

Crooked Trails and Straight

By William MacLeod Raine
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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 these 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, Curly had seen the robber and is almost certain it was Luck. Cullison is about to enter a homestead claim which will practically put Flandrick 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 Mahoney, catman, 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 exchanged 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 III.—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 it to 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 cattlemen, Fendrick tells Kate Cullison enough of the story to induce her company 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 men, 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.

CHAPTER X.—Back at Saguache, Luck Cullison and his son are reconciled, while Curly and Kate disclose their mutual love.

CHAPTER XI.—Kate Cullison, while riding on the range, disappears. Suspect

ing she has been abducted, a searching party is formed, Fendrick joining it.

CHAPTER XII.—Escaping from the scene of the train robbery, Blackwell falls into a prospect hole. Kate rescues him. He forces her to accompany him, making for the Mexican border. Hemmed in, Blackwell compels Kate to put on his hat and coat and ride out of shelter, he hoping the girl will be mistaken for him and shot while he makes his escape. Kate reaches the posse safely. Fendrick discovers Blackwell and in an exchange of shots the sheepman is wounded and the desperado killed.

CHAPTER XIII.—Curly is married to Kate, and with his wife at his side is acquitted of complicity in the horse "rustling" which was the beginning of all his misfortunes, and also his happiness, since it led to his meeting with Kate Cullison.

Luck looked at his jandy-legged old rider with eyes in which little cold devils sparkled. "A human cougar, I'll bet. This time I'll take his hide off inch by inch while he's still living."

"You thinking of Fendrick?" asked Sam.

"You've said it." Sweeney considered, rasping his stubby chin. "I don't reckon Cass would do Miss Kate a meanness. He's a white man, say the worst of him. But it might be Blackwell. When last seen he was heading into the hills. If he met her—"

A spasm of pain shot across Luck's face. "My God!"

"By gum, there he is now, Luck."

Sweeney's finger pointed to an advancing rider.

Cullison swung as on a pivot in time to see some one drop into the dip in the road, just beyond the corral. "Who—Blackwell?"

"No, Cass."

Fendrick reappeared presently and turned in at the lane. Cullison, standing on the porch at the head of the steps looked like a man who was passing through the inferno. But he looked, too, a personified day of judgment untempered by mercy.

The sheepman spoke, looking straight at his foe. "I've just heard the news. I was down at Yesler's ranch when you 'phoned asking if they had seen anything of Miss Cullison. I came up to ask you one question. When was she seen last?"

"About ten o'clock this morning. Why?"

"I saw her about noon. She was on Mesa Verde, headed for Blue canon. It looked like."

"Close enough to speak to her?" Sam asked.

"Yes. We passed the time of day."

"And then?" Luck cut back into the conversational with a voice like a file.

"She went on toward the gulch and I kept on to the ranch. The last I saw of her she was going straight on. We'd better travel over toward Mesa Verde, so as to be ready to start at day-break."

Cullison's gaze had never left him. It observed, weighed, appraised. "Good enough. We'll start."

He left Sweeney to answer the telephone while he was away. All of his other riders were already out combing the hills under the supervision of Curly. Luck had waited with Sam only to get some definite information before starting. Now he had his lead. Fendrick was either telling the truth or he was lying with some sinister purpose in view. The cattlemen meant to know which.

The party pushed up the gulch as rapidly as they could. The ashes of a camp fire halted them a few minutes later. Scattered about lay the feathers and dismembered bones of some birds.

Cass stooped and picked up some of the feathers. "Quails, I reckon. Miss Cullison had three tied to her saddle horn when I met her."

"Why did she come up here to cook them?" Sam asked.

Luck was already off his horse, quartering over the ground to read what it might tell him.

"She wasn't alone. There was a man with her. See these tracks?"

It was Fendrick who made the next discovery. He had followed a draw for a short distance and climbed to a little mesa above. Presently he called to Cullison.

Father and son hurried toward him. The sheep owner was standing at the edge of a prospect hole pointing down with his finger.

"Some one has been in that pit recently, and he's been there several days."

"Then how did he get out?" Sam asked.

Fendrick knelt on the edge of the pit and showed him where a rope had been dragged so heavily that it had cut deeply into the clay.

"Some one pulled him out."

"What's it mean anyhow? Kate wasn't in that hole, was she?"

Cass shook his head. "This is my guess. Some one was coming along here in the dark and fell in. Suppose Miss Cullison heard him calling as she came up the gulch. What would she do?"

"Come up and help the fellow out."

"Sure she would. And if he was hungry—as he likely was—she would cook her quail for him."

"And then? Why didn't she come home?"

Luck turned a gray agonized face on him. "Boy, don't you see? The man was Blackwell."

"And if you'll put yourself in Blackwell's place you'll see that he couldn't let her go home to tell where she had seen him," Fendrick explained.

"Then where is she? What did he do with her?"

"He may have shot her when he got a good chance, but I don't think so. He would keep her for a hostage as long as he could."

"That's the way I figure it," agreed Cullison. "He daren't hurt her, for he would know Arizona would hunt him down like a wolf if he did."

"Then where's he taking her?" Sam asked.

"Somewhere into the hills. His idea will be to slip down and cut across the line into Sonora. He's a rotten bad lot, but he won't do her any harm unless he's pushed to the wall. The fear of Luck Cullison is in his heart."

"That's about it," nodded Luck. "He's somewhere in these hills unless he's broken through."

"There's a chance he'll make for one of my sheep camps to lay in a supply. Wouldn't it be a good idea to keep a man stationed at each one of them?"

"You're talking sense," Cullison approved. "Sam, ride back and get in touch with Curly. Tell him to do that. And rouse the whole country over the wire. We'll run him down and feed him to the coyotes."

CHAPTER XII.

A Good Samaritan.

Fendrick had guessed the exact truth. After leaving him Kate had ridden forward to the canon and entered it. She did not mean to go much farther, but she took her time. More than once she slipped from under a fold of her waist a letter and re-read sentences of it. Whenever she did this her eyes smiled. For it was a love letter from Curly, the first she had ever had. It had been lying on the inner edge of the threshold of her bedroom door that morning when she got up, and she knew that her lover had risen early to put it there unnoticed.

Faintly there came to her a wind-swept sound. She pulled up and waited, but no repetition of it reached her ears. But before her pony had moved a dozen steps she stopped him again. This time she was almost sure of a far cry, and after it the bark of a revolver.

With the touch of a rein she guided her horse toward the sound. It might mean nothing. On the other hand it might be a call for help. Her shout brought an answer which guided her to the edge of a prospect hole. In the darkness she made out an indistinct figure.

"Water," a husky voice demanded.

She got her canteen from the saddle and dropped it to him. The man gazed his lips to the mouth as if he could never get enough.

"For God's sake get me out of here," he pleaded piteously.

"How long have you been there?"

"Two days. I fell in at night while I was cutting across country."

Kate fastened her rope to the horn of the saddle, tightened the cinch carefully, and dropped the other end to him. She swung to the back of the horse and braced herself by resting her full weight on the farther stirrup.

"Now," she told him.

The imprisoned man was dragged over the edge with one cheek scratched and bleeding.

"Might a-known you'd hurt me if you moved so fast," he complained nursing his wounded face in such a way as to hide it.

"I'm sorry. I did my best to go carefully," the girl answered, stepping forward.

His hand shot forward and caught her wrist. Her startled eyes flashed to his face. The man was the convict Blackwell.

"Got anything to eat with you. I'm starving," he snapped.

"Yes. I shot some quail. Let go my hand."

He laughed evilly, without mirth. "Don't try any of your sassy ways on me. I'm a wolf on the howl."

She fought and twisted till she was worn out in her efforts to free herself. Panting, she faced him.

"Let me go, I tell you."

For answer his open hand struck her mouth. "Not till you learn your boss. Before I'm through with you a squaw won't be half so tame as you."

He dragged her to the horse, took from its case the rifle that hung by the saddle, and fung her from him roughly. Then he pulled himself to the saddle.

"March ahead of me," he ordered.

As soon as they had reached the bed of the canon he called a halt and bade her light a fire and cook him the quail. She gathered ironwood and catclaw while he watched her vigilantly. Together they roasted the birds by holding them over the fire with sharpened sticks thrust through the wings. He devoured them with the voracity of a wild beast.

Hitherto his mind had been busy with the immediate present, but now his furtive shifting gaze rested on her more thoughtfully. He dared not leave her in the prospect hole. He was not yet ready to do murder, for fear of

punishment, that was a possibility to be considered only if he should be hard pressed. The only alternative left him was to take her to the border as a companion of his fugitive doings.

"We'll be going now," he announced, after he had eaten.

"Going where? Don't you see I'll be a drag to you? Take my horse and go. You'll get along faster."

"Do you think so?"

For the first time it came to her that if he did not take her with him he would kill her to insure his own safety.

None of the arguments that would have availed with another man were of any weight here. Her sex, her



"March Ahead of Me," He Ordered.

youth, the service she had done him—these would not count a straw. He was lost to all the instincts of honor that govern even hard desperate men of his class.

They struck into the mountains, following a cattle trail that wound upward with devious twists. The man rode, and the girl walked in front with the elastic lightness, the unconscious flexuous grace of poise given her body by an outdoor life. By dusk they were up in the headwaters of the creeks. The resilient muscles of the girl had lost their spring. She moved wearily, her feet dragging heavily so that sometimes she staggered when the ground was rough. Not once had the man offered her the horse.

He meant to be fresh ready for any emergency that might come. Moreover, it pleased his small soul to see the daughter of Luck Cullison faded and exhausted but still answering the spur of his urge.

The moon was up before they came upon a tent shining in the cold silvery light. Beside it was a sheetiron stove, a box the ashes of a camp fire, and a side of ham hanging from the limb of a stunted pine. Cautiously they stole forward.

The camp was for the time deserted. No doubt its owner, a Mexican sheep-border in the employ of Fendrick and Dominguez, was out somewhere with his flock.

Kate cooked a meal and the convict ate. The girl was too tired and anxious to care for food, but she made herself take a little. They packed the saddlebags with bacon, beans, coffee and flour. Blackwell tightened again the cinches and once more the two took the trail.

They made camp in a pocket opening from a gulch far up in the hills. With her own reins he fastened her hands behind her and tied the girl securely to the twisted trunk of a Joshua tree. To make sure of her he lay on the rope, both hands clinched to the rifle. In five minutes he was asleep, but it was long before Kate could escape from wakefulness. At last she fell into troubled catnaps.

From one of these she awoke to see that the morning light was sifting through the darkness. She was shivering with the chill of an Arizona mountain night. Turning her body, the girl's eyes fell upon her captor. He was looking at her in the way that no decent man looked at a woman. Her impulse was to scream, to struggle to her feet and run. What did he mean? What was he going to do?

But something warned her this would precipitate the danger. She called upon her courage and tried to still the fearful tumult in her heart. Somehow she succeeded. A scornful, confident pride flashed from her eyes into his. It told him that for his life he dared not lay a finger upon her in the way of harm. And he knew it was true, knew that if he gave way to his desire no hole under heaven would be deep enough to hide him from the vengeance of her friends.

He got slyly to his feet. "Come. We'll be going."

Within the hour they saw some of his hunters. A wisp of smoke rose from the basin below. Grouped about

it were three men eating breakfast.

"Don't make a sound," warned Blackwell.

His rifle covered her. With all her soul she longed to cry for help. But she dared not take the risk. Even as the two on the edge of the bowl withdrew from sight one of the campers rose and snatched to a little grove where the ponies were tethered. The distance was too far to make sure, but something in the gait made the girl sure that the man was Curly. Her hands went out to him in a piteous little gesture of appeal.

She was right. It was Curly. He was thinking of her at that moment despairingly, but no bell of warning rang within to tell him she was so near and in such fearful need of him.

Twice during the morning did the refugee attempt to slip down into the parched desert that stretched toward Sonora and safety. But the cordon set about him was drawn too close. Each time a loose-seated rider lounging in the saddle with a rifle in his hands drove them back. The second attempt was almost disastrous, for the convict was seen. The hum of a bullet whistled past his ears as he and his prisoner drew back into the chaparral and from thence won back to cover.

Kate, drooping with fatigue, saw that fear rode Blackwell heavily. He was trapped and he knew that by the Arizona code his life was forfeit and would be exacted of him should he be taken. He had not the hardhood to game it out in silence, but whined complaints, promises and threats. He tried to curry favor with her, to work upon her pity, even while his furtive glances told her that he was wondering whether he would have a better chance if he sacrificed her life.

From gulch to arroyo, from rock-cover to pineclad hillside he was driven in his attempts to break the narrowing circle of grim hunters that hemmed him. And with each failure, with every passing hour, the terror in him mounted. He would have welcomed life imprisonment, would have sold the last vestige of manhood to save the worthless life that would soon be snuffed out unless he could evade his hunters till night and in the darkness break through the line.

He knew now that it had been a fatal mistake to bring the girl with him. He might have evaded Bolt's posse, but now every man within fifty miles was on the lookout for him. His rage turned against Kate because of it. Yet even in those black outbursts he felt that he must cling to her as his only hope of saving himself. He had made another mistake in lighting a campfire during the morning. Any fool ought to have known that the smoke would draw his hunters as the smell of carrion does a buzzard.

Now he made a third error. Doubling back over an open stretch of hillside, he was seen again and forced into the first pocket that opened. It proved to be a blind gulch, one offering no exit at the upper end but a stiff rock climb to a bluff above.

He whipped off his coat and gave it to Kate.

"Put it on, Quick!"

Surprised, she slipped it on.

"Now ride back out and cut along the edge of the hill. You've got time to make it all right before they close in if you travel fast. Stop once—just once—and I'll drop you in your tracks. Now, go!"

She saw his object in a flash. Wearing his gray felt hat and his coat, the pursuers would mistake her for him. They would follow her—perhaps shoot her down. Anyhow, it would be a diversion to draw them from him. Meanwhile he would climb the cliff and slip away unnoticed.

The danger of what she had to do stood out quite clearly, but as a chance to get away from him she welcomed it gladly. From the lip of the gulch she swung abruptly to the right. Her horse stumbled and went down just as a bullet flew over her head. Before she was free of the stirrups strong hands pinned her shoulders to the ground. She heard a glad, startled cry. The rough hands became immediately gentle. Then things grew black. The last she remembered was that the mountains were dancing up and down in an odd fashion.

Her eyes opened to see Curly. She was in his arms and his face was broken with emotions of love and tenderness.

"You're not hurt?" he implored.

"No."

"He didn't—mistreat you?" His voice was trembling as he whispered it.

"No—no."

And at that she broke down. A deep sob shook her body—and another. She buried her head on his shoulder and wept.

Without losing an instant the convict set himself at the climb. His haste, the swift glances shot behind him, the appalling dread that made his nerves ragged, delayed his speed by dissipating the singleness of his energy. His face and hands were torn with catclaw, his knees bruised by a

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