

Crooked Trails and Straight

By William MacLeod Raine

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I—Adventures and reckless rather than criminal and excited by them. Curly, Flaudrau and the other boys, both practically these boys, because involved in a horse-stealing adventure. The story of the stolen horse in the town of Sanguache. After the horse was stolen, Curly and his partner started in town. They are arrested and held in prison. They are released and find a place to live in the town of Sanguache. They are arrested again, this time for a horse-stealing. They are released and find a place to live in the town of Sanguache. They are arrested again, this time for a horse-stealing. They are released and find a place to live in the town of Sanguache.

the table and handed it to the prisoner. "We're not interested in his friends—except one of them. Did you ever see the boy that sat for that picture?"

"The print was a snapshot of a boy about nineteen, a bright-faced handsome fellow, a little sulky around the mouth but with a pair of straight honest eyes."

Curly shook his head slowly. Yet he was vaguely reminded of some one he knew. Glancing up, he found instantly the clue to what had puzzled him. The young man in the picture was like Kate Cullison, like her father, too, for that matter.

"He's your brother," the words were out before Flaudrau could stop them.

"Yes. You've never met him?"

"No."

Cullison had been watching the young man steadily. "Never saw him with Soapy Stone?"

"No."

"Never heard Stone speak of Sam Cullison?"

"No. Soapy doesn't talk much about who his friends are."

The ex-chieftain nodded. "I've met him."

Of course he had met him. Curly knew the story of how in one drive he had made a fortune of outlaws that had brought him to him. Soapy had broken through the net but the sheriff had followed him into the hills alone and was his to kill. What passed between the men nobody ever found out. Soapy had repeatedly given it out that he would not be taken alive. But Cullison had brought him down to the valley bound and cowed. In due season the benefits had come over the road to Yuma. Soapy and the others had sworn to get their revenge some day. Now they were back in the hills at their old tricks. Was it possible that Cullison's son was with them, caught in a trap during some drunken frolic just as Curly had been? In what way could Stone pay more fully the debt of hate he owed the former sheriff than by making his son a villain?

"The little doctor came briskly into the room."

"Everybody out but the nurse. You've had company enough for one day, Luck," he announced cheerfully.

Kate followed Maloney and his prisoner to the porch.

"About the letters of your friend that was shot," she said to Curly. "Doctor Brown was telling me what you said. I'll see they reach Miss Anderson. Do you know in what restaurant she works?"

"No. Mac didn't tell me." The boy gulped to swallow an unexpected lump in his throat. "They was expecting to get married soon."

"I'll write her," Kate promised. Her eyes shined.

"Ed he stopped when Mac was a

good boy. Anyone will tell you that. And he was awful fond of her. He talked about her that last night before the camp fire. Had companions got him going wrong, but he sure would have settled down into a good man. That's straight goods, too. You write it strong."

"I've changed my mind. I'll not write but go to see her."

Curly could only look his thanks. Words seemed strangely inadequate. But Kate understood the boy's unspoken wish and nodded her head reassuringly as he left the room.

Kate Bonilla and Maloney took Curly back to Sanguache and turned him over to Sheriff Bolt.

"How about bail?" Maloney asked.

The sheriff smiled. He was a long lean leather-faced man with friendly eyes from which humorous wrinkles radiated.

"Oh, say two thousand."

"You're on."

"What?"

A cheerleader with fifty dollars two weeks after pay day was a rarity. No wonder Bolt was surprised.

"It's not my money. Luck Cullison is going bail for him," Maloney explained.

"Luck Cullison?" Maloney's words had surprised the exclamation from Curly. Why should the owner of the C.P. be that of all men go bail for him?

The sheriff commented dryly on the fact. "I thought this kid was the one that shot him."

"That was just a happenstance. Curly had to save his bacon. Luck don't hold any grudges."

Bolt belonged to the political party named to Cullison. He had been bucked by Cass Kendrick, a sheepman in feud with the cattle interests and in particular with the Circle C outfit. But he could not go back on his word. He and Maloney called together on the district attorney. An hour later Dick returned to the jail.

"It's all right, kid," he told Curly. "You can shake off the dust of Sanguache from your hoofs till court meets in September."

To Flaudrau the news seemed too good for the truth. Less than twenty-four hours ago he had been waiting for the end of the road with a rope around his neck. Now he was free to slip a saddle on his pony Keno and gallop off as soon as he pleased.

While he and Maloney were sitting opposite each other at the New Orleans Hash House waiting for a big steak with onions he asked questions.

"I don't savvy Cullison's play. Why for is he digging up two thousand for me? How does he know I won't cut my steak for Mexico? Do you suppose Miss Kate made him?"

"I reckon maybe she influenced him. But why did she? You don't figure that nasty topknot of yours is disbarber's hair dreams any, do you?"

"Quit your joshing and tell me why?"

"I can't tell you for sure. But here's my guess. Don't cost you a cent if you ain't satisfied with it. First off, there was poor Mac shot by the Circle C boys. Course Mac was a horse thief, but then he was a kid, too. That worried the little girl some. She got to thinking about Brother Sam and how he might be in the same fix one of these days as you are now. He's on her mind a good deal, Sam is. Same way with the old man, too. I reckon, though he don't say much. Well, she decided Soapy Stone had led you astray like he's doing with Sam. It got to worrying her for fear her brother might need a friend some time. So she handed over her worry to the old man and made him dig up for you."

"That's about it. Tell me what you know of Sam."

"Sam is all right, but he has got off wrong foot first. He and the old man got to kind of disagreeing, for the kid was a wild colt. Come by it honestly from the old man, too. Well, they had a row one time when Sam got into trouble. Luck told him he never wanted to see him again. Sam lit out, and next folks knew he was trailing with Soapy's gang."

"Looks like some one ought to be able to pay him loose from that bunch," Curly mused aloud.

Maloney grinned across at him. "You try it, son. You've always led a good plain life. He sure would listen to you."

He had said it as a jest, but Curly did not laugh. Why not? Why shouldn't he hunt up Sam and let him know how his folks were worrying about him? He was footloose till September and out of a job. For he could not go back to the Map of Texas with his hat in his hand and a repentant whine on his lips. Why not hike into the hills and round up the boy?

"Damn if I don't take a crack at it."

The man on the other side of the table stared at him.

"Meaning that, are you?"

"Yep."

"Might be some lively if Soapy gets wise to your intentions," he said in a casual sort of way.

"I don't aim to declare them out loud."

That was all they said about it at that time. The rest of the evening was devoted to pleasure.

Since their way was one for several miles Maloney and Curly took the road together next morning at daybreak. Their ponies ambled along side by side at the easy gait characteristic of the Southwest.

Your plainsman is a taciturn individual. These two rode for an hour without exchanging a syllable.

At Willow Wash their ways diverged. They parted with the casual "So long, see you later." Curly was striking for the headwaters of Dead Cow creek, where Soapy Stone had a horse ranch.

About two o'clock he reached a little pack in the hills, in the middle of

which, by a dry creek, lay a ranch. The young man at first thought the place was deserted for the day, but when he called a girl appeared at the door. She was a young person of soft curves and engaging dimples. Beneath the brown cheeks of Arizona was a pink that came and went very attractively.

Curly took off his dusty gray hat.



"I'll Bet I'm Too Late to Draw Any Dinner."

"Buenos tardes, senorita! I'll bet I'm too late to draw any dinner."

"Buenos, senor," she answered promptly. "I'll bet you'd lose your money. You can wash over there by the pump. There's a towel on the fence."

She disappeared into the house and Curly took care of his horse, washed, and sauntered back to the porch. He could smell potatoes frying and could hear the sizzling of ham and eggs.

While he ate, the girl flitted in and out, soft-footed and graceful, replenishing his plate from time to time.

Presently he discovered that her father was away hunting strays on Sunk creek, that the nearest neighbor was seven miles distant and that Stone's ranch was ten miles farther up Dead Cow.

"Ever meet a lad called Sam Cullison?" the guest asked carelessly.

Curly was hardly prepared to see the color whip into her cheeks or to meet the quick stabbing look she fastened on him.

"You're looking for him, are you?" she said. "Do you know him?"

He shook his head. She looked at him very steadily before she spoke again.

"You haven't met him yet, but you want to. Is that it?"

"That's it."

"Will you have another egg?"

(To be continued.)

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