



CROOKED TRAILS AND STRAIGHT by William MacLeod Raine

CHAPTER V. Bad Medicine.

The house at the horse ranch was a long, low I-shaped adobe structure. Two men were seated on the porch playing seven up. One was Bad Bill, the other Blackwell. At sight of Curly they gave up their game.

ress in wearing him from his loyalty to Stone. The latter was a hero to him, and gradually he was filling him with wrong ideas, encouraging him the while to drink a great deal. That the man had some definite purpose Curly was sure. What it was, he meant to find out.

Because he could not persuade him to join in their drinking bouts, Stone nicknamed Curly the good bad man.



Curly Lashed Out Hard With His Left.

"Hello, kid! Where did you drop from?" Cranston asked. A muscle twitched in Flandrau's cheek. "They got Mac. Ran us down near the Circle C. Mac opened fire. They—killed him."

"How come you here? Did you escape?" "Nep. Friends dug up bail. Say, Soapy has been telling me that the Cullison kid is up here. I reckon we better not say anything about my mixup with his folks. I'm not looking for any trouble with him."

Curly studied the characters of those present. Bill he knew already fairly well as a tough nut to crack, game to the core, and staunch to his friends. Blackwell was a bad lot, treacherous, vindictive, slippery as an eel. Even his confederates did not trust him greatly. But it was Soapy and young Cullison that interested Flandrau most. Sam was at an impressionable age, inclined to be led by any man whom he admired. Curly knew that he could gain no influence over him by preaching. He had to live the rough-and-tumble life of these men who dwelt beyond the pale of the law, to excel them at the very things of which they boasted. But in one respect he held himself apart. While he was at the horse ranch he did not touch a drop of liquor.

Laura London's letter was not delivered until the second day, for though she had not told her messenger to give it to Sam when he was alone, Curly guessed this would be better. Sam ran over his letter two or three times. It was such a message as any brave-hearted, impulsive girl might send to the man she loved when he seemed to her to walk in danger. Cullison loved her for the interest she took in him, even while he ridiculed her fears.

As they rode back to the ranch, Curly mentioned that he had seen Sam's people a day or two before. Cullison asked no questions, but he listened intently while the other told the story of his first rustling and of how Miss Kate and her father had stood by him in his trouble.

"If I had folks like you have, the salt of the earth, and they were worrying their hearts out about me, seems to me I'd quit belling around and go back to them," Curly concluded. "The old man sent you to tell me that, did he?" Hard and bitter was the voice of the young man.

"No, he didn't. He doesn't know I'm here. But he and your sister have done more for me than I ever can pay. That's why I'm telling you this." Sam answered gruffly, as a man does when he is moved. "Much obliged, Curly, but I reckon I can look out for myself."

Blackwell picked on the youth to be the butt of his coarse pleasantries. Day after day he pointed his jeers at Curly, who continued to grin as if he did not care. When the worm turned, it happened that they were all sitting on the porch. Curly was sewing a broken stirrup leather. Blackwell had a quilt in his hand, and from time to time flung it at the back of his victim. Twice the lash stung, not hard, but with pepper enough to hurt. Each time the young man asked him to stop.

Blackwell snapped the quilt once too often. When he picked himself out of the dust five seconds later, he was the maddest man in Arizona. Like a bull he lowered his head and rushed. Curly side-stepped and lashed out hard with his left. It was a sledge-hammer blow, with no rules except to hit the other man often and hard. Curly watched his chance, dodged a wild swing and threw himself forward hand with his shoulder against the chest of the convict. The man staggered back, tripped on the lowest step of the porch and went down hard. The fall knocked the breath out of him.

"Had enough?" demanded Curly. For answer Blackwell bit Flandrau's thumb savagely. "Since you like it so well, have another taste." Curly, now thoroughly angry, sent a short-arm jolt to the mouth. The man underneath tried to throw him off, but Flandrau's fingers found his hairy throat and tightened. "You're killing me!" the convict gasped.

"Enough?" "Yes." Curly stepped back quickly, ready either for a knife or a gunplay. Blackwell got to his feet and went into the house, swearing to get even. His face was livid with fury. "You wouldn't think a little thing like a whaling given fair and square would make a man hold a grudge. My system has absorbed as-to-real without doing it any harm." Sam stooped to inspect a rapidly discoloring eye. "Say, Curly, he hung a peach of a lamp on you."

Soapy made no comment in words, but he looked at Flandrau with a new respect. For the first time a doubt as to the wisdom of letting him stay at the ranch crossed his mind. His suspicion was justified. Curly had been living on the edge of a secret for weeks. Mystery was in the air. More than once he had turned a corner to find the other four whispering over something. Occasionally a man had ridden into the yard late at night for a private talk with Stone, and Curly was morally certain that the man was the little cowpuncher Dutch of the Circle C.

Through it all Curly wore a manner of open confidence. But all the time his brain was busy with questions. What were they up to? What was it they had planned? Stone and Blackwell rode away one morning. To Curly the word was given that they were going to Mesa. Four days later Soapy returned alone. Late had found a job, he said. "That a paper sticking out of your pocket?" Flandrau asked. Soapy, still astride his horse, tossed the Saguache Sentinel to him as he turned toward the stable. Caught between the folds of the pa-

per was a railroad time table. It was a schedule of the trains of the Texas, Arizona & Pacific for July. Curly turned the pages idly till a penciled marking caught his eye. Under Number 4's time was scrawled, just below Saguache, the words Tin Cup, and opposite them the figures 10:10. The express was due to leave Saguache at 9:57 in the evening. From there it pushed up to the divide and slid down with air brakes set to Tin Cup three thousand feet lower. Soapy could not want to catch the train fifteen miles the other side of Saguache. But this note on the margin showed that he was interested in the time it reached the water tank. There must be a reason for it.

Flandrau's doubt had been converted into a lively suspicion. Presently he took a gun and strolled off to shoot birds. What he really wanted was to be alone that he could think the matter over. Coming home in the dusk, he saw Stone and young Cullison with their heads together down by the corral. Curly sat down on a rock and watched them, himself unobserved. They appeared to be rehearsing some kind of a scene, of which Soapy was stage director.

The man on the rock smiled grimly. "They're having a quarrel, looks like. . . Now the kid's telling Soapy to go to Guinea, and Soapy's pawing around mad as a bull moose. It's all a play. They don't mean it. But why?" Curly's mind was so full of guesses that his poker was not up to par that night. About daylight he began to see his way into the maze. His first gleam of light was when a row started between Soapy and Cullison. Before anyone could say a word to stop them they were going through with that identical corral quarrel.

Flandrau knew now that they had been preparing it for his benefit. Cranston chipped in against Sam and, to keep up appearances, Curly heckled the boy. The quarrel grew furious. At last Sam drove his fist down on the table and said he was through with the outfit and was going back to Saguache. "Yo tambien," agreed Curly. "Not that I've got anything against the horse ranch. That ain't it. But I'm sure pining for to bust the bank at Bronson's. I've got forty plunks burning my jeans. I've got to separate myself from it or make my roll a thousand."

The end of it was that both Sam and Curly went down to the corral and saddled their ponies. To the last the conspirators played up to their parts. According to program, Sam sulked for the first few miles of their journey. But before they reached the Bar 60 he grew sunny again. "I'm going to have a talk with Laura while I'm so near," he explained. "You drift in. . . just happen along, you know. I'll stay in the scrub pines up here. If the old man is absent scenery, you wave your ban-



"I'll Stay in the Scrub Pines Up Here."

danna real indignations. If he is at home give Laura the tip and she'll know where to find me." The owner of the ranch, as it happened, was cutting trail over by Agua Caliente. "Do you want to see him very bad, Mr. Flandrau?" asked Miss Laura demurely. "No, I can't say I've lost Mr. London."

"You inquired for him." "Hump! That's different. When I used to come home from the swimming hole contrary to orders I used to ask where dad was, but I didn't want to see him." "I see. Did you just come down from the horse ranch?" "You've guessed right." "Then I am sorry I can't ask you to 'tight. Dad's orders." "Anything in those orders about you meeting one of the lads from the horse ranch up on the hillside where it is neutral ground?" "Did Sam come with you?" she cried. "He's here. Oh, I know he's here."

"What do I get for bringing good news?" "I didn't say it was good news." "Sho! Your big eyes are shouting it." "Was that the news from the horse ranch?" "That's part of it, but there is more. Sam and Curly are on their way to Saguache to spend the Fourth of July. Sam is going for another reason, but I'm not sure yet what it is. There's something doing I don't save, some big deal on foot that's not on the level. Sam is in it up to the hocks. He is supposed to be quilting Soapy's outfit for good. But I know better." White to the lips, she faced him bravely. "What sort of trouble is he

leading Sam into?" "I've got a kind of notion. But it won't bear talking about yet. Don't tell him what I've told you, unless you want to spoil my chance of helping him." "I won't," she promised; then added, with quick eagerness: "Maybe I can help you. I'm going down to Saguache to visit on the Fourth." "I'll look you up. Trouble is that Sam is bent on ruining himself. Seems to me you'd better be his best friend. If we could show him different things might work out all right."

While she climbed the hill to Sam, Curly watered his horse and smoked a cigarette. He was not hired to chaperone lovers. Therefore, it took him three-quarters of an hour to reach the scrub pine belt on the edge of the park. At once he saw that they had been having a quarrel. The girl's eyes were red, and she was still dabbing at them with her handkerchief when he came whistling along. Sam looked discouraged, but stubborn. Very plainly they had been disagreeing about his line of conduct.

The two young men took the trail again. About noon the next day they reached Saguache. After they had eaten, Curly strolled off by himself to the depot. "Gimme a ticket for Tin Cup for this evening. I want to go by the express," he told the agent. The man looked at him and grinned. "You're so darned active, maybe you could get off No. 4 when she is fogging along sixty miles per. But most folks couldn't, not with any comfort." "Meaning that the flyer 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 marked the time of its arrival there? He was beginning 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 there, but waiting for him was a boy with a note for the gentleman in No. 311. "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 Chalkey's place soon as you get this. There'll be 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." Cullison 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 sprang the feeble-minded jest on him. "Blonde or brunette?" "I'm no lady's man," Sam protested, content to let the other follow a wrong scent.

"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 Chalkey'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 would not leave now until he had found out what he wanted to know.

(To be Continued.) BLANDS GET MESSAGES One Correspondent Would Hang Father of Thirty-four Children. Since nation-wide publicity has been given to the fact that Reuben Bland, of Robersonville, Beaufort county, N. C., was the proud father of 34 children, Mr. and Mrs. Bland have been deluged with letters from persons all over the United States and Canada. The letters are from both women and men. Excerpts from a few of the letters follow: A man in Ohio writes: "I read the story about your large family aloud to my wife. 'There's a man who ought to be given a medal' I told her. 'There's a man who ought to be hanged' she retorted." A writer in Oregon sent this: "Reuben, Reuben, I am thinking, you are quite a nifty man. To your health I am drinking. You have done what few men can." From Navarre, Ohio, Mr. Bland received this: "I'm father of eight children, and I have an awful time keeping them in food and clothing. I've worried a lot, but since reading about your big family, I realize that I'm a lucky guy."

TO RECEIVE SMALLER PAY

Moving Picture Stars Will Work for Less Money This Year. The day of fabulous salaries for movie stars, of extravagant productions of over-paid directors and executives is at an end, the chiefs of the great Los Angeles film colony agreed recently, relates a Los Angeles dispatch. The last few months have seen a gradual change in the movie business, as in other lines, due to the general business conditions. As a result the movie chiefs have agreed that during 1921:

Fewer stars will twinkle. Fewer productions will be released. Ink will be conserved in writing salaries of screen favorites, as the figures will not be so large. Thousands of cinema actors have been thrown out of work. There has been a wholesale slashing of wages of those retained.

Decrease in the attendance at moving picture houses has been the one big cause of the upheaval. Marshall Nilan, producer and head of his own organization, expressed the opinion that the situation was only temporary. "While it is to be regretted from the viewpoint of the players, it is a healthy condition for the industry as a whole," he said. Many movie organizations have laid off practically their entire staffs, Neilan said and salaries have been reduced. "Those salaries which have been inflated must be reduced," was the statement of D. R. Fineman, vice president and general manager of the Katherine MacDonald Pictures company. Sol Lesser, western representative for the Associated First National Exhibitors advocated fewer and better pictures.

"Where twelve pictures were produced in other years, but three or four will be produced in 1921," said Lesser. Production standards have reached the point where more time and attention to detail are necessary to meet demands of motion picture followers. The day of extravagance and wasteful production has passed. There is plenty of room in the industry for earnest workers and the only ones to suffer will be the incompetent and the lazy." Lesser said that the directors will go in for big productions with hundreds in the casts. He is now working on a production in which 2,000 persons appear.

HELPED TO FREEDOM

Big Whale Stranded on Isle of Palms Shoved Off by Sportsmen. Off the point at the eastern end of the Isle of Palms Sunday afternoon a group of Charleston men liberated a stranded whale after considerable difficulty, relates the Charleston News and Courier. The whale, of the black-fish variety, was stranded on the beach and its fins were bleeding from its own desperate efforts to get free. It had evidently been cast up at high water and at the time its liberators appeared it was well up on the beach. The liberating party included Messrs.

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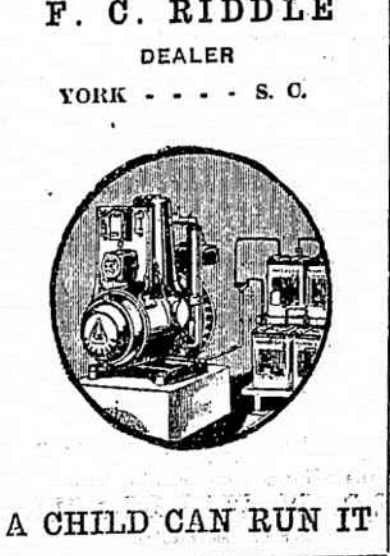
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A CHILD CAN RUN IT.

O. Harleston Lesesne, Horace Rivers, Edwin S. Motte, Jr., Jennings Porter, Ashley Halsay, Henry Portwig, Dr. Ralph V. Kennedy and Dr. C. Bunting Colson. Mr. Portwig lives on the eastern end of the Isle of Palms. It appears that the whale, which was somewhat more than sixteen feet in length, was cast up Friday night. Mr. Portwig believed that it was dead and curiosity caused it to be freed from its plight.

By means of a stout plank, the whale was shoved into deeper water. It too; the concerted efforts of the men to budge the creature. Once in water deep enough to float it the whale began to swim about in a circular fashion, apparently being unable to control its direction. Unable to head the whale out to sea, the party stopped for luncheon. Later, the whale having become stranded again, the party considered the feasibility of killing it and towing

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