

# Crooked Trails and Straight

By

William MacLeod Raine

Copyright by G. W. Dillingham Company

## 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 Saguahe, 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 of himself and been wounded. The man shot is Luck Cullison.

## CHAPTER II.

## At the End of the Road.

Curly's wooden face told nothing of what he was thinking. The first article of the creed of the frontier is to be game. Good or bad, the last test of a man is the way he takes his medicine. So now young Flandrau ate his dinner with a hearty appetite, smoked cigarettes impassively, and occasionally chatted with his guards casually and as a matter of course. Deep within him was a terrible feeling of sickness at the disaster that had overwhelmed him, but he did not intend to play the quitter.

As the day began to wear out two riders from the Bar Double M reached the ranch and were brought in to identify him as the horse thief. The two were Maloney and Kite Bonfils, neither of them friends of the young rustler. The foreman in particular was a wet blanket to his chances.

"You've got the right man all right," he said to Buck without answering Flandrau's cool nod of recognition.

"What sort of a reputation has he got?" Buck asked, lowering his voice a little.

Kite did not take the trouble to lower his. "Bad. Always been a tough character. Friend of Bad Bill Cranston and Soapy Stone."

"I don't know anything against the kid, barring that he's been a little wild," Maloney testified. "And I reckon we ain't any of us prize Sunday school winners for that matter."

As Buck turned to leave the bunkhouse the boy touched him on the arm.

"How about Cullison?" he asked, very low.

But Buck would not have it that way. "What about him?" he demanded out loud, his voice grating like steel when it grinds.

"Is he—how is he doing?"

"What's eatin' you? Ain't he dying fast enough to suit you?"

Flandrau shrank from the cruel words, as a schoolboy does from his teacher when he jumps at him with a cane.

It was then that Maloney made a friend of the young man for life. He let a hand drop carelessly on Curly's shoulder and looked at him with a friendly smile in his eyes, just as if he knew that this was no wolf but a poor dog up against it hard.

"Doc thinks he'll make it all right."

But there were times when Curly wondered whether it would make any difference to him whether Cullison got well or not. Something immediate was in the air. Public opinion was sifting down to a decision. Most of these men were up to the average for the milk of human kindness. They were the squarest citizens in Arizona. But Flandrau knew they would snuff out his life just the same if they decided it was best. Afterward they might regret it, but that would not help him.

Darkness came, and the lamps were lit. Again Curly ate and smoked and chatted a little with his captors. But as he sat there hour after hour, feeling death creep closer every minute, cold shivers ran up and down his spine.

They began to question him, at first casually and carelessly, so it seemed to Curly. But presently he discerned a drift in the talk. They were trying to find out who had been his partners in the rustling.

"And I reckon Soapy and Bad Bill left you lads at Saguahe to hold the sack," Buck suggested sympathetically.

Curly grew wary. He did not intend to betray his accomplices. "Wrong guess. Soapy and Bad Bill weren't in this deal," he answered easily.

The foreman of the Bar Double M interrupted impatiently, tired of trying to pump out the information by finesse. "You've got to speak, Flandrau. You've got to tell us who was engineering this theft. Understand?"

The young rustler looked at the grim frowning face and his heart sank.

"Out with it," ordered Buck.

"Oh, I expect I'll keep that under my hat," Curly told them lightly.

They were crowded about him in a half circle, nearly a score of hard leather-faced plainmen. Some of them were riders of the Circle C outfit. Others had ridden over from neighboring ranches. All of them plainly meant business.

"Think again, Curly," advised Sweeney again. "The boys ain't trifling about this thing. They mean to find out who was in the rustling of the Bar Double M stock."

"Not through me, they won't."

"Through you. And right now."

A dozen times during the evening Curly had crushed down the desire to beg for mercy, to cry out desperately for them to let him off. He had kept telling himself not to show yellow, that it would not last long. Now the fear of breaking down sloughed from his soul. He rose from the bed and looked round at the brown faces circled about him in the shine of the lamps.

"I'll not tell you a thing—not a thing."

He stood there chalk-faced, his lips so dry that he had to keep moistening them with the tip of his tongue.

Dutch had a new rope in his hand with a loop at one end. He tossed it over the boy's head and drew it taut. Two or three of the faces in the circle were almost as bloodless as that of the prisoner, but they were set to see the thing out.

"Will you tell now?" Bonfils asked.

Curly met him eye to eye. "No."

"Come along, then."

One of the men caught his arm at the place where he had been wounded. The rustler flinched.

"Careful, Buck. Don't you see you're hurting his bad arm?" Sweeney said sharply.

"I didn't aim to hurt him," Buck defended himself.

Curly's senses had never been more alert. He noticed that Buck had on a red necktie that had got loose from his shirt and climbed up his neck. It had black polka dots and was badly frayed. Sweeney was chewing tobacco.

He would have that chew in his mouth after they had finished what they were going to do.

"Ain't he the gamest ever?" some one whispered.

The rustler heard the words and they braced him as a drink of whisky does a man who has been on a bad spree.

"Better do it at the cottonwoods down by the creek," Buck told Bonfils in a low voice.

The foreman of the Bar Double M moved his head in assent. "All right. Let's get it over quick as we can."

A sound of flying feet came from outside. Some one smothered an oath of surprise. Kate Cullison stood in the doorway, all out of breath and panting.

"What is it?"

They had not a word to say for themselves. In that room were some of the most callous hearts in the territory. Not one man in a million could have fazed them, but this slender girl dumfounded them. Her gaze settled on Buck. His wandered for help to Sweeney, to Jake, to Kite Bonfils.

"Now look-a-here, Miss Kate," Sweeney began to explain.

But she swept his remonstrance aside.

"No—No—No!" Her voice gathered strength with each repetition of the

word. "I won't have it. What are you thinking about?"

"He's a rustler, Miss Kate; belongs to Soapy Stone's outfit," Sweeney answered the girl.

"Can you prove it?"

"We got him double cinched."

"Then let the law put him in prison."

"He shot yore paw," Buck reminded her.

"Is that why you're doing it?"

"Yes'm," and "That's why," they nodded.

Like a flash she took advantage of their admission. "Then I've got more against him than you have, and I say turn him over to the law."

Kite pushed forward, rough and overhearing. "Now see here. We know what we're doing and we know why we're doing it. This ain't any business for a girl to mix in. You go back to the house and nurse your father that man shot."

"So it isn't the kind of business for a girl," she answered scornfully. "It's work for a man, isn't it? No, not for one. For nine—eleven—thirteen—seventeen big brave strong men to hang one poor wounded boy."

At that an amused laugh rippled out. It came from Maloney. He was leaning against the door jamb with his hands in his pockets. Nobody had noticed him before. He had come in after the girl. When Curly came to think it over later, if he had been given three guesses as to who had told Kate Cullison what was on the program he would have guessed Maloney each time.

"Now that you've relieved your mind proper, Miss Cullison, I expect

any of the boys will be glad to escort you back to the house," Kite suggested with an acid smile.

"What have you got to do with this?" she flamed. "Our boys took him. They brought him here as their prisoner. Do you think we'll let you come over into this county and dictate everything we do?"

"I've got a notion tucked away that you're trying to do the dictating your own self," the Bar Double M man contradicted.

"I'm not. But I won't stand by while you get these boys to do murder."

Kite laughed sarcastically. "You hear your boss, boys."

"You've had yore say now, Miss Kate. I reckon you better say good-night," advised Buck.

She handed Buck and his friends her compliments in a swift flow of feminine ferocity.

Maloney pushed into the circle. "She's dead right, boys. There's nothing to this lynching game. He's only a kid."

The tide of opinion was shifting. Those who had been worked up to the lynching by the arguments of Bonfils began to resent his activity. Flandrau was their prisoner, wasn't he? No use going off half-cocked. Some of them were discovering that they were not half so anxious to hang him as they had supposed.

The girl turned to her friends and neighbors. "I oughtn't to have talked to you that way, but you know how worried I am about dad," she apologized with a catch in her breath. "I'm sure you didn't think or you would never have done anything to trouble me more just now. You know I didn't half mean it." She looked from one to another, her eyes shiny with tears.

"I know that no braver or kinder men live than you. Why, you're my folks. I've been brought up among you. And so you've got to forgive me."

Some said "Sure," others told her to forget it, and one grass widower drew a laugh by saying that her little spiel reminded him of happier days.

"I'm so glad you've changed your minds. I knew you would when you thought it over," she told them chat-tily and confidentially.

She was taking their assent for granted. Now she waited and gave them a chance to chorus their agreement. None of them spoke except Maloney. Most of them were with her in sympathy but none wanted to be first in giving way.

She looked around from one to another, still cheerful and sure of her ground apparently. Two steps brought her directly in front of one. She caught him by the lapels of his coat and looked straight into his eyes. "You have changed your mind, haven't you, Jake?"

The big Missourian twisted his hat in embarrassment.

"Sure. Whatever's right suits me."

"Well, you know what is right, don't you?"

"I expect."

"Then you won't hurt this man, our prisoner?"

"I haven't a thing against him if you haven't."

"Then you won't hurt him? You won't stand by and let the other boys do it?"

"Now, Miss Kate—"

She burst into sudden tears. "I thought you were my friend, but now I'm in trouble—you think only of making it worse."

Jake gave in immediately and the rest followed like a flock of sheep. Two or three of the promises came hard, but she did not stop till each one individually had pledged himself.

The young man she had saved could not keep his eyes from her. He would have liked to kneel down and kiss the edge of her dress and put his curly head in the dust before her. The ice in his heart had melted in the warmth of a great emotion. She was standing close to him talking to Buck when he spoke in a low voice.

"I reckon I can't tell you—how much I'm obliged to you, miss."

She drew back quickly as if he had been a snake about to strike, her hand instinctively gathering her skirts so that they would not brush against him.

"I don't want your thanks," she told him, and her voice was like the drench of an icy wave.

But when she saw the hurt in his eyes she hesitated. Perhaps she guessed that he was human after all, for an impulse carried her forward to take the rope from his neck. While his heart beat twice her soft fingers touched his throat and grazed his cheek. Then she turned and was gone from the room.

It was a long time before the bunkhouse quieted. Curly, faint with weariness, lay down and tried to sleep. His arm was aching a good deal and he felt feverish. The men of the Circle C and their guests sat down and argued the whole thing over. But after a time the doctor came in and had the patient carried to the house. He was put in a good clean bed and his arm dressed again.

The doctor brought him good news. "Cullison is doing fine. He ought to make it all right."

Curly thought about the girl who had fought for his life.

"You'll not let him die, Doc," he begged.

"He's too tough for that, Luck Cullison is."

Presently Doctor Brown gave him a sleeping powder and left him. Soon after that Curly fell asleep and dreamed about a slim dark girl with fine long-lashed eyes that could be both tender and ferocious.

CHAPTER III.

The Cullisons, and Laura London.

Curly was awakened by the sound

of the cook beating the call to breakfast on a triangle. Buck was standing beside the bed.

"How're they coming this glad morning, son?" he inquired with a grin.

"Fine and dandy," grinned back Flandrau. "How is Cullison?"

"Good as the wheat, doc says. Mighty lucky for Mr. C. Flandrau that he is. Say, I'm to be yore valley and help you into them clothes. Git a wiggle on you."

Buck escorted his prisoner over to the ranch messhouse. The others had finished breakfast but Maloney was still eating. His mouth was full of hot cakes, but he nodded across at Curly in a casual friendly way.

"How's the villain in the play this morning?" he inquired.

Twenty-one usually looks on the cheerful side of life. Curly had forgotten for the moment about what had happened to his friend Mac. He did not remember that he was in the shadow of a penitentiary sentence. The sun was shining out of a deep blue sky. The vigor of youth flowed through his veins. He was hungry and a good breakfast was before him. For the present these were enough.

"Me, I'm feeling a heap better than I was last night," he admitted.

"Come pretty near losing you out of the cast, didn't we?"

"Might a-turned out that way if the stage manager had not remembered the right cue in time."

The heart of the prisoner went out to this man who was reaching a hand to him in his trouble. He had always known that Maloney was true and steady as a snubbing post, but he had not looked for any kindness from him.

"Kite just got a telephone message from Saguahe," the Bar Double M man went on easily. "Your friends that bought the rustled stock didn't get away with the goods. Seems they stumbled into a bunch of rurales unexpected and had to pull their freight sudden."

"Make their getaway?" Curly inquired as indifferently as he could. But in spite of himself a note of eagerness crept into his voice. For if the men had escaped that would be two less witnesses against him.

"Yep."

"Too bad. If they hadn't I could have proved by them I was not one of the men who sold them the stock," Flandrau replied.

"Like h— you could," Buck snorted, then grinned at his prisoner in a shame-faced way. "You're a good one, son."

Jake stuck his head in at the door. "Buck, you're needed to help with them two-year-olds. The old man wants

to have a talk with the rustler. Doc says he may. Maloney, will you take him up to the house?"

Maloney had once ridden for the Circle C and was friendly with all the men on the place. He nodded. "Sure."

A Mexican woman let them into the chamber where the wounded man lay. Kate was bending over the bed rearranging the pillows, but she looked up quickly when the two men entered. Her eyes were still gentle with the love that had been shining down from them upon her father.

Cullison spoke. "Sit down, Dick." And to his prisoner: "You too."

Flandrau saw close at hand for the first time the man who had been Arizona's most famous fighting sheriff. Luck Cullison was well-built and of medium height, of a dark complexion, clean shaven, wiry and muscular. Already past fifty, he looked not a day more than forty. One glance was enough to tell Curly the kind of man this was. The power of him found expression in the gray steel-chilled eyes that bored into the young outlaw.

"You have begun early, young fellow," he said quietly. "But never mind

that. I don't ask you to convict yourself. I sent for you to tell you I don't blame you for this." He touched the wound

"Different with your boys, sir."

"So the boys are a little excited, are they?"

"They were last night, anyhow."

Curly answered, with a glimmer of a smile.

Cullison looked quickly at Maloney and then at his daughter.

"I'll listen to what you've been hiding from me," he told them.

"Oh, the boys had notions. Miss Kate argued with them and they saw things different," the Bar Double M rider explained.

But Cullison would not let it go at that. He made them tell him the whole story. When Curly and Maloney had finished he buried his daughter's little hand in his big brown fist. His eyes were dancing with pride, but he gave her not a word of spoken praise.

Kate spoke to Curly. "Father wants me to tell you that we don't blame you for shooting at him. We understand just how it was. Your friend got excited and shot as soon as he saw he was surrounded. We are both very sorry he was killed. Father could not stop the boys in time. Perhaps you remember that he tried to get you to surrender."

The rustler nodded. "Yes, I heard him holler to me to put my gun down, but the others blazed away at me."

"And so you naturally defended yourself. Father wants it made clear that he feels you could have done nothing else."

"Much obliged. I've been sorry ever since I hit him, and not only on my own account."

"Then none of us need to hold hard feelings." The girl looked at her father, who answered her appeal with a grim nod, and then she turned again to the young rustler a little timidly. "I wonder if you would mind if I asked you a question."

"You've earned the right to ask as many as you like."

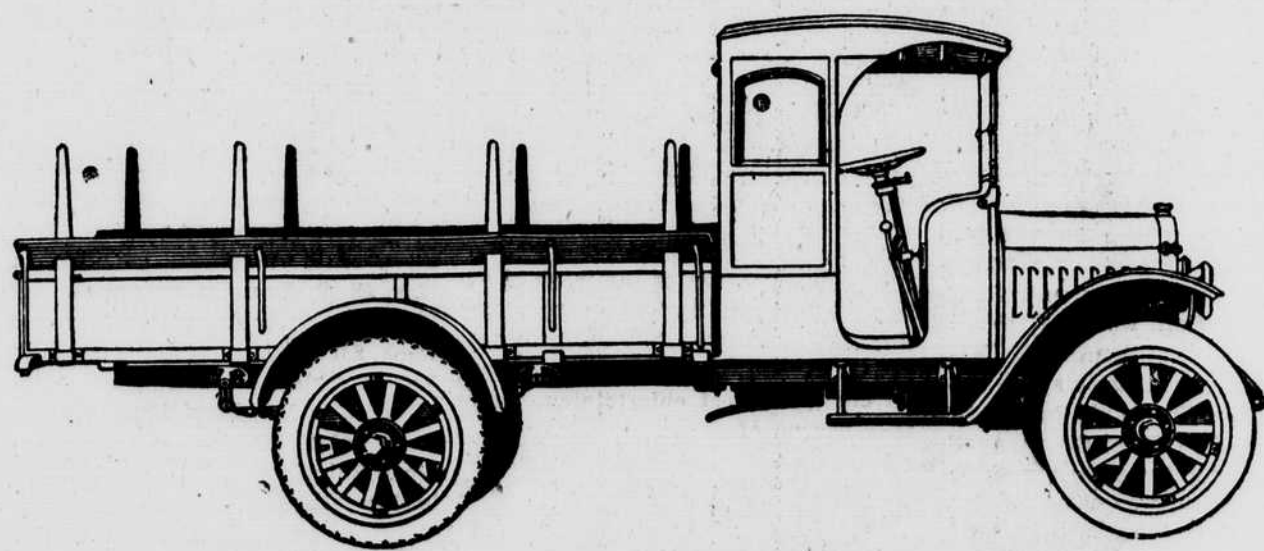
"It's about— We have been told you know the man they call Soapy Stone. Is that true?"

Flandrau's eyes took on a stony look. It was as if something had sponged all the boyishness from his face. Still trying to get him to give away his partners in the rustling, were they? Well, he would show them he could take his medicine without squealing.

"Your boys were asking that question about Soapy last night. They had a rope round my neck at the time. Nothing unfriendly in the matter, of course. Just a casual interest in my doings."

(To be continued)

## THE MAXWELL TRUCK



### HE'S FAST ON HIS "FEET"

He responds with spirit to any request. He is up and away in a jiffy, gets over ground faster than bigger fellows, who struggle under the heavy burdens of their own dead weight.

He turns a corner quickly, picks his way in and out of traffic, fairly runs away from most any other carrier when a street's thick with teams and motors.

He therefore makes more trips, more miles in a day, covers more territory, delivers or collects more parcels and freight.

That's why some call him "Speedy" Maxwell. He's there when it comes down to getting a thing done in a hurry.

He might just as well be called "Thrifty" Maxwell, for he's a penny counter, if you like.

He never uses food except when he is working for you and he is almost sure to make you a present of your own cost in one trip around the calendar.

For demonstration see

**Lillard and Ross Johnston**  
Agents for Little River County.