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 in a business deal. She is the sister of Wild Rose, a riding girl, who tells her sister's trouble to Kirby Lane, an upstanding and chivalrous cowboy. Kirby takes up the matter with Jack and James, his two cousins, favored protégés 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. The murder had been committed by a left-handed person. On a table is a glove, one he had seen on Wild Rose. Both Lane and Wild Rose are at the apartment also a woman whose photograph, signed "Phyllis," was in the dead man's room. Lane is arrested for the murder, but released on bail. Rose reveals she also had been in Cunningham's apartment the night of the murder. Still, the man thrown out of Cunningham's apartment, Jack and Phyllis, a society girl, to whom Cunningham had been engaged, are also known to have been in it the night of the murder. Lane and his cowboy chum, Stevenson, discover that Olson, a rancher, had been in a room near the apartment. The Jap valet is discovered dead. Esther, Rose's sister, disappears.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

YES. A girl at the house who works for the telephone company saw Esther get into an automobile a block and a half from the house. A man helped her in. I pretended to laugh and asked her what sort of a looking man he was. She said he was a live one, well-dressed and handsome. The car was a limousine."

"Good. Fits in with what I found out," Kirby said. "The bank was closed, but I got in the back door by pounding at it. The teller at the K-R window was still there, working at his accounts. Esther did not draw any money today or yesterday."

"Why do you say good?" Cole wanted to know. "Is it good for our li'l' friend to be in the power of this good-lookin' guy with the big car, an' her without a bean of her own? I don't get it.

"Who is the man? How come she to go with him? She sure had no notion of goin' when we was eatin' together an hour before."

"I don't see who he could be. She never spoke of such a man to me," Rose murmured, greatly troubled.

"I don't reckon she was very well acquainted with him," Lane said, shaking out his napkin.

The talk was suspended while he ladled the soup into the plates and the waiter served them. Not till the man's back was turned did Rose fling out her hot challenge to Kirby.

"Why would she go with a man she didn't know very well? Where would she be going with him?" The flame in her cheeks, the stab of her eyes, dared him to think lightly of her sister. It was in her temperament to face all slights with high spirit.

His smile reassured. "Mebbe she didn't know where she was goin'. That was his business. Let's work this out from the beginnin'."

Kirby passed Rose the crackers. She rejected them with a little gesture of impatience.

"I don't want to eat. I'm not hungry."

Lane's kind eyes met hers steadily. "But you must eat. You'll be of no help if you don't keep up your strength."

Rather than fight it out, she gave up.

"We know right off the reel Esther didn't plan this," he continued. "Before we knew the man was in it you felt it wasn't like her to run away alone, Rose, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"She hadn't drawn any money from her account. So she wasn't makin' any plans to go. The man worked it out an' then persuaded Esther. It's no surprise to me to find a Mr. Man in this thing. I'd begun to guess it before you told me. The question is, what man."

The girl's eyes jumped to his. She began to see what he was working toward. Cole, entirely in the dark, stirred uneasily. His mind was still busy with a possible love tangle.

"What man or men would benefit most if Esther disappeared for a time? We know of two it might help," the man from Twin Buttes went on.

"Your cousins!" she cried, almost in a whisper.

"Yes, if we've guessed rightly that Esther was married to Uncle James. That would make her his heir. With her in their hands and away from us, they would be in a position to drive a better bargain. They know that we're hot on the trail of the marriage. If they're kind to her—and no doubt they will be—they can get anything they want from her in the way of an agreement as to the property. Looks to me like the fine Italian hand of Cousin James. We know Jack wasn't the man. He was busy at Golden right then. Kinda leaves James in the spotlight, doesn't it?"

Rose drew a long, deep breath. "I'm so glad! I was afraid—thought maybe she would do something desperate. But if she's being looked after it's a lot better. We'll soon have her back. Until then they'll be good to her, won't they?"

"They'll treat her like a queen. Don't you see? That's their game. They don't want a lawsuit. They're playin' for a compromise."

Kirby leaned back and smiled expansively on his audience of two. He began to fancy himself tremendously as a detective.

CHAPTER XXVI
Cutting Trail

Kirby's efforts to find James Cunningham after dinner were not successful. He was not at his rooms at the Country Club, or at his office. Nor was he at a dinner dance where he was among the invited guests, a bit of information Rose had gathered from the society columns of the previous Sunday's News. His cousin reached him at last next morning by means of his business telephone. An appointment was arranged in five sentences.

If James felt any surprise at the delegation of three which filed in to see him he gave no sign of it. He bowed, sent for more chairs from the outer office, and seated his visitors, all with a dry, close smile hovering on the edge of irony.

Kirby cut short preliminaries. "You know why we're here and what we want," he said abruptly.

"I confess I don't, unless to report on your trip to Golden," James countered suavely. "Was it successful, may I ask?"

"If it wasn't, you know why it wasn't."

The eyes of the two men met. Neither of them dodged in the least or gave to the rigor of the other's gaze.

"Referring to Jack's expedition, I presume."

"You don't deny it, then."

"My dear Kirby, I never waste breath in useless denials. You saw Jack. Therefore he must have been there."

"He was. He brought away with him a page cut from the marriage license registry."

James lifted a hand of protest. "Ah! There we come to the parting of the ways. I can't concede that."

"No, but you know it's true," said Kirby bluntly.

"Not at all. He surely would not mutilate a public record."

"We needn't go into that. He did. But that didn't keep us from getting the information we wanted."

"No?" James murmured the monosyllable with polite indifference. But he watched, lynx-eyed, the strong, brown face of his cousin.

"We know now the secret you want to keep hidden in the courthouse at Golden."

"I grant you energy in ferreting out

"But—two James Cunninghams haven't died mysteriously, have they?" she asked.

other people's business, dear cousin. If you're always so—so altruistic, let us say—I wonder how you have time to devote to your own affairs."

"We intend to see justice done Miss Esther McLean—Mrs. James Cunningham, I should say. You can't move us from that intention or——"

The expression on the oil broker's face was either astonishment or the best counterfeit of it Kirby had ever seen.

"I beg pardon. What did you say?"

"I told you, what you already know, that Esther McLean was married to Uncle James at Golden on the 21st of last month."

"Miss McLean and Uncle James married—at Golden—on the 21st of last month? Are you sure?"

"Aren't you? What did you think we found out?"

Cunningham's eyes narrowed. A film of caution spread over them. "Oh, I don't know. You're so enterprising you might discover almost anything. It's really a pity with your imagination that you don't go into fiction."

"Or oil promotin'," suggested Cole with a grin. "Or is that the same thing?"

"Let's table our cards, James," his cousin said. "You know now why we're here."

"On the contrary, I'm more in the dark than ever."

Kirby was never given to useless movements of his limbs or body. He had the gift of repose, of wonderful poise. Now not even his eyelashes flickered.

"We want to know what you've done with Esther McLean."

"But my dear fellow, why should I do anything with her?"

"You know why as well as I do. Somehow you've persuaded her to go somewhere and hide herself. You want her in your power, to force or cajole her into a compromise of her right to Uncle James' estate. We won't have it."

A satiric smile touched the face of Cunningham without warming it. "That active imagination of yours again. You do let it run away with you."

"You were seen getting into a car with Miss McLean."

"Did she step in of her own free will?"

"We don't claim an abduction."

"On your own statement of the case, then, you have no ground of complaint whatever."

"Do you refuse to tell us where she is?" Kirby asked.

"I refuse to admit that I know where the young lady is."

"We'll find her. Don't make any mistake about that."

Kirby rose. The interview was at an end.

Cole Sanborn strode forward. He leaned over the desk toward the oil broker, his blue eyes drilling into those of the broker.

"We sure will, an' it you've hurt our li'l' friend—if she's got any grievance against you an' the way you treat her—I'll certainly wreck you proper, Mr. Cunningham."

James flushed angrily. "Get out of here—all of you! Or I'll send for the police and have you swept out. I'm fed up on your interference."

"Is it interference for Miss McLean here to want to know where her sister is?" asked Kirby quietly.

"Why should you all assume I know?"

"Because the evidence points to you."

"Absurd. You come down here from Wyoming and do nothing but make trouble for me and Jack even though we try to stand your friend. I've had about enough of you."

"Sorry you look at it that way." Kirby's smile was friendly. It was even wistful. "I appreciate what you did for me, but I've got to go through with what I've started. I can't quit on the job because I'm under an obligation to you. By the way, I've arranged the matter of the bond. We're to take it up at the District Attorney's office at 11 this morning."

"Glad to hear it. I want to be quit of you," snapped Cunningham tartly.

Outside, Kirby gave directions to his lieutenants.

"It's up to you two to dig up some facts. I'm gonna be busy all mornin' with this bond business so's I can keep outa jail. Rose, you go up to the Secretary of State's office and find the number of the license of my cousin's car and the kind of machine it is. Then you'd better come back an' take a look at all the cars parked within three or four blocks of here. He may have driven it down when he came to work this mornin'. Look at the speedometer an' see what the mileage record is of the last trip taken. Cole, you go to this address. That's where my cousin lives. Find out at what garage he keeps his car. If they don't know, go to all the garages within several blocks of the place. See if it's a closed car. Get the make an' the number an' the last trip mileage. Meet me here at 12 o'clock, say. Both of you."

"Suits me," said Cole. "But wise me up. What's the idea of the mileage?"

"Just this. James was outa town last night probably. We couldn't find him anywhere. My notion is that he's taken Esther somewhere into the mountains. If we can get the mileage of the last trip, all we have to do is to divide it by two to know how far away Esther is. Then we'll draw a circle around Denver at that distance an'——"

Cole slapped his thigh with his hat. "Bully! You're sure the white-haired lad in this deteckative game."

"Maybe he didn't set the speedometer for the trip," suggested Rose.

"Possible. Then again more likely he did. James is a methodical chap. Another thing, while you're at the private hotel where he lives, Cole. Find out if you can where James goes when he fishes or drives into the mountains. Perhaps he's got a cottage of his own or some favorite spot."

"I'm on my way, old-timer!" Cole announced with enthusiasm.

At luncheon the committee reported progress. Cole had seen James Cunningham's car. It was a sedan. He had had it out of the garage all afternoon and evening and had brought it back just before midnight. The trip record on the speedometer registered ninety-two miles.

From his pocket Kirby drew an automobile map and a pencil. He notched on the pencil a mark to represent forty-six miles from the point, based on the scale of miles shown at the foot of the map. With the pencil as a radius he drew a semi-circle from Denver as the center. The curved line passed through Loveland, Long's Peak, and across the Snow Range to Tabernash. It included Georgetown, Gray's Peak, Mount Evans, and Cassells. From there it swept on to Palmer Lake.

"I'm not includin' the plains country to the east," Kirby explained. "You'll have enough territory to cover as it is, Cole. By the way, did you find anything about where James goes into the hills?"

"No."

"Well, we'll make some more inquiries. Perhaps the best thing for you to do would be to go out to the small towns around Denver an' find out if any of the garage people noticed a car of that description passin' through. That would help a lot. It would give us a line on whether he went up Bear Canyon, Platte Canyon, into North Colorado, or south toward the Palmer Lake country."

"You've allowed forty-six miles by an air line," Rose pointed out. "He couldn't have gone as far as Long's Peak or Evans—nowhere nearly as far, because the roads are so winding when you get in the hills. He could hardly have reached Estes Park."

"Right. You'll have to check up the road distances from Denver, Cole. Your job's like lookin' for a needle in a haystack. I'll put a detective agency on James. He might take a notion to run out to the cache any fine evenin'. He likely will, to make sure Esther is contented."

"Or he'll send Jack," Rose added.

"We'll try to keep an eye on him, too."

"This is my job, is it?" Cole asked, rising.

"You an' Rose can work together on it. My job's here in town on the murder mystery."

"If we work both of them out—finding Esther and proving who killed your uncle—I think we'll learn that it's all the same mystery, anyhow," Rose said, drawing on her gloves.

Cole nodded sagely. "You've said somethin', Rose."

"Say when, not if, we work 'em out. We'll be cuttin' hot trail poco tempo," Kirby prophesied, smiling up at them.

CHAPTER XXVII
The Detective Gets Two Surprises

Kirby stared down at the document in front of him. He could scarcely believe the evidence flashed by his eyes to his brain. It was the document he had asked the County Recorder at Golden to send him—and it certified that, on July 21, James Cunningham and Phyllis Harriman had been united in marriage at Golden by the Rev. Nicodemus Rankin.

This knocked the props from under the whole theory he had built up to account for the disappearance of Esther McLean. If Esther were not the widow of his uncle, then the motive of James in helping her to vanish was not apparent. Perhaps he told the truth and knew nothing about the affair whatever.

But Kirby was puzzled. Why had his uncle, who was openly engaged to Phyllis Harriman, married her surreptitiously and kept that marriage a secret? It was not in character, and he could see no reason for it. Foster had sent him to Golden on the tacit hint that there was some clue in the license register to the mystery of James Cunningham's death. What bearing had this marriage on it, if any?

It explained, of course, the visit of Miss Harriman to his uncle's apartments on the night he was murdered. She had an entire right to go there at any time, and if they were keeping their relation a secret would naturally go at night when she could slip in unobserved.

But Kirby's mind wandered up and down blind alleys. The discovery of this secret seemed only to make the tangle more difficult.

He had a hunch that there was a clue at Golden he had somehow missed, and that feeling took him back there within three hours of the receipt of the certificate.

The clerk in the Recorder's office could tell him nothing now except that he had called up Mrs. Rankin by telephone and she had brought up the delayed certificate at once. Kirby lost no time among the records. He walked to the Rankin house and introduced himself to an old lady sunning herself on the porch. She was a plump, brisk little person with snapping eyes and younger than her years.

"I'm sorry I wasn't at home when you called. Can I help you now?" she asked.

"I don't know. James Cunningham was my uncle. We thought he had married a girl who is a sister of the friend with me the day I called. But it seems we were mistaken. He married Phyllis Harriman, the young woman to whom he was engaged."

Mrs. Rankin smiled, the placid, motherly smile of experience. "I've noticed that men sometimes do marry the girls to whom they are engaged."

"Yes, but—" Kirby broke off and tried another tack. "How old was the lady? And was she dark or fair?"

"Miss Harriman? I should think she may be twenty-five. She is dark, slender, and beautifully dressed. Rather an—an expensive sort of young lady, perhaps."

"Did she act as though she were much—well, in love with—Mr. Cunningham?"

The bright eyes twinkled. "She's not a young woman who wears her heart on her sleeve, I judge. I can't answer that question. My opinion is that he was very much in love with her. Why do you ask?"

"You have read about his death since, of course," he said.

"Is he dead? No, I didn't know it." The birdlike eyes opened wider. "That's strange too."

"It's on account of the mystery of his death that I'm troubling you, Mrs. Rankin. We want it cleared up, of course."

"But—two James Cunninghams haven't died mysteriously, have they?" she asked. "The nephew isn't killed, too, is he?"

"Oh, no. Just my uncle."

"Then we're mixed up somewhere. How old was your uncle?"

"He was past fifty-six—just past."

"That's not the man my husband married."

"Not the man! Oh, aren't you mistaken, Mrs. Rankin? My uncle was strong and rugged. He did not look his age."

The old lady got up swiftly. "Please excuse me a minute." She moved with extraordinary agility into the house. It was scarcely a minute before she was with him again, a newspaper in her hand. In connection with the Cunningham murder mystery several pictures were shown. Among them were photographs of his uncle and two cousins.

"This is the man whose marriage to Miss Harriman I witnessed," she said. Her finger was pointing to the likeness of his cousin, James Cunningham.

To be continued tomorrow

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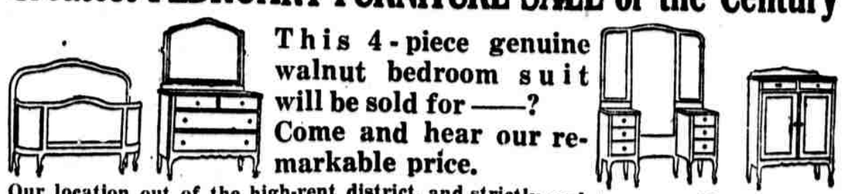

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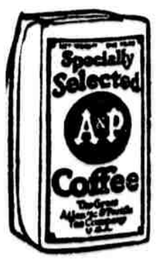

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