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## CROOKED TRAILS AND STRAIGHT

By **William MacLeod Raine**

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While they fed, watered and saddled they swapped gossip with the wrangler. It would not do to leave the boy with a story of two riders in such a hurry to hit the trail that they could not wait to feed their bronchos. So they stuck it out while the animals ate. At that, they slayed it fine, for as they rode away two men were coming down the street.

"Kite Bonfils," Curly called to his partner.

No explanation was needed. Bonfils was the foreman of the Bar Double M. He let out a shout as he caught sight of them and began to run forward. Simultaneously his gun seemed to jump from its holster.

Mac's quirt sang and his pony leaped to a canter in two strides. A bullet zipped between them. Another struck the dust at their heels. Faintly there came to the fugitives the sound of the foreman's impotent curses. They had escaped for the time.

Presently they passed the last barb wire fence and open country lay before them. It did not greatly matter which direction they followed, so long as they headed into the desert.

Neither of them had ever been in serious trouble before and both regretted the folly that had turned their drunken spree into a crime. They were stretched in front of the fire that evening trying to make a smoke serve instead of supper. Mac broke a gloomy silence to grunt out jerkily a situation he could no longer keep to himself.

"Here's where I get my walking papers, I reckon. No rustlers need apply."

Curly shot a slant glance at him. "Meaning—the girl?"

The red-headed puncher took from his coat pocket a photograph and showed it to his friend. The sweet clean face of a wholesome girl smiled at Curly.

"Sues certainly a right nice young lady. I'll bet she stands by you all right. Where's she live at?"

"Waits in a restaurant at Tombstone. We was going to be married soon as we had saved five hundred dollars." Mac swallowed hard. "And I had to figure out this short cut to the money whilst I was drunk. As if she'd look at money made that way."

Curly tried to cheer him up, but did not make much of a job at it. The indisputable facts were that Mac was an outlaw and a horse thief.

The red-headed boy rolled another cigarette despondently. "Sho! I've cooked my goose. She'll not look at me—even if they don't send me to the pen. And she's the best ever. Her name's Myra Anderson."

They slept under a live oak with the soundness of healthy youth. For the time they forgot their troubles. Neither of them knew that as the hours slipped away red tragedy was galloping closer to them.

The sun was shining in his face when Curly awakened. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. Mac was nowhere in sight. Probably he had gone to get the horses.

A sound broke the stillness of the desert. Flandrau leaped to his feet, and at the same instant Mac came running over the brow of the hill. A smoking revolver was in his hand.

From behind the hill a gun cracked—then a second—and a third. Mac stumbled over his feet and pitched forward full length on the ground. His friend ran toward him, forgetting the revolver that lay in its holster under the live oak. Every moment he expected to see Mac jump up, but the figure stretched beside the cholla never moved. Flandrau felt the muscles round his heart tighten. He had seen sudden death before, but never had it come so near home.

A bullet sent up a spurt of dust in front of him, another just on the left. Riders were making a half circle

around the knoll and closing in on him. In his right mind Curly would have been properly frightened. But now he thought only of Mac lying there so still in the sand. Right into the fire zone he ran, knelt beside his partner and lifted the red-thatched head. A little hole showed back of the left ear and another at the right temple. A bullet had plowed through the boy's skull.

Softly Flandrau put the head back in the sand and rose to his feet. The revolver of the dead puncher was in his hand. The riders were closing in on him. The nearest called to him to surrender. Almost at the same time a red-hot pain shot through the left arm of the trapped rustler. Someone had nipped him from the rear.

Curly saw red. Surrender nothing! He would go down fighting. As fast as he could blaze he emptied Mac's gun. When the smoke cleared the man who had ordered him to give up was slipping from his horse. Curly was surprised, but he knew he must have hit him by chance.

"We got him. His gun's empty," some one shouted.

Cautiously they closed in, keeping him covered all the time. Of a sudden the plain tilted up to meet the sky. Flandrau felt himself swaying on his feet. Everything went black. The boy had fainted.

When he came to himself strange faces were all around him and there were no bodies to go with them. They seemed to float about in an odd, casual sort of way. Then things cleared.

"He's coming to all right," one said.

"How is Cullison?"

This was said to another who had just come up.

"Hard hit. Looks about all in. Got him in the side."

The rage died out of Curly. In a flash he saw all that had come of this drunken spree: the rustling of the Bar Double M stock, the discovery, the death of his friend and maybe of Cullison, the certain punishment that would follow. He was a horse thief caught almost in the act. Perhaps he was a murderer, too. And the whole thing had been entirely unpremeditated.

"You've played h—," one of the men told the boy.

He was a sawed-off little fellow known as Dutch. Flandrau had seen him in the Map of Texas country a year or two before. The rest were strangers to the boy. All of them looked at him out of hard, hostile eyes. He was scarcely a human being to them; rather a wolf to be stamped out of existence as soon as it was convenient.

At a shift in the group Flandrau's eyes fell on his friend lying in the sand with face turned whitely to the sky he never would see again. A lump came into the boy's throat and he had

to work it down before he spoke.

"There's a picture in his pocket, and some letters, I reckon. Send them to Miss Myra Anderson, Tombstone, care of one of the restaurants. I don't know which one."

"Send nothin'," sneered Dutch, and coupled it with a remark no decent man makes of a woman on a guess.

Because of poor Mac lying there with the little hole in his temple Curly balled over. With a jerk his right arm was free. It shot out like a pile driver, all his weight behind the blow. Dutch went down as if a charging bull had flung him.

Almost simultaneously Curly hit the sand hard. Before he could stir three men were straddled over his anatomy. One of them ground his head into the dust.

"You would, eh? We'll see about that, Jake, bring yore rope."

They tied the hands of the boy, hauled him to his feet, and set him astride a horse. In the distance a windmill of the Circle C ranch was shining in the morning sun. Toward the group of buildings clustered around this two of his captors started with Flandrau.

As they rode along a fenced lane which led to the house a girl came flying down the steps. At sight of those coming toward her she called out quickly:

"How is dad?" The quiver of fear broke in her voice.

"Don't know yet, Miss Kate," answered one of the men. "He's right peart, though. Says for to tell you not to worry. We've got here the wunny son of a gun that did it."

Before he had finished she was off like an arrow shot from a bow, but not until her eyes had fallen on the youth sitting bareheaded and bloody between the guns of his guard. Curly noticed that she had given a shudder, as one might at sight of a mangled mad dog which had just bit a dear friend. Long after the pounding of her pony's hoofs had died away the prisoner could see the startled eyes of fear and horror that had rested on him.

His guards put Flandrau in the bunkhouse and one of them sat at the door with a rifle across his knees. The cook, the stable boy, and red-headed Bob Cullison, a nephew of the owner of the ranch, peered past the vaquero at the captive with the same awe they would have yielded to a caged panther.

"Why, he's only a kid, Buck," the cook whispered.

Buck chewed tobacco impassively. "Old enough to be a rustler and a killer."

Bob's blue eyes were wide with interest. "I'll bet he's a regular Billy the Kid," murmured the half-grown boy to the other lad.

"Sure. Course he is. He's got bad eyes all right."

"I'll bet he's got notches on his gun. Say, if Uncle Luck dies—" Bob left the result to the imagination.

The excitement at the Circle C in-

creased. Horses cantered up. Men shouted to each other the news. Occasionally some one came in to have a look at the "bad man" who had shot Luck Cullison. Young Flandrau lay on a cot and stared at the ceiling, paying no more attention to them than if they had been blocks of wood.

The crunch of wagon wheels over disintegrated granite drifted to the bunkhouse.

"They're bringing the boss back," Buck announced from the door to one of his visitors.

The man joined him and looked over his shoulder. "Miss Kate there too?"

"Yep. Say, if the old man don't pull through it will break her all up."

The boy on the bed turned his face to the wall. He had not cried for ten years, but now he would have liked the relief of tears. A big lump rose in his throat and would not stay down. The irony of it was that he was staged for the part of a gray wolf on the howl, while he felt more like a little child that has lost its last friend.

After a time there came again the crisp roll of wheels.

"Doc Brown," announced Buck casually to the other men in the bunkhouse.

There was more than one anxious heart at the Circle C waiting for the verdict of the bowlegged, baldheaded little man with the satchel, but not one of them—no, not even Kate Cullison herself—was in a colder fear than Flandrau, for if Cullison should die he knew that he would follow him within a few hours. These men would take no chances with the delays of the law.

The men at the bunkhouse had offered more than once to look at Curly's arm, but the young man declined curtly. The bleeding had stopped, but there was a throb in it as if some one were twisting a red-hot knife in the wound. After a time Doctor Brown showed up in the doorway of the men's quarters.

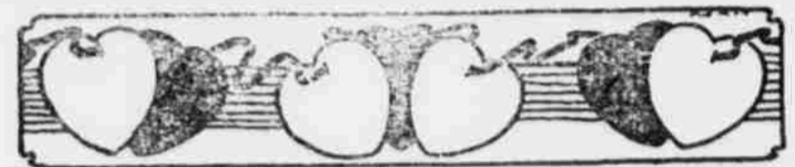
"Another patient here, they tell me," he grunted in the brusque way that failed to conceal the kindest of hearts.

"Let's have a look at your arm, young fellow," the doctor ordered.

(To be continued.)  
 Watch for the next installment.

### DISTRICT GROWS GOOD STOCK

Livestock "as good as the stock back east" is no longer good enough for the Pacific northwest, and it is high time for growers here to make up their minds to have them better, says E. L. Potter, head of the animal husbandry department at O. A. C. They can breed the best stock and will find it profitable to let the world know it, he believes. Superiority of western feed and climate for fine stock production is not booster talk but a hard, plain fact that should be made use of, he explains.



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