TANGLED TRAILS

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE
Author of "A Man Four-Square," "Gunsight Pass," etc.

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THIS BEGINS THE STORY

James Cunningham is rich and ruthless. He turns down the plea of a girl who has a claim on him and kicks out a man who says Cunningham owes him a share on a business deal. She is the sister of Wild Rose, a riding girl, who tells her sister's trouble to Kirby Lane, an understanding and chivalrous cowboy. Kirby takes up the matter with his two cousins, favored protegés of James Cunningham, who demand to know the name of the girl. When he goes to his uncle's apartment he finds the man chloroformed, bound and dead. On a table is a glove, one he had seen on Wild Rose. He takes it and makes his escape by the fire-escape, but is observed by a reporter, Morikawa, Cunningham's Japanese valet, disappears, adding a new sensation. Both Lane and Wild Rose are at the inquest. Lane is arrested for the murder, but released on bail. Rose goes to see the two cousins, and reveals she also had been in Cunningham's apartment the night of the murder. Jack and James Cunningham, nephews of the murdered man, send Lane to Dry Valley to look up a clue. He finds several, including a left-handed rancher, who had a bitter grudge against old Cunningham. The murder had been committed by a left-handed person. Back in Denver, with Cole Sanborn, a fellow cowpuncher, Lane discovers that Olson had roomed near his uncle's apartment the night of the murder. The dead body of the Jap valet who disappeared is also found. Meanwhile a valuable paper connected with the case disappears from James Cunningham's office.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

I say that she and you were in the rooms of Uncle James at 9:50 the evening he was killed

CHAPTER XXII

"Are You With Me or Against Me?"

MISS PHYLLIS HARRIMAN had breakfast earlier than usual. Her luxuriant blue-black hair had been dressed and she was debating the important question as to what gown she would wear. The business of her life was to make an effective carnal appeal, and she had a very sure sense of how to accomplish this.

A maid entered with a card, at which Miss Harriman glanced indolently. A smile twitched at the corners of her mouth, but it was not wholly one of amusement. In the dark eyes a hint of adventure sparked. Her pulses beat with a little glow of triumph. For this young woman was of the born coquettes. She could no more resist alluring an attractive man and playing with him to his subsequent mental discomfort than she could refrain from bridge drives and dinner dances. This Wild Man from Wyoming, so strong of stride, so quietly competent, whose sardonic glance had taken her in so directly and so keenly, was a foeman worthy of her weapons.

"Good gracious!" she murmured. "does he usually call in the middle of the night. I wonder? And does he really expect me to see him now?"

The maid waited. She had long ago discovered that Miss Phyllis did not always regulate her actions by her words.

"Take him into the red room and tell him I'll be down in a minute," Miss Harriman decided.

After which there was swift action in the lady's boudoir.

The bed room was scarcely more than a cozy alcove set off the main reception room, but it had a note of warmth, of friendly and seductive intimacy. Its walls whispered of tete-a-tetes, the cushions hinted at interesting secrets they were forever debarred from telling. In short, when Miss Harriman was present, it seemed, no less than the clothes she wore, an expression of her personality.

After a very few minutes Miss Phyllis sauntered into the room and gave her hand to the man who rose at her entrance. She was simply but expensively gowned. Her smile was warm for Kirby. It told him, with a touch of shy reluctance, that he was the one man in the world she would rather meet just now. He did not know that it would have carried the same message to any one of half a dozen men.

"I'm so glad you came to see me," she said, just as though she were in the habit of receiving young men at eleven in the morning. "Of course, I want to know you better. James thinks so much of you."

"And Jack," added Lane, smilingly.

"Oh, yes, Jack, too," she said, and laughed outright when their eyes met.

"I'm sure Jack's very fond of me. He can't help showing it occasionally."

"Jack's—impulsive," she explained. "But he's amenable to influence."

"Of the right sort. I'm sure he would be."

He found himself the object of a piquant, amused scrutiny under her long lashes. It came to him that this Paris-gowned, long-limbed young sylph was more than willing to let him become intrigued by her charms. But Kirby Lane had not called so early in the day to fall in love.

"I came to see you, Miss Harriman, about the case," he said. "My good name is involved. I must clear it. I want you to help me."

He saw a pulse of excitement flutter in her throat. It seemed to him that her eyes grew darker, as though some shadow of dread had fallen over them. The provocative smile vanished.

"How can I help you?" she asked. "If you would answer a few questions——"

"What questions?" All the softness had gone from her voice. It had become tense and sharp.

"Personal ones. About you and my uncle. You were engaged to him, were you not?"

"Yes."

"There wasn't any quarrel between you recently, was there?"

A flash of apprehension filled her eyes. Then, resolutely, she banished fear and called to her aid hauteur.

"There was not, though I quite fail to see how this can concern you, Mr. Lane."

"I don't want to distress you," he said gently. "Just now that question must seem to you a brutal one. Believe me, I don't want to hurt you."

Her eyes softened, grew wistful and appealing. "I'm sure you don't. You couldn't. It's all so—so dreadful to think about." There was a little catch in her throat as the voice broke. "Let's talk of something more cheerful. I want to forget it all."

"I'm sure you do. We all want to do that. The surest way to get it out of our minds is to solve the mystery and find out who is guilty. That's why I want you to tell me a few things to clear up my mind."

"But I don't know anything about it—nothing at all. Why should you come to me?"

"When did you last see my uncle alive?"

"What a dreadful question! It was—let me think—in the afternoon—the day before——"

"And you parted from him on the best of terms?"

"Of course."

He leaned toward her ever so little, his eyes level with hers and steadily fastened upon her. "That's the last time you saw him—until you went to his rooms at the Paradox the night he was killed?"

She had lifted her hand to pat into place an escaping tendril of hair. The hand remained lifted. The dark eyes froze with horror. They stared at him, as though held by some dreadful fascination. From her cheeks the color ebbed. Kirby thought she was going to faint.

But she did not. A low moan of despair escaped from the ashen lips. The lifted arm fell heavily to her lap.

Then Kirby discovered that the two in the red room had become three. Jack Cunningham was standing in the doorway.

His glance flashed to Lane accusingly. "What's up? What are you doing here?" he demanded abruptly.

The Wyoming man rose. "I've been asking Miss Harriman a question."

Who are you, anyhow? A man accused of killing my uncle, the man who found his valet dead and is suspected of that crime, too, a fellow who would be lying behind the bars now if my brother hadn't put up the money to save the family from disgrace. If we tell all we know, the police will grab you again double-quick. Yet you have the nerve to come here and make insinuations against the lady who is mourning my uncle's death. I've a good mind to phone for the police right now."

"Do," suggested Kirby, smiling. "Then we'll both tell what we know and perhaps things will clear up a bit."

It was a bluff pure and simple. He couldn't tell what he knew any more than his cousin could. The part played by Rose and Esther McLean in the story barred him from the luxury of truth-telling. Moreover, he had no real evidence to back his suspicions. But Jack did not know how strong the restraining influence was.

"I didn't say I was going to phone. I said I'd a jolly good mind to," Cunningham replied sulkily.

"I'd advise you not to start anything you can't finish, Jack. I'll give you one more piece of advice, too. Come clean with what you know. I'm goin' to find out, anyhow. Make up your mind to that. I'm goin' through with this job till it's done."

"You'll pull off your Sherlock Holmes stuff in jail, then, for I'm going to ask James to get off your bond," Jack retorted vindictively.

"As you please about that," Lane said quietly.

"He'll choose between you and me. I'll be damned if I'll stand for his keeping a man out of jail to try to fasten on me a murder I didn't do."

"I haven't said you did it. What I say is that you and Miss Harriman know somethin' an' are concealin' it. What is it? I'm not a fool. I don't think you killed Uncle any more than I did. But you an' Miss Harriman have a secret. Why don't you go to James an' make a clean breast of it? He'll tell you what to do."

"The devil he will! I tell you we haven't any secret. We weren't in uncle's rooms that night."

"Can you prove an alibi for the whole evening—both of you?" the range rider asked curtly.

"None of your business. We're not in the prisoner's dock. It's you that is likely to be there," Jack tossed out petulantly.

Phyllis Harriman had flung herself down to sob with her head in the pillows. But Kirby noticed that one small pink ear was in the open to take in the swift sentences passing between the men.

"I'm intendin' to make it my business," Lane said, his voice ominously quiet.

"You're laying up trouble for yourself," Jack warned blackly. "If you want me for an enemy you're going at this the right way."

"I'm not lookin' for enemies. What I want is the truth. You're concealin' it. We'll see if you can make it stick."

"We're not concealing a thing."

"Last call for you to show down your cards, Jack. Are you with me or against me?" asked Kirby.

"Against you, you meddling fool!" Cunningham burst out in a gust of fury. "Don't you meddle with my affairs, unless you want trouble right off the bat. I'm not going to have a Paul Pry nosing around and hinting slanders about me and Miss Harriman. What do you think I am? I'll protect my good name and this lady's if I have to do it with a gun. Don't forget that, Mr. Lane."

Kirby's steady gaze appraised him coolly. "You're excited an' talkin' foolishness. I'm not attackin' anybody's good name. I'm lookin' for the man who killed Uncle James. I'm expectin' to find him. If anybody stands in the way I'm liable to run against him."

The man from Twin Buttes bowed toward the black hair and pink ear of his hostess. He turned on his heel and walked from the room.

CHAPTER XXIII

Cousins Disagree

It was essential to Kirby's plans that he should be at liberty. If he should be locked up in prison even for a few days the threads that he had begun to untangle from the snarl known as the Cunningham mystery would again be enmeshed. He was not sure what action James would take at his brother's demand that he withdraw from the bond. But Lane had no desire to embarrass him by forcing the issue. He set about securing a new bond.

He was, ten minutes later, in the law offices of Irwin, Foster & Warren, attorneys who represented the cattle interests in Wyoming with which Kirby was identified. Foster, a stout, middle-aged man with only a few locks of gray hair left, heard what the rough rider had to say.

"I'll wire to Caldwell and to Norman as you suggest, Mr. Lane," he said. "If they give me instructions to stand back of you, I'll arrange a new bond as soon as possible."

"Will it take long? I can't afford to be tied up behind the bars right now."

"Not if I can get it accepted. I'll let you know at once."

Kirby rose. He had finished his business.

"Just a moment, Mr. Lane." Foster leaned back in his swivel-chair and looked out of the window. His eyes did not focus on any detail of the office building opposite. They had the far-away look which denotes a preoccupied mind. "Ever been to Golden?" he asked at last abruptly, swinging back in his seat and looking at his client.

"No. Why?"

"Golden is the Gretna Green of Denver, you know. When young people elope they go to Golden. When a couple gets married and doesn't want it known they choose Golden. Very convenient spot."

"I'm not figuring on gettin' married right now," the cattleman said, smiling.

"Still you might find a visit to the place interesting and useful. I was there on business a couple of weeks ago."

The eyes of the men fastened. Lane knew he was being given a hint that Foster did not want to put more directly.

"What are the interestin' points of the town?" asked the Twin Buttes man.

"Well, sir, there are several. Of course, there's the School of Mines, and the mountains right back of the town. Gold was discovered there somewhere about fifty-seven, I think. Used to be the capital of the territory before Denver found her feet."

"I'm rather busy."

"Wouldn't take you long to run over on the interurban." The lawyer began to gather toward him the papers upon which he had been working when the client was shown in. He added casually: "I found it quite amusing to look over the marriage licenses of the last month or two. Found the names there of some of our prominent citizens. Well, I'll call you up as soon as I know about the bond."

Lane was not entirely satisfied with what he had been told, but he knew that Foster had said all he meant to say. One thing stuck in his mind as the gist of the hint. The attorney was advising him to go to the courthouse and check up the marriage licenses.

He walked across to the Equitable Building and dropped in on his cousin James. Cunningham rose to meet him a bit stiffly. The cattleman knew that Jack had already been in to see him or had got him on the wire.

Kirby brushed through any embarrassment there might be and told frankly why he had come.

"I've had a sort of row with Jack. Under the circumstances I don't feel that I ought to let you stay on my bond. It might create ill-feelin' between you an' him. So I'm arrangin' to have some Wyoming friends put up whatever's required. You'll understand I haven't any bad feeling against you, or against him for that matter. You've been bully all through this thing, an' I'm certainly in your debt."

"What's the trouble between you about?" asked James.

"I've found out that he an' Miss Harriman were in Uncle James' rooms the night he was killed. I want them to come through an' tell what they know."

"How did you find that out?"

The eyes of the oil broker were hard as jade. They looked straight into those of his cousin.

"I can't tell you that exactly. Put two an' two together."

"You mean you guess they were there. You don't know it."

A warm, friendly smile lit the brown face of the rough rider. He wanted to remain on good terms with James if he could. "I don't know it in a legal sense. Morally, I'm convinced of it."

"Even though they deny it."

"Practically they admitted rather than denied."

"Do you think it was quite straight, Kirby, to go to Miss Harriman with such a trumped-up charge? I don't. I confess I'm surprised at you." In voice and expression James showed his disappointment.

"It isn't a trumped-up charge. I wanted to know the truth from her."

"Why didn't you go to Jack, then?"

"I didn't know at that time Jack was the man with her."

"You don't know it now. You don't know she was there. In point of fact the idea is ridiculous. You surely don't think for a moment that she had anything to do with Uncle James' death."

"No; not in the sense that she helped bring it about. But she knows somethin' she's hidin'."

"That's absurd. Your imagination is too active, Kirby."

"Can't agree with you." Lane met him eye to eye.

"Grant for the sake of argument that she was in uncle's room that night. Your friend Miss Rose McLean was there, too — by her own confession. When she came to Jack and me with her story, we respected it. We did not insist on knowing why she was there, and it was of her own free will she told us. Yet you go to our friend and distress her by implications that must shock and wound her. Was that generous? Was it even fair?"

The cattleman stood convicted at the bar of his own judgment. His cousins had been magnanimous to Esther and Rose, more so than he had been to Miss Harriman. Yet, even while he confessed fault, he felt uneasily that there was a justification he could not quite lay hold of and put into words.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, James. Perhaps I was wrong. But you want to remember that I wasn't askin' about what she knew with any idea of makin' it public or tellin' the police. I meant to keep it under my own hat to help run down a cold-blooded murderer."

"You can't want to run him down any more than we do—and in that 'we' I include Jack and Miss Harriman as well as myself," the older man answered gravely. "But I'm sure you're entirely wrong. Miss Harriman knows nothing about it. If she had she would have confided in us."

"Perhaps she has confided in Jack."

"Don't you think that obsession of yours is rather—well, unlikely, to put it mildly? Analyze it and you'll find you haven't a single substantial fact to base it on."

This was true. Yet Kirby's opinion was not changed. He still believed that Jack and Miss Harriman had been in his uncle's rooms just before Wild Rose had been there.

He returned to the subject of the bond. It seemed to him best, he said, in view of Jack's feeling, to get other bondsmen. He hoped James would not interpret this to mean that he felt less friendly toward him.

His cousin bowed, rather formally. "Just as you please. Would you like the matter arranged this afternoon?"

Lane looked at his watch. "I haven't heard from my new bondsmen yet. Besides, I want to go to Golden. Would tomorrow morning suit you?"

"I dare say." James stifled a yawn. "Did you say you were going to Golden?"

"Yes. Some one gave me a tip. I don't know what there's in it, but I thought I'd have a look at the marriage license registry."

Cunningham flashed a startled glance at him that asked a peremptory question. "Probably waste of time. I've been in the oil business too long to pay any attention to tips."

"Expect you're right, but I'll trot out there, anyhow. Never can tell."

"What do you expect to find among the marriage licenses?"

"Haven't the slightest idea. I'll tell you tomorrow what I do find."

James made one dry, ironic comment. "I rather think you have too much imagination for sleuthing. You let your wild fancies gallop away with you. If I were you I'd go back to bronco busting."

Kirby laughed. "Dare say you're right. I'll take your advice after we get the man we're after."

To be continued tomorrow

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