Crooked Trails and Straight

By

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SYNOPSIS.

Part I.

CHAPTER I—Adventurous and reckless rather than criminal, and excited by liquor, Curly Flandrau and his chum Mac, both practically mere boys, become involved in a horse stealing adventure. Disposing of the stolen stock in the town of Saguache, Ariz., the band separates, Curly and his partner staying in town. They are awakened and told a posse is in town in pursuit of them. They elude their pursuers. Overtaken next day, Mac is killed by the posse and Curly made captive, after he has shot one and himself been wounded. The man shot is Luck Cullison.

CHAPTER II—Cullison's friends, all cattlemen, determine to lynch Curly as an example to cattle thieves. With the rope around his neck he is saved by the intercession of Kate Cullison, Luck's daughter.

CHAPTER III—His wound dressed, and further violence not apprehended, Curly is sent for by Cullison. He questions the boy, ... law. Soapy Stone, real leader of the rustlers who had been Curly's ... Flandrau learns that Soapy Stone is Cullison's bitter enemy and exercises a baleful influence over the ex-sheriff's son Sam, who has quarreled with his father. Cullison goes bail for Curly.

Flandrau laughed. "No, thanks. Staying up at Stone's, is he?"

"How should I know who's staying at Stone's?"

It was quite plain she did not intend to tell anything that would hurt young Cullison.

"Are you expecting to stop in the hills long, or just visiting?"

"Yes," Curly answered, with his most innocent blank look.

"Yes which?"

"Why, whichever you like, Miss London. What's worrying you? If you'll ask me plain out I'll know how to answer you."

"You know my name?"

"Anything strange about that? The Bar 99 is the London brand. I saw your calves in the corral with their flanks still sore. Naturally I assume the young lady I meet here is Miss Laura London."

"What do you want with Sam Cullison? Are you friendly to him? Or aren't you?"

"Ladies first. Are you friendly to him? Or aren't you?"

Curly smiled gayly across the table at her. A faint echo of his pleasantry began to dimple the corners of her mouth. Both of them relaxed to peals of laughter, and neither of them quite knew the cause of their hilarity.

"Oh, you!" she reproved when she had sufficiently recovered.

"So you thought I was a detective or a deputy sheriff. That's certainly funny."

"For all I know yet you may be one."

"I never did see anyone with a disposition so dark-complected as yours. If you won't put them suspicions to sleep I'll have to table my cards." From his pocket he drew a copy of the Saguache Sentinel and showed her a marked story. "Maybe that will explain what I'm doing up on Dead Cow."

This is what Laura London read:

"From Mesa comes the news of another case of bold and flagrant rustling. On Friday night a bunch of horses belonging to the Bar Double M were rounded up and driven across the mountains to this city. The stolen animals were sold here this morning, after which the buyers set out at once for the border and the thieves made themselves scarce. It is claimed that the rustlers were members of the notorious Soapy Stone outfit. Two of the four were identified, it is alleged, as William Cranston, generally known as 'Bad Bill,' and a young vaquero called 'Curly' Flandrau.

"In case the guilty parties are apprehended the Sentinel hopes an example will be made of them that will deter others of like stamp from a practice that has of late been far too common. Lawlessness seems to come in cycles. Just now the southern tier of counties appears to be suffering from such a sporadic attack. Let all good men combine to stamp it out. The time has passed when Arizona must stand as a synonym for anarchy."

She looked up at the young man breathlessly, her pretty lips parted, her dilated eyes taking him in solemnly. A question trembled on her lips.

"Are you this man mentioned here? What's his name—'Curly' Flandrau?"

"Yes."

"And you're a rustler? Why do men do such things?" letting the hands that held the paper drop into her lap hopelessly. "You don't look bad. Anyone would think—"

Her sentence trailed out and died away. She was still looking at Curly, but he could see that her mind had flown to some one else. He would have bet a month's pay that she was thinking of another lad who was wild but did not look bad.

Flandrau rose and walked round the table to her. "Much obliged, Miss Laura. I'll shake hands on that with you. You've guessed it. Course, me being so 'notorious' I hate to admit it, but I ain't bad any more than he is."

She gave him a quick shy look.

"You mean this 'Bad Bill'?"

"You know who I mean, all right. His name is Sam Cullison. And you needn't to tell me where he is. I'll find him."

"I know you don't mean any harm to him." But she said it as if she were pleading with him.

"Creet, I don't. Can you tell me how to get to Soapy Stone's ranch from here, Miss London?"

She laughed. Her doubts were vanishing like mist before the sunshine. "Good guess. At least he was there the last I heard."

"And I expect your information is pretty recent."

That drew another little laugh, accompanied by a blush.

"Don't you think I have told you enough for one day, Mr. Flandrau?"

"That 'Mr.' sounds too solemn. My friends call me 'Curly,'" he let her know.

She remembered that he was a stranger and a rustler and she drew up stiffly. This pleasant young fellow was too familiar.

"If you take this trail to the scrub pines above, then keep due north for about four miles, you'll strike the creek again. Just follow the trail along it to the horse ranch."

With that she turned on her heel and walked into the kitchen.

Curly had not meant to be "fresh." He was always ready for foolery with the girls, but he was not the sort to go too far. Now he blamed himself for having moved too fast. He had offended her sense of what was the proper thing.

There was nothing for it but to saddle and take the road.

CHAPTER IV.

A Bear Trap

The winding trail led up to the scrub pines and from there down into the hills. Curly had not traveled far when he heard the sound of a gun fired three times in quick succession. He stopped to listen. Presently there came a faint call for help.

Curly cantered around the shoulder of the hill and saw a man squatting on the ground. He was stooped forward in an awkward fashion with his back to Flandrau.

"What's up?"

At the question the man looked over his shoulder. Pain and helpless rage burned in the deepset black eyes.

"Nothing at all. Don't you see I'm just taking a nap?" he answered quietly.

Curly recognized him now. The man was Soapy Stone. Little beads of perspiration stood out all over his forehead. A glance showed the reason. One of his hands was caught in a bear trap fastened to a cottonwood. Its jaws held him so that he could not move.

"What's Up?"

The young man swung from the back of Keno. He found the limb of a cottonwood about as thick as his forearm below the elbow. This he set close to the trap.

"Soon as I get the lip open shove her in," he told Stone.

The rescuer slipped the toes of his boots over the lower lip and caught the upper one with both hands. Slowly the mouth of the trap opened. Stone slipped in the wooden wedge and withdrew his crushed wrist. By great good fortune the steel had caught on the leather gauntlet he was wearing. Otherwise it must have mangled the arm to a pulp.

Even now he was suffering a good deal.

"You'll have to let a doc look at it," Curly suggested.

Stone agreed. "Reckon I better strike for the Bar 99."

His horse had disappeared, but Curly helped him to the back of Keno. Together they took the trail for the Bar 99. On the face of the wounded man gathered the moisture caused by intense pain.

"Hard sledding, looks like," Curly sympathized.

"Reckon I can stand the grief," Stone grunted.

Nor did he speak again until they reached the ranch and Laura London looked at him from a frightened face.

"What is it?"

"Ran a sliver in my finger, Miss Laura. Too bad to trouble you." Soapy answered with a sneer on his thin lips.

A rider for the Bar 99 had just ridden up and Laura sent him at once for the doctor. She led the way into the house and swiftly gathered bandages, a sponge and a basin of water. Together she and Curly bathed and wrapped the wound.

Laura was as gentle as she could be. "I know I'm hurting you," she said, her fingers trembling.

"Not a bit of it. Great pleasure to have you for a nurse. I'm certainly in luck." Curly did not understand the bitterness in the sardonic face and he resented it.

That something was wrong between them Curly could see. Soapy was very polite in spite of his bitterness, but his hard eyes watched her as a cat does a mouse. Moreover the girl was afraid of him. He could tell that by the timid startled way she had of answering. Now, why need she fear the man? It would be as much as his life was worth to lift a hand to hurt her.

After the doctor had come and had attended to the crushed wrist Curly stepped out to the porch to find Laura.

"I'm right sorry for what I said, Miss Laura. Once in a while a fellow makes a mistake. If he's as big a chump as I am it's liable to happen a little oftener. But I'm not really one of those smart guys."

Out came her gloved hand in the firmest of grips.

"I know that now. You didn't think. And I made a mistake. I thought you were taking advantage because I had been friendly. I'm glad you spoke about it. We'll forget it. There's something I want you to do for me."

"I expect maybe I'll do it."

"It's about that boy he has up there." She gave a hopeless little gesture toward the hills.

"Sam Cullison?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"He's bent on ruining him, always has been ever since he got a hold on him. I can't tell you how I know it, but I'm sure— And now he's more set on it than ever."

"Jealous, is he?"

"Yes. If he can drag Sam down and get him into trouble he'll pay off two grudges at once. And he will too. You'll see. He's wily as an Indian. For that matter there is Apache blood in him, folks say."

"What about young Cullison? Can't he make a fight for himself?"

"Oh, you know how boys are. Sam is completely under this man's influence." Her voice broke a little. "And I can't help him. I'm only a girl. He won't listen to me. What Sam needs is a man friend, one just as strong and determined as Soapy but one who is good and the right sort of an influence."

"Are you picking me for that responsible friend who is to be such a powerful influence for good?" Curly asked with a smile.

"Yes—yes, I am." She looked up at him confidently.

Curly met her on the ground of her own seriousness. "I'll tell you something, Miss Laura. Maybe you'll be glad to know that the reason I'm going to the horse ranch is to help Sam Cullison if I can."

He went on to tell her the whole story of what the Cullisons had done for him. In all that he said there was not one word to suggest such a thing, but Laura London's mind jumped the gaps to a knowledge of the truth that Curly himself did not have. The young man was in love with Kate Cullison. She was sure of it.

When Curly walked back into the house, Stone laid down the paper he had been reading.

"I see the Sentinel hints that Mr. Curly Flandrau had better be lynched," he jeered.

"The Sentinel don't always hit the bull's-eye, Soapy," returned the young man evenly. "It thinks I belong to the Soapy Stone outfit, but we know I haven't that honor."

Soapy frowned at him under the heavy eyebrows that gave him so menacing an effect.

"Better come back with me to the ranch till you look around."

"Suits me right down to the ground if it does you."

Some one came whistling into the house and opened the door of the room. He was a big lank fellow with a shotgun in his hands. "From Missouri" was stamped all over his awkward frame. He stood staring at his unexpected guests. His eyes, clashing with those of Stone, grew chill and hard.

"So you're back here again, are you?" he asked, looking pretty black.

Stone's lip smile mocked him. "I don't know how you guessed it, but I sure am here."

"Didn't I tell you to keep away from the Bar 99—you and your whole cursed outfit?"

"Seems to me you did mention something of that sort. But how was I to know whether you meant it unless I came back to see?"

Laura came into the room and ranged herself beside her father. Her hand rested lightly on his forearm.

"He got caught in one of your bear traps and this young man brought him here to wait for the doctor," she explained.

"Hmp!"

The Missourian stared without civility at his guest, turned on his heel, and with his daughter beside him marched out of the room. He could not decently tell Stone to leave while he was under the care of a doctor, but he did not attempt to make him welcome.

"We'll pull our freights right away," [illegible] announced as soon as the doc had gone.

The young man went to the stable and saddled Keno. While he was tightening the cinch a shadow fell across his shoulder. He did not need to look round to see whose it was.

"I'm so glad you're going to the horse ranch. You will look out for Sam. I don't know why, but I have the greatest confidence in you," the owner of the shadow explained sweetly.

Curly smiled blandly over his shoulder at her. "Fine! That's a good uplifting line of talk, Miss Laura. Now what is it I'm to do for you?"

She blushed and laughed at the same time. Her hand came from behind her back. In it was a letter.

"That's to be my pay for giving Master Sam his billy doo, is it?"

"How did you guess? It is a letter to Sam."

"How did I guess it? Shows I'm sure a wiz, don't it?"

She saw her father coming and handed him the letter quickly.

"Here. Take it." A spark of mischief lit her eye and the dimples came out on her cheeks. "Good-by, Curly."

CHAPTER V.

Bad Medicine.

The house at the horse ranch was a long, low L-shaped adobe structure. Two men were seated on the porch playing seven up. One was Bad Bill, the other Blackwell. At sight of Curly they gave up their game.

"Hello, kid! Where did you drop from?" Cranston asked.

A muscle twitched in Flandrau's cheek. "They got Mac. Ran us down near the Circle C. Mac opened fire. They—killed him."

"Shot him or—?" Curly was left to guess the other half of the question.

"Shot him and took me prisoner."

"They couldn't prove a thing, could they?"

(To be continued.)

Watch for the next installment.

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