

Crooked Trails and Straight

By William MacLeod Raine

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Adventure and riskless, rather than ordinary, and called by liquor. Curly Flandrau and his classmate, Mac, both practically from boys, meeting in a horse-stocking adventure. Disposing of the stolen stock in the town of Mesquite, Ariz., the band separates. Curly and his partner staying in town. They are arrested and held a prisoner in town in pursuit of them. They escape their pursuers. Overaken 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 children, determine to lunch Curly as an example to other boys. With the posse around his neck, he is saved by the intervention of Kate Cullison, Luck's daughter.

CHAPTER III—His wound dressed, and further evidence, Curly is sent for by Cullison. He meets them the day following. A horse-stealer, who had been Curly's partner, Flandrau, leaves that day. Curly is told that his partner is a horse-stealer. Flandrau is a horse-stealer and a horse-stealer. Flandrau is a horse-stealer and a horse-stealer.

CHAPTER IV—Curly and Soapy Stone, a horse-stealer, are in the town. Curly is sent for by Cullison. He meets them the day following. A horse-stealer, who had been Curly's partner, Flandrau, leaves that day. Curly is told that his partner is a horse-stealer. Flandrau is a horse-stealer and a horse-stealer.

"They could prove I wounded Cullison. That was enough for them. They set out to bring me. Later they changed their minds."

"How come you here? Did you escape?"

"Nope. Friends dug up hell. Say, Soapy has been telling me that the Cullison kid is up here. I see you've better not say anything about my mixup with his folks. I'm not looking for any trouble with him."

"All right, Curly."

Curly sat down on the porch and told an edited story of his adventures to them. Before he had finished a young fellow rode up and dismounted. After he had unsaddled and turned his pony into a corral he joined the others on the porch.

Young Cullison had seated himself in the chair next to Flandrau. He had, so Curly thought, a strong family re-

semblance to his father and sister. Still a boy in his ways, he might any day receive the jolt that would transform him into a man.

Curly studied the characters of those present. Bill he knew already fairly well as a tough nut to crack, gone to the core, and staunch to his friends. Blackwell was a bad lot, treacherous, vindictive, slippery as an eel. Even his confederates did not trust him greatly. But it was Soapy and young Cullison that interested Flandrau most. Sam was at an impressionable age, inclined to be led by any man whom he admired. Curly knew that he could gain no influence over him by preaching. He had to live the rough and tumble life of these men who dwelt beyond the pale of the law, to excel them at the very things which they boasted. But in one respect he held himself apart. While he was at the horse ranch he did not touch a drop of liquor.

Laura's letter was not delivered until the second day, for though she had not told her messenger to give it to Sam when he was alone, Curly guessed this would be better.

Sam ran over his letter two or three times. It was such a message as any brave-hearted, impulsive girl might send to the man she loved when he seemed to her to walk in danger. Cullison loved her for the interest she took in him, even while he ridiculed her fears.

As they rode back to the ranch, Curly mentioned that he had seen Stone's people a day or two before.

Cullison asked no questions, but he listened intently while the other told the story of his first meeting and of how Miss Kate and her father had stood by him in his trouble.

"If I had folks like you have, the salt of the earth, and they were worrying their hearts out about me, seems to me I'd quit being around and go back to them," Curly concluded.

"The old man sent you to tell me that, did he?" Hard and bitter was the voice of the young man.

"No, he didn't. He doesn't know I'm here. But he and your sister have done more for me than I ever can pay. That's why I'm telling you this."

Sam answered gruffly as a man does when he is moved. "Much obliged, Curly, but I reckon I can look out for myself."

"Just what I thought, and in September I have to go to the penitentiary. They've got me clinked. But with you it's different. There's nothing to this sort of life. The bunch up here is no good. Soapy don't mean right by you, or by any young fellow he trails with."

"I'll not listen to anything against Soapy. He has been a good friend to me, I'm not going to throw him down."

"Would it be throwing him down to go back to your people?"

"Yes, it would. We've got plans, Soapy is relying on me. No matter what they are, but I'm not going to lie down on him. And I'm not going back to the old man. He told me he was through with me. I'm not begging him to take me back, not on your life."

Curly dropped the matter. But as the days passed he kept one thing in his mind, not to miss any chance to win his friendship. They rode together a good deal, and Flandrau found that Sam liked to hear him talk about the Circle C and its affairs. But often he was discouraged, for he made no progress in winning him from his loyalty to Stone. The latter was a hero to him, and gradually he was filling him with wrong ideas, encouraging him while to drink a great deal. That the man had some definite purpose Curly was sure. What it was, he meant to find out.

Because he could not persuade him to join in their drinking bouts, Stone nicknamed Curly the good bed man.



Curly Lashed Out Hard With His Left.

Blackwell picked on the youth to be the butt of his coarse pleasantries. Day after day he poured his jeers at Curly, who continued to grin as if he did not care.

When the worm turned it happened that they were all sitting on the porch. Curly was sewing a broken stirrup leather. Blackwell had a quilt in his hand, and from time to time flicked it at the back of his victim. Twice the lash stung not hard, but with pepper enough to hurt. Each time the young man asked him to stop.

Blackwell snapped the quilt once

too often. When he picked himself out of the dust five seconds later, he was the maddest man in Arizona. Like a bull he lowered his head and rushed, Curly side-stepped and lashed out hard with his left.

It was a sledge-hammer blow, with no rules except to hit the other man often and hard. Curly watched his chance, dodged a wild swing and threw himself forward hard with his shoulder against the chest of the convict. The man staggered back, tripped on the lowest step of the porch and went down hard. The fall knocked the breath out of him.

"Had enough?" demanded Curly.

For answer Blackwell bit Flandrau's thumb savagely.

"Since you like it so well, have another taste," Curly, now thoroughly angry, sent a short-arm jolt to the mouth.

The man underneath tried to throw him off, but Flandrau's fingers found his hairy throat and tightened.

"You're killing me!" the convict gasped.

"Enough?"

"Y-yes."

Curly stopped back quickly, ready either for a knife or a gunplay. Blackwell got to his feet and went into the house, swearing to get even. His face was livid with fury.

"You wouldn't think a little thing like a whaling given fair and square would make a man hold a grudge. My system has absorbed se-ve-real without doing it any harm." Sam stooped to inspect a rapidly discoloring eye.

"Say, Curly, he hung a peach of a lump on you."

Soapy made no comment in words, but he looked at Flandrau with a new respect. For the first time a doubt as to the wisdom of letting him stay at the ranch crossed his mind.

His suspicion was justified. Curly had been living on the edge of a secret for weeks. Mystery was in the air. More than once he had turned a corner to find the other four whispering over something. Occasionally a man had ridden into the yard late at night for a private talk with Stone, and Curly was morally certain that the man was the little cowpuncher Dutch of the Circle C.

Through it all Curly wore a manner of open confidence. But all the time his brain was busy with questions. What were they up to? What was it they had planned?

Stone and Blackwell rode away one morning. To Curly the word was given that they were going to Mesa. Four days later Soapy returned alone. Late had found a job, he said.

"That a paper sticking out of your pocket?" Flandrau asked.

Soapy, still astride his horse, tossed the Saguache Sentinel to him as he turned toward the stable.

Caught between the folds of the paper was a railroad time table. It was a schedule of the trains of the Texas, Arizona & Pacific for July. Curly turned the pages (by all a pencilled marking caught his eye. Under Number 4's time was scratched, just below Saguache, the words Tin Cup, and opposite them, the figures 10:20. The express was due to leave Saguache at 9:57 in the evening. From there it pushed up to the divide and slid down 1000 feet to Tin Cup, about 1500 feet below. Soapy couldn't wait to catch the train fifteen miles the other side of Saguache. But this note on the margin showed that he was interested in the time it reached the water tank. There must be a reason for it.

Flandrau's doubt had been converted into a lively suspicion. Presently he took a gun and strolled off to shoot birds. What he really wanted was to be alone that he could think the matter over. Coming home in the dusk, he saw Stone and young Cullison with their heads together down by the corral. Curly sat down on a rock and watched them, himself unobserved. They appeared to be rehearsing some kind of a scene, of which Soapy was stage director.

The man on the rock smiled grimly. "They're having a quarrel, looks like. . . . Now the kid's telling Soapy to go to Guinea, and Soapy's pawing around mad as a bull moose. It's all a play. They don't mean it. But why?"

Curly's mind was so full of guesses that his poker was not up to par that night. About daylight he began to see his way into the maze. His first gleam of light was when a row started between Soapy and Cullison. Before anyone could say a word to stop them they were going through with that identical corral quarrel.

Flandrau knew now that they had been preparing it for his benefit. Cranston chipped in against Sam and, to keep up appearances, Curly backed the boy. The quarrel grew furious. At last Sam drove his fist down on the table and said he was through with the outfit and was going back to Saguache.

"Yo tambien," agreed Curly. "Not that I've got anything against the horse ranch. That ain't it. But I'm sure pining for to bust the bank at Bronson's. I've got forty plunks burning my jeans. I've got to separate myself from it or make my roll a thousand!"

The end of it was that both Sam and Curly went down to the corral and saddled their ponies. To the last the conspirators played up to their parts.

According to program, Sam sukked for the first few miles of their journey. But before they reached the Bar 60 he grew sunny again.

"I'm going to have a talk with Laura while I'm so near," he explained. "You drift in . . . just happen along, you know. I'll stay in the scrub pines up here. If the old man is absent scenery, you wave your hands."



"I'll Stay in the Scrub Pines Up Here."

Sam's real indignation. If he is at home give Laura the tip and she'll know where to find me."

The owner of the ranch, as it happened, was cutting trail over by Agua Caliente.

"Do you want to see him very bad, Mr. Flandrau?" asked Miss Laura demurely.

"No, I can't say I've lost Mr. London."

"You inquired for him."

"Hmp! That's different. When I used to come home from the swimming hole contrary to orders I used to ask where dad was, but I didn't want to see him."

"I see. Did you just come down from the horse ranch?"

"You've guessed right."

"Then I am sorry I can't ask you to light. Dad's orders."

"Anything in those orders about you meeting one of the lads from the horse ranch up on the hillside where it is neutral ground?"

"Did Sam come with you?" she cried.

"He's here. Oh, I know he's here."

"What do I get for bringing good news?"

"I didn't say it was good news."

"Sho! Your big eyes are shouting it."

"Was that the news from the horse ranch?"

"That's part of it, but there is more. Sam and Curly are on their way to Saguache to spend the Fourth of July. Sam's going for another reason, but I'm not sure yet what it is. There's something doing I don't save, some big deal on foot that's not on the level. Sam is in it up to the hocks. He is supposed to be quitting Soapy's outfit for good. But I know better."

White to the lips, she faced him bravely. "What sort of trouble is he leading Sam into?"

"I've got a kind of notion. But it won't bear talking about yet. Don't tell him what I've told you, unless you want to spoil my chance of helping him."

"I won't," she promised; then added, with quick eagerness: "Maybe I can help you. I'm going down to Saguache to visit on the Fourth."

"I'll look you up. Trouble is that Sam is bent on ruining himself. Seems to think Soapy is his best friend. If we could show him different things might work out all right."

While she climbed the hill to Sam, Curly watered his horse and smoked a cigarette. He was not hired to chaperone lovers. Therefore, it took him three-quarters of an hour to reach the scrub pine belt on the edge of the park.

At once he saw that they had been having a quarrel. The girl's eyes were red, and she was still dabbing at them with her handkerchief when he came whistling along. Sam looked discouraged, but stubborn. Very plainly they had been disagreeing about his line of conduct.

The two young men took the trail again. About noon the next day they reached Saguache. After they had eaten, Curly strolled off by himself to the depot.

"Gimme a ticket for Tin Cup for this evening. I want to go by the express," he told the agent.

(To be continued.)

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