Crooked Trails and Straight

By

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SYNOPSIS

Part I.

CHAPTER I. A great man and rich beyond dreams, but crippled and crushed by honor, Curly Collison and his friend Mac, both prospectors, meet in an adventure involving all the wealth and adventure promising at the young man's disposal in the town of Sagebrush, Ariz. The good samaritan Curly and his partner staying in town. They are awakened and find 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 Collison.

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

CHAPTER III. His wound dressed, and feeling weakness and unprincipled Curly is sent on his errand. He goes to the big concerning a subject of law. Soapy Stone, one of the gamblers, who had been in the saloon, is a friend of Flandrau's. Flandrau learns that Soapy Stone is all. Faces before, is and is a dangerous fellow to get the drop on. Curly, Sam, who has abandoned his father, Collison goes with his Curly.

CHAPTER IV. Curly rescues Soapy Stone from a lynching and is shot through the shoulder. And a girl, Luck's daughter, is young man's nurse for the land of Dead Cow. She gives Curly a note to deliver to Sam, and Flandrau and Stone set out for the latter's ranch.

CHAPTER V. There Curly meets his companions of the lynching expedition and delivers Luck's note to Sam. Young Collison believes Stone is a friend and says he will stay in town. Flandrau sees some money in some plans, and becomes convinced it is Luck's money. Sam leaves the ranch to go to Sagebrush. Curly accompanies him.

The man looked at him and grinned. "You're so dogged active, maybe you could get off. No, I think you are fogging along sixty miles per. But most folks [illegible], not with his comfort."

"Meaning that the first doesn't stop?"

"Not at 'Tin Cup.'"

"Have to take the afternoon train then?"

"I reckon." He punched a ticket and shoved it through the window toward Curly. "Sixty-five cents, please."

Flandrau paid for and pocketed the ticket he did not intend to use. He had found out what he wanted to know. The express did not stop at Tin Cup. Why, then, had Soapy mentioned the time of its arrival there? He was in no mining to guess the reason. But he would have to do more than guess.

Flandrau sauntered back to the hotel on the lookout for Sam. He was not more than walking for him was a boy with a note for the gentleman in No. 211.

"Kid looking for you," the clerk called to the cow puncher.

"Are you Mr. Soapy Stone's friend, the one just down from Dead Cow creek?" asked the boy.

Curly nodded and took the note. This was what he read:

"Sam, come to Chalkeye's place soon as you get this. There we will talk over the business.

"YOU KNOW WHO."

Though he did not know who, Curly thought he could give a pretty good guess both as to the author and the business that needed talking over.

Through the open door of the hotel he saw Sam approaching. Quickly he sealed the flap of the envelope again.

"A letter for you, Sam."

Collison tore open the envelope and read the note.

"A friend of mine has come to town and wants to see me," he explained.

To help out his bluff, Curly spring the feeble jointed jest on him. "Lady or lawyer?"

"For my lady's friend," Sam protested, content to let the other fellow a wrong guess.

"Sure not. It never is a lady," Flandrau called after him as he departed.

But Sam had no more than turned the corner before Curly was out of a side door and cutting through an alley toward Chalkeye's place. Reaching the back door of the saloon, he opened it a few inches and peered in. A minute later Sam opened the front screen and asked a question of the man in the apron. The bartender gave a jerk of his thumb. Sam walked toward the rear and turned in at the second private booth.

Curly slipped forward quietly, and passed unobserved into the third stall. The wall which divided one room from another was of pine boarding and did not reach the ceiling. Flattened against the wall, his attention strained to the utmost, Curly began to catch words and phrases of the low-voiced speakers in the next compartment. His position was perilous in the extreme, but he should not leave now until he had found out what he wanted to know.

CHAPTER VI.

Eavesdropping.

Out of the murmur of voices came one that Curly recognized as that of Soapy Stone, alias You Know Who.

". . . then you'll take the 9:57, Sam . . ."

After more whispering, "Yep, soon as you hear the first shot . . . cover the passengers . . ."

The listener lost what followed. Once he thought he heard the name Tin Cup, but he could not be sure. Presently another fragment drifted to him. ". . . make our getaway and cache the plunder . . ."

The phonograph lifted up its voice. This time it was "I Love a Lassie." Because the song was hushed there came the sound of shuffling feet, and the man in the next stall was leaving. Curly could not tell which one top and he gave peep over the top of the partition to find out. He was [illegible]. This advantage had [illegible] so unexpectedly that he had not time to get back to his [illegible] for his stockinged [illegible]. What would happen to him if he were [illegible] was not a matter of [illegible] Soapy would pump lead into him till he quit kicking slap a saddle or a lassoo and light out for the Sonora [illegible].

As the phonograph lifted anew, peacefully—some one had evidently interrupted the record—the fragment of a sentence seemed to jump at Curly.

". . . so the kid will get his in the row."

It was the voice of Soapy, raised slightly to make itself heard above the music.

"Take care," another voice replied, and Flandrau would have sworn that this belonged to Blackwell.

Stone, who had been sitting on the other side of the table, moved close to the paroled convict. Between him and Curly there was only the thickness of a plank.

". . . don't like it," Blackwell was objecting sullenly.

"Makes it safe for us. Besides"—Stone's voice grated like steel rasping steel, every word distinct though very low—"I swore to pay off Luck Collison, and by G—— I'm going to do it."

Again they fell to whispers. The next word that came to Curly clearly was his own name.

"Luck Collison sent his bail. I learned it this morning."

"The son-of-a-gun. It's a cinch he's a spy. Reckon he knows anything?"

"No. Can't."

"If I thought he did—"

"Keep your shirt on, Lute. He don't know a thing. And you get revenge on him all right. Sam will run with him and his friends while he's here. Consequence is, when they find the kid where we leave him they'll sure guess Curly for one of his partners. Tell you his ticket is good as bought to Yuma. He's a horse thief. Why shouldn't he be a train robber, too? That's how a jury will argue."

Once more the voices ran together indistinctly. It was not till Blackwell suggested that they go and get a drink that Curly understood anything more of what was being said.

The outlaws passed out of the little room and strolled forward to the bar.

Curly had heard more than he had expected to. Moreover, as he congratulated himself, his luck had stood up fine. Nobody in the sunburnt territory felt happier than he did that minute when he struck the good fresh air of the alley and knew that he had won through his hazardous adventure alive.

The first thing that Flandrau did was to walk toward the outskirts of the town, where he could think it out by himself. Before he reached Arroyo street Curly came plump against his old range-mate, Slats Davis. Flandrau caught him by the arm. "Hello, Slats. You're the man I want."

"I'm pretty busy today," Davis answered stiffly.

"Forget it. This is more important."

"Well?"

"Come along and take a walk. I got something to tell you."

Reluctantly Davis fell in beside him. "All right. Cut it short. I've got to see a man."

"He'll have to wait." Curly could not help chuckling to himself at the evident chagrin of the other. The unjust impulse to "devil" him had its way. "You're a man of experience, Slats. Ever hold up a train? Some of my friends are aiming to hold up one shortly. If you'd like to get in I'll say a good word for you."

Davis threw him a look that drenched like ice water. "I expect you and me are traveling different trails, these days, Curly. You don't mean it, of course, but the point is I'm not going to joke with you along that line. Understand?"

"Wrong guess, old hoss. I do mean it."

Davis stopped in his tracks. "Then you've said too much to me. We'll part right here. When you choose Soapy Stone's crowd to run with that cuts out me and other decent folks. If they have sent you here to get me mixed up in their devilry you go back and tell them there's nothing doing."

"Won't have a thing to do with them. Is that it?"

"Not till the call comes for citizens to get together and run them out of the country. Or to put them behind bars. Or to string them to a cottonwood. Then I'll be on the job."

He stood there quiet and easy, the look in his steady eyes piercing Curly's irony smile as a summer sun does mottled clouds in a clear sky. Not many men would have had the courage to send that message to Soapy and his outfit. For Stone was not only a man killer, but a mean one, at that.

Curly sloughed his foolishness and came to the point. "You're on, Slats. I'm making that call to you now."

Surprise, doubt, wonder, relief filled in turn the face of the other man.

"I'm listening, Curly."

His friend told him the whole story from the beginning, just as he had

"I'm Listening, Curly."

been used to do in the old days. And Davis heard it without a word, taking the tale in quietly with a grim look settling on his face.

"So he aims to play traitor to young Collison."

"He means to shut Sam's mouth for good and all. That is what he has been paying for from the start, to get even with Luck. He and his gang will get away with the haul and they will leave Sam dead on the scene of the holdup. There will be some shooting and it will be figured the boy was hit by one of the train crew. Nothing could be easier. He aims to put me on the stand and prove by me that Sam and he had a quarrel and parted company mighty sore at each other hardly a week before the holdup. He'll have an alibi, too, to show he couldn't have been in sight. See how slick his scheme is? At one flip of the cards he kills the kid and daims his reputation. He scores Collison and he shuffs out Sam, who has had the luck to win the girl Soapy fancies. The boy gets his and the girl is shown she can't love another man than Stone."

"You've got it about right," Slats admitted. "How about warning Luck?"

"The point is, would he be willing to wait and let Soapy play his hand out till we called?"

"You would have to guarantee his boy would be safe meanwhile."

"Two of us would have to watch him day and night without Sam knowing it."

"Count me in."

"There is where we hit heavy traveling, Slats. For we don't know when the thing is going to be pulled off."

"We'll have to be ready. That's all."

"Happen to know whether Dick Maloney is here for the show?"

"Saw him this morning. Luck is here too, him and his girl."

"Good. We've got to have a talk with them, and it has to be on the q.t. You go back to town and find Dick. Tell him to meet us at the Del Mar, where Luck always puts up. Find out the number of Cullison's room and make an appointment. I'll be on El Molino street all morning off and on. When you find out pass me without stopping, but tell me when we are to meet and just where."

Curly gave Slats a quarter of an hour before sauntering back to town. As he was passing the Silver Dollar saloon a voice called him. Stone and Blackwell were standing in the door. Flandrau stopped.

Soapy's deep-set eyes blazed at him. "You didn't tell me it was Luck Cullison went bail for you, Curly. So you and him are thick, are you?"

"I've met him once, if that's being thick. That time I shot him up."

"Funny. And then he went bail for you?"

"Yes."

"Now, I wonder why."

The eyes of the man had narrowed to red slits. His head had shot forward on his shoulders as that of a snake does. Curly would have given a good deal just then for the revolver lying on the bed of his room. For it was plain trouble was in sight. The desperado had been drinking heavily and was ready to do murder.

"That's easy to explain, Soapy. I shot him because I was driven to it. He's too much of a man to bear a grudge for what I couldn't help."

"You're a liar. He did it because you promised to sneak up to my ranch and spy on us. That's why he did it."

With the last word his gun jumped into sight. That he was lashing himself into a fury was plain. Presently his rage would end in a tragedy.

Given a chance, Curly would have run for it. But Soapy was a dead shot. Of a sudden the anger in the boy boiled up over the fear. In two jumps he covered the ground and jammed his face close to the cold rim of the blue-steel barrel.

"I'm not heeled. Shoot and be damned, you coward. And with my last breath I'll tell you that you're a liar."

Flandrau had called his bluff, though he had not meant it as one. A dozen men were in sight and were watching. They had heard the young man tell Stone he was not armed. Public opinion would hold him to account if he shot Curly down in cold blood. He hung there undecided, breathing fast, his jaw clamped tightly.

The lad hammered home his defiance. "Drop that gun, you four-flusher, and I'll whale you till you can't stand. Sabe? Call yourself a bad man, do you? Time I'm through with you there will be one lame wolf crawling back to Dead Cow with its tail between its legs."

The taunt diverted his mind, just as Curly had hoped it would. He thrust the revolver back into the holster and reached for his foe.

Then everybody, hitherto paralyzed by the sight of a deadly weapon, woke up and took a hand. They dragged the two men apart. Curly was thrust into a barber shop on the other side of the street and Stone was dragged back into the Silver Dollar.

In two minutes Flandrau had made himself famous, for he was a marked man. The last words of the struggling desperado had been that he would shoot on sight. Now half a dozen talked at once. Some advised Curly one thing, some another. He must get out of town. He must apologize at once to Stone. He must send a friend and explain.

The young man laughed grimly. "Explain nothing. I've done all the explaining I'm going to. And I'll not leave town either. If Soapy wants me he'll sure find me."

"Don't be foolish, kid. He has got four notches on that gun of his. And he's a dead shot."

The tongues of those about him galloped. But Curly was excited, pleased with himself because he had stood up to the bogey man of the Southwest and too full of strength to be afraid.

Maloney came into the barber shop and grinned at him. "I hear you and Soapy are figuring on setting off some fireworks this Fourth."

It did Curly good to see him standing there so easy and deliberate among the excitable town people.

"Soapy is doing the talking."

"I heard him; happened to be at the Silver Dollar when they dragged him in."

Maloney's eyebrows moved the least bit. His friend understood. Together they passed out of the back door of the shop into an alley. The others stood back and let them go.

Back to the hotel the two ran. When Curly buckled on his revolver and felt it resting comfortably against his thigh he felt a good deal better.

"I've seen Slats Davis," Maloney explained. "He has gone to find Luck, who is now at the Del Mar."

"Had any talk with Slats?"

"No. He said you'd do the talking."

"I'm to wait for him on El Molino street to learn where I'm to meet Cullison."

"That won't do. You'd make too tempting a target. I'll meet him instead."

That suited Curly. He was not hunting trouble just now, even though he would not run away from it. For he had serious business on hand that could not take care of itself if Soapy should kill him.

Nearly an hour later Maloney appeared again.

"We're to go right over to the Del Mar. Second floor, room 217. You are to go down El Molino to Main, then follow it to the hotel, keeping on the right hand side of the street. Slats will happen along the other side of the street and will keep abreast of you. Luck will walk behind you. Unless I yell your name don't pay any attention to what is behind you. Soon as we reach the hotel Slats will cross the road and go in by the side door. You will follow him a few steps behind, and we'll bring up the rear casually as if we hadn't a thing to do with you."

(To be continued.)

Watch for the next installment.

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