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 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 boy 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 bail for Curly.

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. 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 III.—Kate goes to Saguache for a consultation with Mackenzie, Alex Flandrau and Curly. All are convinced of Luck's innocence. The sheriff reveals that besides the finding of Cullison's hat, and his payment of his debts, Cass Fendrick had seen the robber and is almost certain it was Luck. Cullison is about to enter a homestead claim which will practically put Fendrick out of business.

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, 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 confidant of Dick Maloney, cattleman, and they inform Luck Cullison of Stone's plot against his son.

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. Cullison pays his poker debts, and shortly afterward Mackenzie and Alex Flandrau, his closest friends, learn he is suspected of the express robbery, his hat having been found on the scene and he being missing.

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 frameup on Fendrick's part and to his being responsible for Luck's disappearance. The sheriff receives a series of notes turning on the "Jack of Hearts." Curly finds a cigar store by that name and secures evidence that the proprietress, Mrs. Wylie, knows what happened to Luck.

CHAPTER V.—In the cellar of the cigar store Flandrau finds a cipher message left by Cullison, and follows the scent. Luck is held prisoner by Fendrick and Blackwell in a sheep herder's cabin in the mountains. Fendrick wants him to sign a relinquishment of his homestead rights, conditional to his release.

CHAPTER VI.—Uneasy over the possible results of his kidnaping of the cattleman, Fendrick tells Kate Cullison enough of the story to induce her to accompany him to her father. Cullison, fearing for his daughter's safety should she be left at the mercy of Blackwell, signs the relinquishment and accompanies Kate home.

CHAPTER VII.—Bucky O'Connor, of the Texas Rangers, lifelong friend of Cullison, takes a hand in the game, he and Curly making a search for the missing man. O'Connor arrests Fendrick, charging him with the abduction. Cullison seeks Fendrick with the object of punishing the sheepman personally, but O'Connor forbids, holding Fendrick under arrest.

CHAPTER VIII.—O'Connor apprehends Blackwell on his way to Soapy Stone's ranch and brings him to Saguache. Blackwell admits the express robbery, claiming Fendrick took the money from him. He also explains the circumstances of Cullison's abduction.

CHAPTER IX.—Blackwell escapes from prison and joins Soapy Stone. Sam Cullison receives notice from Stone of the approaching train holdup. Curly and Mackenzie drug the boy's coffee, and Curly, in Sam's clothes, takes his place on the train. The robbery takes place according to schedule, and Stone believes Sam to have been killed. Curly overcomes Stone's man, left with the horses, and gets away with them. He meets Luck Cullison and the posse. They intercept Stone, Blackwell and "Bad Bill" Cranston. Blackwell surrenders, but escapes. Stone and Cranston are killed.

The sight of the mask had given Curly an idea. He was about the same build as Sam. Why not go in his place? It would be worth doing just to catch sight of Soapy's face when he took the mask off after the robbers had been captured.

"What's the use?" Davis protested. "It's an unnecessary risk. They might shoot you in place of Sam."

"I'll look out for myself. Don't worry about that. Before the time for getting rid of Sam comes Mr. Soapy and his bunch will be prisoners."

They argued it out, but Curly was set and could not be moved. He dressed in young Cullison's clothes and with Maloney took the express at 9:57. Davis remained to guard Sam.

Curly's watch showed 10:17 when the wheels began to grind from the setting of the air brakes. He was in the last sleeper, Dick in the day coach near the front. They had agreed that Dick was to drop off as soon as the train slowed down enough to make it safe, whereas Curly would go on and play Sam's part until the proper time.

The train almost slid to a halt from the pressure of the hard-jammed brakes. A volley of shots rang out. Curly slipped the mask over his face and rose with a revolver in each hand. He had been sitting at the end of the car, so that nobody noticed him until his voice rang out with a crisp order.

"Hands up! Don't anybody move!"

An earthquake shock could not have alarmed the passengers more. The color was washed completely from the faces of most of them.

"Reach for the roof. Come, punch a hole in the sky!" To do it thoroughly, Curly flung a couple of shots through the ceiling. That was enough. Hands went up without any argument, most of them quivering as from an Arkansas chill.

Presently Cranston herded the passengers in from the forward coaches. With them were most of the train crew.

"We're cutting off the express car and going forward to Dobe Wells with it. There we can blow open the safe uninterrupted," Bad Bill explained. "You herd on the passengers here from the outside till you hear two shots, then hump yourself forward and hop on the express car."

Fine! Curly was to stand out there in the moonlight and let anybody in the car that had the nerve pepper away at him. If they did not attend to the job of riddling him, his false friends would do it while he was running forward to get aboard. Nothing could have been simpler—if he had not happened to have had inside information of their intent.

He had to think quickly, for the plans of him and his friends had been deranged. They had reckoned on the express car being rifled on the spot. This would have given Cullison time to reach the scene of action. Now they would be too late. Unless Curly could stop it, the holdup would go through according to the program of Soapy and not of his enemies.

The decision of Flandrau was instantaneous. He slid down beside the track into the long grass. Whipping up one of his guns, he fired. As if in answer to the first shot his revolver cracked twice. Simultaneously, he let out a cry of pain, wriggled back for a dozen yards through the grass, and crossed the track in the darkness. As he crouched down close to the wheels of the sleeper some one came running back on the other side.

"What's up, Sam? You hit?" he could hear Blackwell whisper.

No answer came. The paroled convict was standing close to the car for fear of being hit himself and he dared not move.

"Sam," he called again; then, "He's sure got his."

That was all Curly wanted to know. Softly he padded forward, keeping as low as he could till he reached the empty sleepers. A brakeman was just uncoupling the express car when Curly dived underneath and nestled close to the trucks.

From where he lay he could almost have reached out and touched Soapy standing by the car.

"What about the kid?" Stone asked Blackwell as the latter came up.

"They got him. Didn't you hear him yelp?"

"Yes, but did they put him out of business? See his body?"

Blackwell had no intention of going back into the fire zone and making sure. For his part he was satisfied. So he lied.

"Yep. Blew the top of his head off."

"Good," Soapy nodded. "That's a receipt in full for Mr. Luck Cullison."

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Before many minutes the engine began to slow down. The wheels had hardly stopped moving when Curly crept out, plowed through the sand, up the rubble of a little hill, and into a draw where a bunch of scrub oaks offered cover.

A voice from in front called to him. Just then the moon appeared from behind drifting clouds.

"Oh, it's you, Sam. Everything all right?"

"Right as the wheat. We're blowing open the safe now," Flandrau answered.

Moving closer, he saw that his questioner was the man in charge of the horses. Though he knew the voice, he could not put a name to its owner. But this was not the point that first occupied his mind. There were only four horses for five riders. Curly knew now that he had not been mistaken. Soapy had expected one of his allies to stay on the field of battle, had prepared for it from the beginning. The knowledge of this froze any remorse the young vaquero might have felt.

He pushed his revolver against the teeth of the horse wrangler.

"Don't move, you bandy-legged maverick, or I'll fill your hide full of holes. And if you want to keep on living padlock that mouth of yours."

In spite of his surprise the man caught the point at once. He turned over his weapons without a word.

Curly unwound a rope from one of the saddles and dropped a loop round the neck of his prisoner. The two men mounted and rode out of the draw, the outlaw leading the other two horses. As soon as they reached the bluff above Flandrau outlined the next step in the program.

"We'll stay here in the tornilla and see what happens, my friend. Unless you've a fancy to get lead poisoning keep still."

"Who in Mexico are you?" the captured man asked.

"It's your showdown. Skin off that mask."

The man hesitated. His own revolver moved a few inches toward his head. Hastily he took off the mask. The moon shone on the face of the man called Dutch. Flandrau laughed. Last time they had met Curly had a rope around his neck. Now the situation was reversed.

An explosion below told them that the robbers had blown open the safe. Presently Soapy's voice came faintly to them.

"Bring up the horses."

He called again, and a third time. The dwarfed figures of the outlaws stood out clear in the moonlight. One of them ran up the track toward the draw. He disappeared into the scrub oaks, from whence his alarmed voice came in a minute.

"Dutch! Oh, Dutch!"

The revolver rim pressed a little harder against the bridge of the horse wrangler's nose.

"He ain't here," Blackwell called back to his accomplices.

That brought Stone on the run. "You condemned idiot, he must be there. Ain't he had two hours to get here since he left Tin Cup?"

They shouted themselves hoarse. They wandered up and down in a vain search. All the time Curly and his prisoner sat in the brush and scarcely batted an eye.

At last Soapy gave up the hunt. The engine and the express car were sent back to join the rest of the train and

Three Shadowy Figures Slipped Around the Edge of the Corral.

as soon as they were out of sight the robbers set out across country toward the Flatiron ranch.

Curly guessed their intentions. They would rustle horses there and head for the border. It was the only chance still left them.

After they had gone Curly and his prisoner returned to the road and set out toward Tin Cup. About a mile and a half up the line they met Cullison and his riders on the way down. Maloney was with them. He had been picked up at the station.

Dick gave a shout of joy when he heard Flandrau's voice.

"Oh, you Curly! I've been scared stiff for fear they'd got you."

Luck caught the boy's hand and wrung it hard.

They held a conference while the Circle C riders handcuffed Dutch and tied him to a horse. Soon the posse was off again, having left the prisoner in charge of one of the men. They swung round in a wide half circle, not wishing to startle their game until the proper time.

When they reached the edge of the mesa that looked down on the Flatiron the moon was out and the valley was swimming in light. They followed the dip of a road that led down to the corral. Passing the fenced lane leading to the stable, they tied their ponies inside and took the places assigned to them by Cullison.

They had not long to wait. In less than half an hour three shadowy figures slipped round the edge of the corral and up the lane. Each of them carried a rifle in addition to his hip guns.

They slid into the open end of the stable. Cullison's voice rang out coldly.

"Drop your guns!"

A startled oath, a shot, and before one could have lifted a hand that silent moonlit valley of peace had become a battlefield.

The outlaws fell back from the stable, weapons smoking furiously. Blackwell broke into a run, never looking behind him, but Soapy and Bad Bill gave back foot by foot fighting every step of the way.

Dick and Curly rose from behind the rocks where they had been placed and closed the trap on Blackwell. The paroled convict let out one yell.

"I give up. Goddlemighty, don't shoot!"

Half way down the lane Cranston was hit. In the darkness his voice could be heard, for the firing had momentarily ceased.

"They've got me, Soapy. Run for it. I'll hold 'em back."

"Hit bad, Bill?"

"I'm all in. Vamos!"

Stone turned to run and for the first time saw that his retreat was cut off. As fast as he could pump the lever his rifle began working again.

The firing this time did not last more than five seconds. When the smoke cleared it was all over. Soapy lay on his back, shot through and through. Blackwell had taken advantage of the diversion to crawl through the strands of barbed wire and to disappear in the chaparral. Bill had rolled over on his face.

Dick was bending over Stone. He looked up at the approach of Curly and said just one word.

"Dead."

Cullison had torn open Cranston's shirt and was examining his wounds.

"No use, Luck. I've got a-plenty. You sure fooled us though. Was it Sam gave us away?"

"No, Bill. Curly overheard Soapy and Blackwell at Chalkeye's place. Sam stood pat, though you were planning to murder him."

"I wasn't in on that, Luck—didn't know a thing about it till after the boy was shot. I wouldn't a-stood for it."

"He wasn't shot. Curly saved him. He had to give you away to do it."

"Good enough. Serves Soapy right for double-crossing Sam. Take care of that kid, Luck. He's all right yet." His eye fell on Flandrau. "You're a game sport, son. You beat us all. No hard feelings."

"Sorry it had to be this way, Bill."

The dying man was already gray to the lips, but his nerve did not falter. "It had to come some time. And it was Luck ought to have done it, too." He waved aside Sweeney, who was holding a flask to his lips. "What's the use? I've got mine. Say, there's something else, boys. Curly has been accused of that Bar Double M horse rustling back in the early summer. I did that job. He was not one of us. You hear, boys. Curly was not in it."

A quarter of an hour later he died. He had lied to save from the penitentiary the lad who had brought about his death. Curly knew why he had done it—because he felt himself to blame for the affair. Maybe Bad Bill had been a desperado, a miscreant according to the usual standard, but when it came to dying he knew how to go better than many a respectable citizen. Curly stole off into the darkness so that the boys would not see him play the baby.

CHAPTER X.

The Prodigal Son.

They found the prodigal son with his sister and Laura London at the Del Mar. Repentance was writ large all over his face and manner. From Davis and from the girls he had heard the story of how Soapy Stone had intended to destroy him. His scheme of life had been broken into pieces and he was a badly shaken young scamp.

When Luck and Curly came into the room he jumped up, very white about the lips.

"Father!"

"My boy!"

Cullison had him by the hand, one arm around the shaking shoulders.

"What—what—?"

Sam's question broke down, but his father guessed it.

"Soapy and Bad Bill were killed. Dutch is a prisoner, and Blackwell escaped. All Spring Valley is out after him."

The boy shuddered and drew a long sobbing breath. "I've been a fool, father—and worse."

"Forget it, son. We'll wipe the slate clean. I've been to blame, too."

It was no place for outsiders. Curly beat a retreat into the next room. The young women followed him. Both of them were frankly weeping. Arms twined about each other's waists, they disappeared into an adjoining bedroom.

"Don't go," Kate called to him over her shoulder.

Curly sat down and waited. Presently Kate came back alone. Her shining eyes met his.

"I never was so happy in all my life before. Tell me what happened—everything, please."

As much as was good for her to know Curly told. Without saying a word she listened till he was through.

At last she spoke in a low, sweet voice.

"What can we do for you? First you save father and then Sam. You risked everything for my brother—to win him back to us, to save his life and now his reputation. If you had been killed people would always have believed you were one of the gang."

"Sho! That's nonsense, Miss Kate." He twisted his hat in his hand uneasily. "Honest, I enjoyed every bit of it. And a fellow has to pay his debts."

"Was that why you did it?" she asked softly.

"Yes. I had to make good. I had to show your father and you that I had not thrown away all your kindness. So I quit traveling that downhill road on which I had got started."

"I'm glad—I'm glad." She whispered it so low he could hardly hear.

"There was one way to prove myself. That was to stand between Sam and trouble. So I butted in and spoiled Soapy's game."

"I wish I could tell you how fine father thinks it was of you. He doesn't speak of it much, but I know."

"Nothing to what I did—nothing at all." A wave of embarrassment had crept to the roots of his curly hair. "Just because a fellow—oh, shucks!"

"That's all very well for you to say, but you can't help us thinking what we please."

"But that ain't right. I don't want you thinking things that ain't so, because—"

The Kisses He Had Dreamed About.

"Yes? Because—?"

She lifted her eyes and met his. Then she knew it had to come out, that the feeling banked in him would overflow in words.

"Because you're the girl I love."

He had not intended to say it now, lest he might seem to be urging his services as a claim upon her. But the words had slipped out in spite of him.

She held out her two hands to him with a little gesture of surrender. The light of love was in her starry eyes.

And then—

She was in his arms, and the kisses he had dreamed about were on his lips.

CHAPTER XI.

Cutting Trail.

Kate Cullison had disappeared, had gone out riding one morning and at nightfall had not returned. As the hours passed anxiety at the Circle C became greater.

"Mebbe she got lost," Bob suggested.

Her father scouted this as absurd.

"You don't reckon a cougar—" began Sweeney, and stopped.

(To be continued.)

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