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CROOKED TRAILS AND STRAIGHT

By *William MacLeod Raine*

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PART I

Curly.

CHAPTER I.

Following a Crooked Trail.

Across Dry valley a dust cloud had been moving for hours. It rolled into Saguache at the brisk heels of a bunch of horses just about the time the town was settling itself to supper. From out of the heart of it came a rider, who swung his pony as on a half dollar, and deflected the remuda toward Chunn's corral.

The rider was in the broad rimmed felt hat, the gray shirt, the plain leather chaps of a vaquero. Under other conditions he might have been a college freshman for age, but the competent confidence of manhood sat easily on his broad shoulders. Curly Flandrau had more than once looked into the chill eyes of death.

The leaders of the herd dribbled into the corral through the open gate, and the others crowded on their heels. Three more riders followed Curly into the enclosure. One of them, a red-haired young fellow of about the same age as Curly, swung stiffly from the saddle.

"Me for a square meal first off," he gave out promptly.

"Not till we've finished this business, Mac. We'll put a deal right through if Warren's here," decided a third member of the party. He was a tough-looking customer of nearly fifty. "Bad Bill" Cranston he was called, and the man looked as if he had earned his sobriquet.

"And what if he ain't here?" snarled Lute Blackwell. "Are you aiming to sit down and wait for him?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Bad Bill answered. "Curly, want to ride up to the hotel and ask if Mr. Dave Warren is there? Bring him right down if he is."

The young man centered up the dusty street toward the hotel.

"Thought you'd fixed it with this Warren to be right on the spot so's we could unload on him prompt," Blackwell grumbled at Cranston without looking toward the latter.

"I didn't promise he'd be hanging round your neck soon as you hit town," Cranston retorted coolly.

The owner of the corral sauntered from the stable and glanced over the bunch of horses milling around. "Drive all the way from Bar Double M?" asked the keeper, his eyes on the brand stamped on the flank of a pony circling past.

"Yep."

Bad Bill turned away and began to unsaddle.

"Looks like you been hitting the road at a right lively gait."

Mac cut in. "Shoulder of my brone's chafed from the saddle. Got anything that'll heal it?"

"You bet I have." The man hurried into the stable and the red-headed cowpuncher winked across the back of his horse at Bill.

The keeper of the stable and the young man were still busy doctoring the sore when Curly arrived with Warren. The buyer was a round-bodied man with black gimlet eyes that saw much he never told. The bargain he drove was a hard one, but it did not take long to come to terms at about one-third the value of the string he was purchasing. Very likely he had his suspicions, but he did not voice them. No doubt they cut a figure in the price. He let it be understood that he was a supply agent for the rebels in Mexico. Before the bills were warm in the pockets of the sellers, his vaqueros were mounted and were moving the remuda toward the border.

Curly and Mac helped them get started. As they rode back to the corral a young man came out from the stable. Flandrau forgot that there were reasons why he wanted just now

to be a stranger in the land with his identity not advertised. He let out a shout.

"Oh, you, Slat's Davis!"

"Hello, Curly! How are things a-comin'?"

"Fine. When did you blow in to Saguache? Ain't you off your run some?"

They had ridden the range together and had frolicked around on a dozen boyish larks. To put it mildly the meeting was likely to prove embarrassing.

"Came down to see about getting some cows for the old man from the Fiddleback outfit," Davis explained.

"You riding for the Bar Double M?"

There was a momentary silence. Curly's vigilant eyes met those of his old side partner. What did Slat's know? Were his suspicions already active?

"No, I'm riding for the Map of Texas," Flandrau answered evenly.

"Come on, Curly. Let's go feed our faces," Mac called from the stable.

Flandrau nodded. "You still with the Hashknife?" he asked Davis.

"Still with 'em. I've been raised to assistant foreman."

"Bully for you. That's great. All right, Mac, I'm coming. That's sure great, old boss. Well, see you later, Slat's."

Flandrau followed Mac, dissatisfied with himself for leaving his friend so cavalierly. He guessed Slat's would be hurt, but he had to think of his partners in this enterprise.

After supper they took a room at the hotel and divided the money Warren had paid for the horses. None of them had slept for the last fifty hours and Mac proposed to tumble into bed at once.

Bad Bill shook his head. "I wouldn't, Mac. Let's hit the trail and do our sleeping in the hills. There's too many telephone lines into this town to suit me."

"Sho! Our play isn't to hike out like we were scented stiff of something. What we want to do is to act as if we could look every jarned citizen in the face. Mac's sure right," Curly agreed.

"You kids make me tired. I'm going to dust my pronto," Blackwell snarled.

"Sure. Whenever you like. You got to split up anyhow," Mac said.

Bad Bill looked at Blackwell and nodded. "That's right. We don't all want to pull a blue streak. That would be a dead give away. Let the kids stay if they want to."

"So as they can round on us if they're nabbed," Blackwell sneered.

Cranston called him down roughly. "That'll be enough along that line, Lute. I don't stand for any more cracks like it."

Blackwell, not three months out

from the penitentiary, faced the other with an ugly look in his eyes. He was always ready to quarrel, but he did not like to fight unless he had a sure thing.

"Didn't mean any harm," the convict growled. "But I don't like this sticking around town."

"Then I wouldn't stay if I were you," Curly suggested promptly. "Mac and I have got a different notion. So we'll tie to Saguache for a day or two."

As soon as the older men had gone the others tumbled into bed and fell asleep at once. Daylight was sifting in through the open window before their eyes opened. Somebody was pounding on the bedroom door.

Mac was already out of bed when his partner's feet hit the floor.

"What's up, Mac?"



"They're After You," He Said. The eyes of the redheaded puncher gleamed with excitement. His six-gun was in his hand. By the look of him he was about ready to whang loose through the door.

"Hold your horses, you chump," Curly sang out. "It's the hotel clerk. I left a call with him."

"That you, Curly? For God's sake, let me in."

Before he had got the words out the door was open. Slat's came in and shut it behind him. He looked at Flandrau.

"They're after you," he said.

"Who?" fired Curly back at him. "The Bar Double M boys. They just reached town."

"Put up that gun, Mac, and move into your clothes immediately," ordered Curly. Then to Davis: "Go on. Unload the rest. What do they know?"

"They inquired for you and your friend here down at the Legal Tender."

"Have we got a chance to make our getaway?" Mac asked.

Davis nodded. "Slide out through the kitchen, cut into the alley, and across lots to the corral. We'll lock the door and I'll hold them here long as I can."

"Good boy, Slat's. If there's a neckle party you'll get the first bid," Curly grinned.

Slat's looked at him, cold and steady. Plainly than words he was telling his former friend that he would not joke with a horse thief. For the sake of old times he would save him if he could, but he would call any bluffs about the whole thing being a lark.

Curly's eyes fell away. It came to him for the first time that he was no longer an honest man. Up till this episode he had been only wild, but now he had crossed the line that separates decent folks from outlaws.

Not another word was said while they hurried into their clothes. But as Curly passed out of the door he called back huskily. "Won't forget what you done for us, Slat's."

Again their eyes met. Davis did not speak, but the chill look on his face told Flandrau that he had lost a friend.

The two young men ran down the back stairs, passed through the kitchen where a Chinese cook was getting breakfast, and out into the bright sunlight.

"Won't do to be in any hurry. The play is we're gentlemen of leisure, just out for an amble to get the morning air," Curly cautioned.

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