

Crooked Trails and Straight

By William MacLeod Raine

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Avaricious 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. Diagoning 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. Overlaken 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 intervention 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 boys concerning a notorious outlaw, Soapy Stone, real leader of the rustlers who had been Curly's undoing. 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 ball for Curly.

CHAPTER IV.—Curly escapes Soapy Stone from a bear trap into which he has stumbled, and discovers that the outlaw is young Sam's rival for the hand of Laura London. 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 rustling expedition and delivers Laura's note to Sam. Young Cullison believes Stone is his friend and says he will stick by him. Flandrau sees some move is being planned and becomes convinced it is train robbery. Sam leaves the ranch to go to Saguache. Curly accompanies him.

CHAPTER VI.—Eavesdropping at a meeting place, Curly hears Stone and his lieutenant, Luke Blackwell, arrange to hold up the train at a crossing known as Tin Cup, and after the robbery shoot young Cullison and leave his body on the scene. Stone thus glutting his revenge on the ex-sheriff through his son's death and disgrace, Curly is accused by Stone of being a spy of Luck Cullison's. They are separated, but part with the understanding that their next meeting will mean a fight to the death. Curly makes a complaint of Dick Maloney, cattlemen, and they inform Luck Cullison of Stone's plot against his son.

Part II.

CHAPTER I.—After an all-night session at the flophouse club in which Cullison has lost heavily there is an exchange of sharp words between Luck and a sheepman, Cass Fendrick, with whom Cullison has a feud.

CHAPTER II.—Saguache is electrified by the news of the holdup of express messengers, the bandits securing \$20,000. Cullison pays his poker debts, and shortly afterward Mackenzie and Alex Flandrau, his closest friends, leave he is suspected of the express robbery, his hat having been found on the scene and he being missing.

"Maybe so. Seems to be some evidence, but I reckon he can explain that away—when he comes back. The holdup dropped a hat with the initials L. C. in the band, since identified as his. He had lost a lot of money at poker. Next day he paid it. He had no money in the bank, but maybe he found it growing on a cactus bush." "You liar?" she panted, eyes blazing.

"I'll take that from you, my dear, because you look so blamed pretty when you're mad; but I wouldn't take it from him—from your father, who is hiding out in the hills somewhere."

Anger unheated welled from her in an inarticulate cry. He had come close to her, and was standing beside the stirrup, one bold hand upon the rein. Her quirt went swiftly up and down, cut like a thin bar of red-hot iron across his uplifted face. He



He Stumbled Back Half Blind With Pain.

stumbled back, half blind with the pain. Before he could realize what had happened the spur on her little boot touched the side of the pony and it was off with a bound. She was galloping wildly down the trail toward home.

He looked after her, fingers caressing the welt that burned his cheek. "You'll pay for that, Kate Cullison," he said aloud to himself.

CHAPTER III.

"Ain't She the Gamest Little Thoroughbred?"

Kate galloped into the ranch plaza around which the buildings were set, slipped from her pony, and ran at once to the telephone. Bob was on a side porch mending a bridle.

"Have you heard anything from dad?" she cried through the open door.

"Nope," he answered, hammering down a rivet.

Kate called up the hotel where Maloney was staying at Saguache, but could not get him. She asked in turn for Mackenzie, for Yester, for Alec Flandrau.

While she waited for an answer, the girl moved nervously about the room. She could not sit down or settle herself at anything. For some instinct told her that Fendrick's taunt was not a lie cut out of whole cloth.

The bell rang. Instantly she was at the telephone. Mackenzie was at the other end of the line.

"Oh, Uncle Mac." She had called him uncle ever since she could remember. "What is it they are saying about dad? Tell me it isn't true," she begged.

"A pack of lies, lassie." His Scotch idiom and accent had succumbed to thirty years on the plains, but when he became excited it rose triumphant through the acquired speech of the Southwest.

"Then is he there—in Saguache, I mean?"

"No-o. He's not in town."

"Where is he?"

"Hoots! He'll just have gone somewhere on business."

He did not bluff well. Through the hearty assurance she pierced to the hope of trouble in his voice.

"You're hiding something from me, Uncle Mac. I won't have it. You tell me the truth—the whole truth."

In three sentences he sketched it for her and when he had finished he knew by the sound of her voice that she was greatly frightened.

"Something has happened to him. I'm coming to town. I'll bring Bob. Save us two rooms at the hotel."

She turned to her cousin, who was standing big-eyed at her elbow.

"What is it, Kate? Has anything happened to Uncle Luck?"

She swallowed a lump in her throat.

"Dad's gone, Bob. Nobody knows where. They say—the bars—that he robbed the W. & S. Express company."

Suddenly her face went down into her forearm on the table and sobs began to ruck her body. The boy, staggered at this preposterous charge, could only lay his hand on her shoulder and beg her not to cry.

"I'll be all right, Kate. Wait till Uncle Luck comes back. He'll make em sick for talking about him."

His cousin nodded, choking down her sobs. "Of course. It—it'll come out all right—as soon as he finds out what they're saying. Saddle two horses right away, Bob."

"Sure. We'll soon find where he is, I bet you."

The setting sun found their journey less than half done. Kate was tortured with anxiety. Deep within her something denied that her father could be gone out of a world so good. And if he were alive, Curly Flandrau would find him—Curly and Dick between them. Luck Cullison had plenty of good friends who would not stand by and see him wronged.

Any theory of his disappearance that accepted his guilt did not occur to her mind for an instant. The two had been very close to each other. Luck had been in the habit of saying stingly that she was his major domo, his right bower. Some share of his lawless temperament she inherited, enough to feel sure that this particular kind of wrongdoing was impossible for him. He was reckless, sometimes passionate, but she did not need to reassure herself that he was scrupulously honest.

This brought her back to the only other tenable hypothesis—foul play. And from this she shrank with a quaking heart. For surely if his enemies wished to harm him they would destroy him, and this was a conclusion against which she fought desperately.

The plaza clock boomed ten strokes as they rode into Saguache. Mackenzie was waiting for them on the steps of the hotel.

"Have they—has anything been—?" The owner of the Fiddleback shook his grizzled head. "Not yet. Didn't you meet Curly?"

"No."

"He rode out to come in with you, but if he didn't meet you by ten he was to come back. You took the north road, I reckon?"

"Yes."

He put an arm around her shoulders and drew her into the hotel with cheering talk.

"Come along, Bob. We're going to tuck away a good supper first off. While you're eating, I'll tell you all there is to be told."

Kate opened her lips to say that she was not hungry and could not possibly eat a bite, but she thought better of it. Bob had tasted nothing since noon, and of course he must be fed.

Curly came into the room, and the girl rose to meet him. He took her little hand in his tanned muscular one, and somehow from his grip she gathered strength.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said simply.

"I'm glad you're glad," he smiled cheerfully.

He knew she had been crying, that she was suffering cruelly, but he offered her courage rather than maudlin sympathy. Hope seemed to flow through her veins at the meeting of the eyes. Whatever a man could do for her would be done by Curly.

They talked the situation over together.

"As it looks to me, we've got to find out two things—first, what has become of your father and, second, who did steal that money. I don't see it yet, but there's some link between the two things. I mean between the robbery and his disappearance."

"How do you mean?" Kate asked.

"Well, say the robbers were his enemies—some of the Soapy Stone outfit, maybe. They have got him out of the way to satisfy their grudge and to make people think he did it. Unfortu-

nately there is evidence that makes it look as if he might have done it—what they call corroborating testimony."

"What does Sheriff Bolt think?"

Curly waved the sheriff aside. "It don't matter what he thinks, Miss Kate. He says he thinks Luck was mixed up in the holdup. Maybe that's what he thinks, but we don't want to forget that Cass Fendrick made him sheriff and your father fought him to a fare-you-well."

"I'd like to talk with Bolt," the young woman announced.

"All right," Mackenzie assented.

"Tomorrow morning—"

"No, tonight, Uncle Mac."

The cattlemen looked at her in surprise. Her voice rang with decision. Her slight figure seemed compact with energy and resolution. Was this the girl who had been in helpless tears not ten minutes before?

"I'll see if he's at his office. Maybe he'll come up," Curly said.

"No, I'll go down to the courthouse if he's there."

At the office of the sheriff Kate cut to essentials as soon as the introductions were over.

"Do you think my father robbed the W. & S. Express company, Mr. Bolt?" she asked.

Her plainness embarrassed the officer.

"Let's look at the facts, Mrs. Cullison," he began amiably. "Then you tell me what you would think in my place. Your father needed money mighty bad. There's no doubt at all about that. Here's an envelope on

which he had written a list of his debts. You'll notice they run to just a little more than twenty thousand. I found this in his bedroom the day he disappeared. Turn that envelope over, Miss Cullison. Notice how he has written there half a dozen times in a row, '\$20,000,' and just below it twice, 'W. & S. Ex. Co.' Finally, the one word, 'Tonight.'"

She read it all, read it with a heart heavy as lead, and knew that there had left in his own strong, bold handwriting convincing evidence against himself. Still, she did not doubt him in the least, but there could be no question now that he knew of the intended shipment; that absent-mindedly he had jotted down this data while he was thinking about it in connection with his own debts.

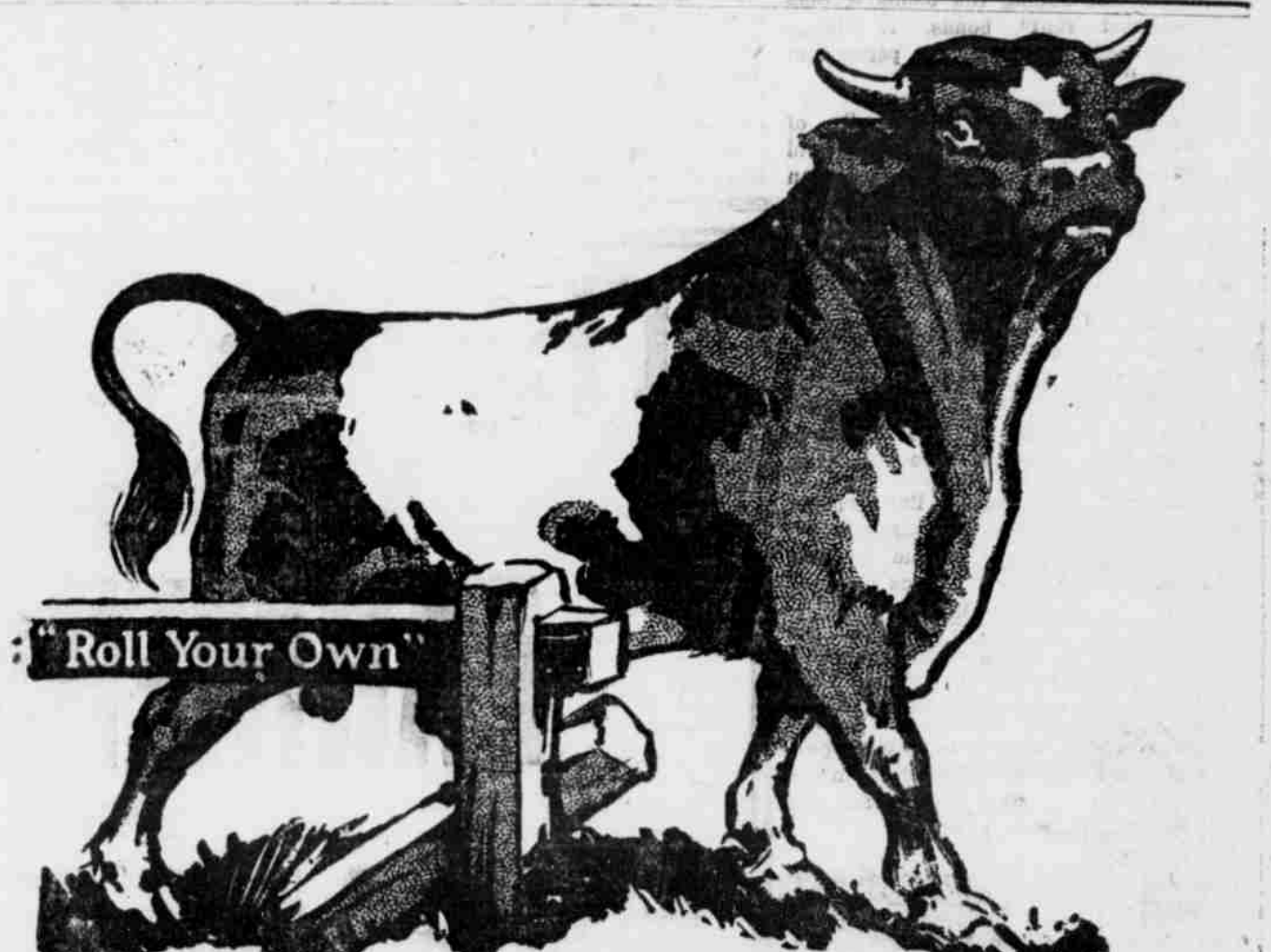
The sheriff went on tightening the chain of evidence in a voice that, for all its kindness, seemed to her remorseless as fate. "It turns out that Mr. Jordan of the Cattlemen's National bank mentioned this shipment to your father that morning. Mr. Cullison was trying to raise money from him, but he couldn't let him have it. Every bank in the city refused him a loan. Yet next morning he paid off two thousand dollars he owed from a poker game."

"He must have borrowed the money from some one," she said weakly.

"That money he paid in twenty-dollar bills. The stolen express package was in twenties. You know yourself that this is a gold country. Bills ain't so plentiful."

(To be continued.)

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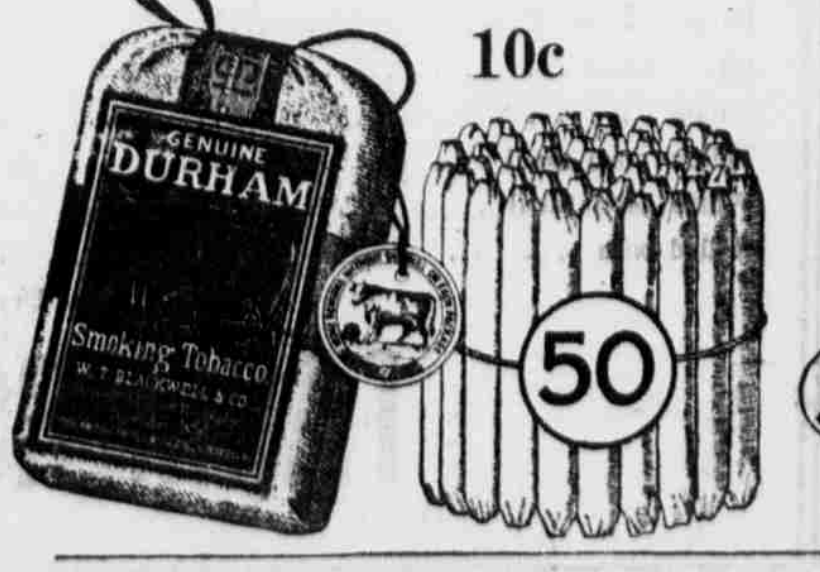
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