

Crooked Trails and Straight

By William MacLeod Raine

SYNOPSIS.

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.

CHAPTER II.—Cullison's friends, all cattlemen, determine to lynch Curly as an example to cattle thieves.

CHAPTER III.—His wound dressed, and further violence not apprehended, Curly is sent for by Cullison.

CHAPTER IV.—Curly rescues 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.

CHAPTER V.—There Curly meets his companions of the rustling expedition and delivers Laura's note to Sam.

CHAPTER VI.—Eavesdropping at a meeting place, Curly hears Stone and his lieutenant, Lute Blackwell, arrange to hold up the train at a crossing known as Tin Cup.

Part II.

CHAPTER I.—After an all-night session at the Roundup 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.

CHAPTER III.—Kate goes to Saguache for a consultation with Mackenzie, Alex Flandrau and Curly.

CHAPTER IV.—Kate's shrewdness reveals how Cullison had taken Fendrick's hat when he left the Roundup club, and suspicion points strongly to a frame-up on Fendrick's part and to his being responsible for Luck's disappearance.

CHAPTER V.—In the cellar of the cigar store Flandrau finds a cipher message left by Cullison and follows the scent.

"First thing is to search the Jack of Hearts and see what's there. Are you with me, Uncle Alec?"

Curly turned at the door with his warm smile. "By the way, I've got some news I forgot. I know where your father got the money to pay his poker debts.

"By George, that's what we did, too, every last one of us," his uncle admitted.

"Every little helps," Kate said, and her little double nod thanked Curly.

"Dick, you go with me inside, Uncle Alec, will you keep guard outside?"

"No, hub, I won't. I knew Luck before you were walking hogwadded," the old cattleman answered brusquely.

"I'm here to play trumps, Mrs. Wythe. What secret has the Jack of Hearts got hidden from us?" young

Flandrau demanded, his hard eyes fastened to her timorous ones. "I—I—I don't know what you mean."

There was no other apparent exit from the kitchen-bedroom except the one by which he and his uncle had entered from the shop.



From the Darkness Below Came No Sound.

ceived the place as full of shining eyes glaring up at him. Any had men down there already had the drop on them.

"I'm coming down, boys," young Flandrau announced in a quiet confident voice.

The two Flandraus were quite alone in the room. For furniture there was a table, a cot which had been slept in and not made up, and a couple of rough chairs.

"Make anything out of it?" the older Flandrau asked.

"He's been here, but they've taken him away. Will you cover the telephoning? Have all the ranches notified that Luck is being taken into the hills, so they can picket the trails?"

"I don't know, I guess. Blackwell is in it. He knows every nook of the hills. The party left here not two hours since, looks like."

"The birds have flown, Dick. Made their getaway through the alley late this afternoon, probably just after it got dark."

"Mrs. Wythe, murder is going to be done, I shouldn't wonder. And you're liable to be held guilty of it unless you tell us all you know."

She began to weep, helplessly, but with a sort of stubbornness, too.

"Mrs. Wythe went with them quietly enough. She was shaken with fears, but still resolute not to speak.

"She doesn't know. But the first thing he did was to lock the outer door and take the key. They carried father

CHAPTER V. A Message in Cipher. While Kate listened to what Curly had to tell her the dark eyes of the girl were fastened upon the trembling little woman standing near the door.

"What's the use of saying that when we know you do? And you'll not get out of it by sobbing. You've got to talk. You've got to tell—you've just got to," Kate insisted.

"Come here, Miss Kate. I believe this is a message to us."

"I found the paper in the cellar where he was. See how some of these words are scored. Done with a finger nail, looks like."

This was the paragraph upon which his gaze had fastened, and the words and letters were scored sharply as shown below, though in the case of single letters the mark ran through them instead of underneath, evidently that no mistake might be made as to which was meant:

J. P. Kelly of the ranger force reports over the telephone that by unexpected good luck he has succeeded in taking prisoner the notorious Jack Foster of Hermosilla and the Rincons notoriety and is now bringing him to Saguache where he will be locked up pending a disposition of his case.

Kelly succeeded in surprising him while he was eating dinner at a Mexican road-house just this side of the border.

"Do you make it out?" Maloney asked, looking over their shoulders.

"Read that right ahead," Dick said not quite get the idea, but Kate, tense with excitement, took the envelope and read aloud:

"Luck—prisoner—Jack of Hearts—now Saguache—locked up pending a disposition of his case—succeeded in surprising him"

"That poor woman! She has told me everything. Father has been down in that cellar for days under a guard. They took him away tonight. She doesn't know where it was she sent the warnings to Sheriff Bolt.

"Because of Blackwell?" "Yes. He came straight to her as soon as he was freed from the penitentiary. He had her completely terrorized. She gave him money, and he came for more—and more."

"He was there that day," the girl continued. "She plucked up courage to refuse him what little she had left because she needed it for the rent. He got hold of her arm and twisted it. Father heard her cry and came in. Blackwell was behind the door as it opened. He struck with a loaded cane and father fell unconscious. He raised it to strike again, but she clung to his arm and called for help.

"Fendrick?" breathed Curly. "She doesn't know. But the first thing he did was to lock the outer door and take the key. They carried father

down into the cellar. Before he came to himself his hands were tied behind his back."

"And then?" "They watched him day and night. Fendrick himself did not go near the place—if it was Fendrick, Blackwell swore to kill Mrs. Wythe if she told. They held him there till tonight. She thinks they were trying to get father to sign some paper."

"The relinquishment, of course. That means the other man was Fendrick."

"Kate nodded. "Yes." Curly rose. The muscles stood out in his jaw hard as steel ropes.

"Two men sat in a log cabin on opposite sides of a cheap table. One of them was immersed in a newspaper. His body was relaxed, his mind apparently at ease.

There were reasons of policy why it were better to curb this fascinating desire, but sometimes the impulse to kill surged up almost uncontrollably.

Blackwell merely scowled. Given his way, Cullison would not be here to read the Sentinel. But the brains of the conspiracy had ruled otherwise and insisted, too, upon decent treatment. With one ankle securely tied to a leg of the table there was no danger in freeing the hands of the cattleman, but his hosts saw that never for an instant were hands and feet at liberty together.

Cullison read on: "Lieutenant O'Connor of the Arizona rangers left town today for a short trip into the hills, where he expects to spend a few days hunting."

"Hello, here's a personal to your address. Listen. The friends of L. C. serve notice that what occurred at the Jack of Hearts is known. Any violence hereafter done to him will be paid for to the limit. No guilty man will escape. So the boys are getting busy. I figured they would be."

"You'd better pray they won't. For if they find the nest it will be empty. Look out of that window behind you."

"There's a prospect hole down there," Blackwell explained savagely. "You'd go down the Devil's Side—what's left of you, I mean—deep into that prospect hole. The timberings are rotted and the whole top of the working ready to cave in. When your body hits it there will be an avalanche—with Mr. Former-Sheriff Cullison at the bottom of it. You'll be buried without any funeral expenses, and I reckon your friends will never know where to put the headstone."

"The thing was devilishly simple and feasible. Luck, still looking out of the window, felt the blood run cold down his spine, for he knew this fellow would never stick at murder if he felt it would be safe.

"So you see I'm right; you'd better pray your friends won't find you. They can't reach here without being heard. If they get to hunting these hills you sure want to hope they'll stay cold, for just as soon as they get warm it will be the signal for you to shoot the chutes."

"I'll be headed for Mexico. I tell you because you ain't liable to go around spreading the news. There's a horse saddled in the dip back of the hill crest. Get it?"

From far below there came through the open window the faint click of a horse's hoofs ringing against the stones in the dry bed of a river wash. Swiftly Blackwell moved to the door, taking down a rifle from his rack as he did so. Cullison rose noiselessly in his chair. If it came to the worst he meant to shout aloud his presence and close with this fellow. Hampered as he was by the table, the man would get him without question. But if he could only sink his fingers into that hairy throat while there was still life in him he could promise that the Mexican trip would never take place.

Blackwell, from his place by the door, could keep an eye both on his prisoner and on a point of the trail far below, where horsemen must pass to reach the cabin.

"Not your friends this time, Mr. Sheriff," Blackwell jeered. "I get a stay of execution, do I?"

"The cool drawing voice of the cattleman showed nothing of the tense feeling within.

He resumed his seat and the reading of the newspaper. Presently, to the man that came over the threshold he spoke with a casual nod.

"Morning, Cass." Fendrick mumbled a surly answer. The manner of ironical comradeship his captive chose to employ was more than an annoyance. To serve his ends it was necessary to put the fear of death into this man's heart, which was a thing he had found impossible to do. The logic of circumstances was driving the sheepman into a corner. He had on impulse made the owner of the Circle C his prisoner. Seeing him there unconscious on the floor of the Jack of Hearts, it had come to him in a flash that he might hold him and force a relinquishment of the Del Oro claim. His disappearance would explain itself if the rumor spread that he was the W. & S. express robber. Cass had done it to save himself from the ruin of his business, but already he had regretted it fifty times. Threats could not move Luck in the least. He was as hard as iron.

"So the sheepman found himself between the upper and the nether millstones. He could not drive his prisoner to terms and he dared not release him. For if Cullison went away unpunished he would surely send him to the penitentiary. Nor could he hold him a prisoner indefinitely. He had seen the "personal" warning in both the morning and the afternoon papers. He guessed that the presence of the ranger, Bucky O'Connor, in Saguache was not a chance. The law was closing in on him. Somehow Cullison must be made to come through with a relinquishment and a pledge not to prosecute. The only other way out would be to let Blackwell wreak his hate on the former sheriff. From this he shrank with every instinct. Fendrick was a hard man. He would have fought it out to a finish if necessary. But murder was a thing he could not do.

"Price of sheep good this week?" Cullison asked amiably. "I didn't come here to discuss the price of sheep with you." Fendrick spoke harshly. "Are you going to sign this relinquishment?"

"Luck's face showed a placid surprise. "Why no, Cass. Thought I mentioned that before."

"You'd better." The sheepman's harassed face looked ugly enough for anything.

"Can't figure it out that way." "You've got to sign it, By G—, you've no option." "No?" Still with pleasant incredulity.

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(To be continued.)

Periodic Bilious Attacks. Persons subject to bilious attacks at regular intervals know about when to expect an attack. They find that they have no desire for food when an attack is due but usually eat because it is meal time. Skip one meal and take three of Chamberlain's Tablets and you may be able to avoid the attack. Persons subject to periodic bilious attacks should not drink tea or coffee at any time.

Vegetable Gardening—Now is a good time for the farmers of the Willamette valley for field setting of tomato plants. Other regions can set out the plants a little later.