd does!"

The two boys looked at each other when Steve made this stunning announcement. It was a matter that concerned them deeply. And to fully understand why, it might be as well for us right here to go back, ascertain who Steve and Toby were,

and also what relation they bore to the other boys mentioned in their little talk under the wide spreading tree that cast such a pleasant shade on this hot day.

They lived in the little town of Carson, located in a Northern State on the very pretty Evergreen River, which in turn was formed by the junction of two smaller streams known as the Elder and the Big Sunflower.

At the beginning of the long summer vacation five lads, who were great friends, had banded themselves together under the name of the "Outing Boys of Carson." They had quite extensive plans of what they would like to do in company; but in the beginning a terrible lack of funds threw cold water over these ambitious schemes.

But the two cousins, Max and Owen Hastings, conceived a glorious idea that promised at least a shadowy chance for success. They believed that as pearls of considerable value had been found in many of the streams in Indiana and other middle Western States, a search among the mussels that were known to lie plentifully along the Big Sunflower might result in their securing a prize or two.

Accordingly these four, with another boy, called "Bandy-legs" on account of the fact of his lower extremities being a bit short, and with a slight curve, after the style of a Western cowboy—these five had gone camping up in the region of the Big