

THE LAST OF THE DUANES

by **Zane Grey**
Illustrated by **Verne C. Christy**



Duane goes to visit the Miss Lee who had intervened for him with MacNelly, and finds her to be none other but Jennie. They talk and tell each other of their love and when Duane tells Jennie he is commissioned to capture Cheseldine she breaks down and begs him to break his word to MacNelly.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY
Duane stared at her, amazed. He hardly knew what to say. He felt how little he understood women. His heart began to pound, and thrills ran over him. The sweetness of this woman—that she would go back to outlawry with him—appealed with strange power.

"That course wouldn't be dishonorable," she continued.
"No, But it's impossible. I'd die before I'd drag you into that life. You ought to remember an outlaw's day."

"I do. I'd rather have them again than lose you. Besides, we could hide in some canyon, some valley—and be happy."

Jennie came closer to him then, so close that she almost touched him. Something about her presence, the look of her eyes, of the heave of her breast, made that sweet, vague emotion grow.

"Duane, do you love me?" she asked.

"Jennie, you're going to make it harder for me!" he burst out in despair.

"Tell me," she insisted.

"Love you? I love you as no man ever loved a woman. Think of my lonely, wretched life! What I have known of women—of the sweetness of one? And now it bursts on me. Jennie, don't ask me that. I'm afraid of myself. I can't understand."

She came only the closer, until now she touched him, her slender form reaching to his shoulders, and she leaned upon him with her face upturned. He felt her hands on his, and they were soft, clinging, strong, like steel under velvet. He felt the rise and fall—the warmth of her breast.

A tremor ran over him. He tried to draw back, and if he succeeded a little her form swayed with him, pressing closer. She did not speak. She held her face up, and he was compelled to look. It was wonderful now—white, yet glowing, with the red lips parted, the dark eyes alluring. But that was not all. There was passion, unquenchable spirit, woman's resolve deep and mighty as life.

"I love you, Duane," she said. "I could suffer anything for you. I'm not selfish in this. It's for you. I know what your life has been. I can't let you go back to it. Listen—you don't know me. You think you're with the old Jennie. But I'm different. I've suffered and I've learned in these years. I believe I'm right in asking you to give up this ranger service. Will you?"

"Jennie, I can't. How could you ask it?"

"How could you go if you love me?"

"If you were a man you'd understand."

"But I'm a woman. You don't understand that!" she cried passionately.

"Can you expect a man who lives like a hunted wolf to understand the finer feelings of a woman? I am outside, Jennie—the outcast—the outlaw. And even so, I've kept myself different from the others. But heaven knows—perhaps I'm course, hard, inhuman."

"Hush!" She put a hand over his lips. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I meant—Oh, Duane, I'm here ready for your arms—a starved woman—and you don't know it."

Duane became suddenly weak, and when he did take her into his arms he scarcely had strength to lift her to a seat beside him. She seemed more than dead weight. Her calmness had fled. She was throbbing, palpitating, quivering, with hot, wet cheeks and arms that clung to him like vines. She lifted her mouth to him, whispering: "Kiss me!"

Duane bent down, and her arms went around his neck and drew him close. With his lips on hers, he seemed to float away. That kiss closed his eyes, and he could not lift his head. He sat motionless, holding her blind and helpless, wrapped in a sweet, dark glory.

She kissed him—one long, endless kiss—or else a thousand times. Her lips, her wet cheeks, her hair, the softness, the fragrance of her, the tender, moving clasp of her arms, the swell of her breast—all these enclosed him, bound him. She whispered and murmured broken and incoherent words—words that did not need to be understood, so full were they of sweetness and meaning and love.

He rose and let Jennie sit back against the cushions. Her fingers clung weakly to him. Her eyes hurt him. While he fumbled in his pocket for paper, to fetch forth the Governor's pardon, Jennie watched him; and when he laid the paper in her hands she let it drop.

"Give that to mother," he said huskily. "Tell her—maybe I'll come back—there's a chance."

"Don't go! Don't go!" she cried.

"I must. Dear, good-by. Remember I love you! Jennie, let me go!" He pulled her hands loose from his; stepped back.

She fell upon her knees with outstretched arms.
"Duane! Duane!" she wailed.
Like a murderer he backed away.

"Jennie—dearest, I believe—I'll come back!" he whispered.

These last words were falsehood. He reached the door, gave her one last piercing glance—to fix forever in memory that white face with its dark, staring, tragic eyes.

"Duane!"
He fled with that moan like thunder, death, hell, in his ears.

Duane had been three months out of the Nueces country. At El Paso he bought the finest horse he could find, and, armed and otherwise outfitted to suit him, he had taken to unknown trails.

Leisurely he rode from town to town, village to village, ranch to ranch, fitting his talk and his occupation to the impression he wanted to make upon different people whom he met.

He was in turn a cowboy, a rancher, a cattleman, a stock-buyer, a boomer, a landhunter; and long before he reached the wild and inhospitable Ord he had acted the part of an outlaw drifting into new territory.

He passed on slowly because he wanted to learn the lay of the country, the location of villages and ranches, the work, habit, gossip, pleasure, and fears of the people with whom he came in contact. The one subject most impelling to him outlaw—he never mentioned—but, by talking all around it, sifting the ranch and cattle story, he acquired a knowledge calculated to aid him much in his deplaid plot. In this game time was of no moment; if necessary he would take years to accomplish his task.

The stupendous and perilous nature of it showed in the slow, weary preparation. When he heard Fletcher's name and faced Knell he knew he had reached the place he had sought—Ord was a hamlet on the fringe of the grazing country, of doubtful honesty, from which surely winding trails led down into the free and never disturbed paradise

of outlaws—the Big Bend.

He saw a bright light before he made out the dark outline of the cabin. Then he heard voices, a merry whistle, a coarse song, and the clink of iron cooking utensils. He smelled fragrant wood-smoke. He saw moving dark figures cross the light. Evidently there was a wide door, or else the fire was out in the open.

Fortune favored him. There was bushes, an old shed, a wood pile, all the cover he needed at that corner.

Before he peered between the rough corner of wall and the bush growing close to it Duane passed a moment. His excitement was different from that he always felt when pursued. It had no bitterness, no paid, no dread. There was as much danger here, perhaps more, yet it was not the same. Then he looked.

He saw a bright fire, a red faced man bending over it whistling while he handled a steaming pot. Over him was a roofer shed built against the wall with two open sides and two supporting posts. Duane's second glance, not so blinded by the sudden bright light, made out other men, three in the shadows, two in the flare, but with back to him.
"What's eatin' you, Pan Handle?" ejaculated another. "Blossom an' me rode from Faraway Springs, where Poggin is with some of the gang."

"Excuse me, Phil. Shore I didn't see you come in, an' Boldt never said nothin'."

"It took you a long time to get here, but I guess that's just as well," spoke up a smooth, suave voice with a ring in it.

Cheseldine's voice!
Here they were—Cheseldine—Phil Knell—Blossom Kane—Pan Handle Smith—Boldt—how well Duane remembered the names!—all here, the big men of Cheseldine's game, except the biggest—Poggin.

Duane had holed them, and his sensations of the moment deadened sight and sound of what was before him. He sank down controlled himself, silenced amounting exultation, then, from a less strained position, he neered forth again.

The outlaws were waiting for sup-

per. Their conversation might have been that of cowboys in camp, ranchers at a roundup. Duane listened with eager ears, waiting for business talk that he felt would come. All the time he watched with the eyes of a wolf upon its quarry.

Blossom Kane was the lean-limbed messenger who had so angered Fletcher. Boldt was a giant in stature, dark, beard, silent. Pan Handle Smith was the red faced cook, merry, profane, short, bow legged man resembling many rustlers Duane had known, particularly Luke Stevens.

And Knell, who set there, tall, slim, like a boy in build, like a boy in years with his pale, smooth expressionless face and his cold gray eyes.

And Cheseldine, who leaned against the wall, handsome, with his pointed face and beard, like an aristocrat, resembled many a rich Louisiana planter Duane had met. The sixth man sat so much in the shadow that he could not be plainly discerned, and though addressed, his name was not mentioned.

Pan Handle Smith carried pots and pans into the cabin, and cheerfully called out: "If you gents air hungry fer grub don't look fer me to feed you with a spoon."

The outlaws piled inside, made a great bustle and clatter as they sat

to their meal. Like hungry men they talked little.

Duane waited there a while, then guardedly got up and crept round to the other side of the cabin. After he became used to the dark again he ventured to steal along the wall to the crack, and peeped in. The outlaws were in the first room and could not be seen.

For Duane the twenty-fifth of October seemed a whole lifetime in coming. When that day dawned he left a lonely camp in the brush and rode into Bradford.

He went to the old inn-keeper, with whom he had made acquaintance, and leaving his horse in the stable set off in search of Buell.

Inquiry discovered the night operator at his boarding-house asleep. Duane had him awakened. Buell came in heavy-eyed, but curious, half-expectant.

"Buell, I'm sorry to disturb you," said Duane, "but my business is urgent. You can aid me. I'm urgent to arrest a man here to-day, a prominent citizen. Now it's likely some

of his friends—somebody, at any rate—will shove a gun in your face, or the day operator's, and make you send telegrams along the line."

(Continued Next Week)

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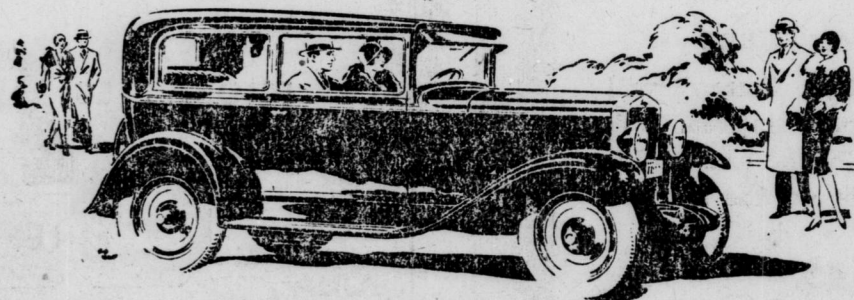
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