

THE LAST OF THE DUANES

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

Cast of Principal Characters in This Thrilling Story by Zane Grey

Buck Duane	The Last of the Duanes
Cal Bain	A Texas "Bad Man"
Luke Stevens	An Outlaw
Bland	Leader of An Outlaw Group
Mrs. Bland	His Wife
Jennie	A Girl at Bland's Camp
Captain MacNelly	A Captain of the Rangers
Cheseldine	A Dangerous Outlaw

So it was in him then—an inherited fighting instinct—a blood lust—a driving intensity to kill. He was the last of the Duanes—that old fighting stock of Texas.

But not the memory of his dead father, nor the pleading of his soft-voiced mother, nor the warning of this uncle who stood before him now had brought so much to Duane realization of the dark passionate strain in his blood. It was the recurrence, a hundredfold increased in power, of a strange emotion that for the last three years had taken possession of him.

"Yes, Cal Bain's in town, full of bad whisky, an huntin' for you," repeated the elder man gravely.

"It's the second time," muttered Duane, as if to himself.

"Son, you can't avoid a meetin'. Leave town till Cal sobers up. He ain't got it in for you when he's not drinkin'."

"But what's he want me for?" demanded Duane. "To insult me again? I won't stand that twice."

"He's got a fever that's rampant in Texas these days, my boy. He wants gunplay. If he meets you he'll try to kill you."

Here it stirred Duane again—that bursting gush of blood, like a wind of flame shaking all his inner being, and subsiding to leave him strangely chilled.

As towns go, Wellston was small enough, but important in that unsettled part of the great State because it was the trading center of several hundred miles of territory. On the main street there were perhaps fifty buildings, some brick, some frame, mostly adobe, and one-third of the lot, by far the most prosperous, were saloons. From the road Duane turned into the street.

It was a wide throughfare, lined by hitching rails, and saddled horses, and vehicles of various kinds. Duane's eye ranged down the street, taking in all at a glance, particularly persons moving up and down. Not a cowboy was in sight.

When he came to within fifty paces of a saloon he swerved out into the middle of the street, stood there for a moment, then went ahead

and back to the sidewalk. He passed on in this way the length of the block.

Sol White was standing in the door of his saloon.

"Buck, I'm a-tippin' you off," he said, quick and low-voiced, "Cal Bain's over at Everall's. If he's a huntin' you bad as he brags he'll show there."

Duane knew himself to be cold, steady. He was conscious of a strange fury that made him want to leap ahead. He seemed to long for this encounter more than anything he had ever wanted. But vivid as were his sensations, he felt as if in a dream. Before he reached Everall's he heard loud voices, one of which was raised high. Then the short door swung outward as if impelled by a vigorous hand. A bow-legged cowboy, wearing woolly chaps, burst out upon the sidewalk. At sight of Duane he seemed to bound into the air and he let out a savage roar.

If Bain was drunk he did not show it in his movements. Red, sweaty, and disheveled, his face distorted and expressive of the most malignant intent, he seemed a wild and sinister figure. He had already killed a man, and this appeared manifest in his demeanor.

"Won't nothin' make you draw, you _____?" he shouted.

"I'm waiting on you, Cal," replied Duane.

Bain's right hand stiffened—moved. Duane threw his gun as a boy throws a ball underhand—a draw his father had taught him. He pulled twice his shots almost as one.

Bain's big Colt boomed while it was pointed downward and he was falling. His bullet scattered dust and gravel at Duane's feet. Bain fell loosely without contortion.

When he came to the gate of his home and saw his uncle there with a mettlesome horse, saddled, with canteen, rope, and bags all in place, a subtle shock pervaded Buck's spirit.

It had slipped his mind—the consequence of his act.

But the sight of the horse, the look of his uncle recalled the fact that he must now become a fugitive.

"I am a murderer," said Duane, shuddering.

"No, son, you're not. An' you never will be. But you've got to be an out-law till time makes it safe for you to come home."

Duane, with blurred sight and contracting throat, gripped his uncle's hand and bade him a wordless farewell. Then he leaped astride the black and rode out of town.

When the heat of the day began to be oppressive, and hunger and thirst made themselves manifest, Duane began to look about him for a place to halt for the noon hour. The trail led into a road which was hard-packed and smooth from the tracks of cattle. He doubted not that he had come across one of the roads used by border raiders.

He headed into it, and had scarcely traveled a mile when turning a curve, he came point-blank upon a single horseman riding toward him.

"Mawnin', stranger," called the man, dropping his hand from his hip.

"Howdy," replied Duane shortly.

"I seen you ain't no ranger," called the rider, an' shore I ain't none."

He laughed loudly as if he had made a joke.

He was small and wiry, slouchy of attire, and armed to the teeth, and he bestrode a fine horse. He had quick dancing brown eyes, at once frank and bold, and a coarse bronzed face. Evidently he was a good-natured ruffian.

"My name's Luke Stevens, an' I hail from the river. Who're you?" said this stranger.

Duane was silent.

"I reckon you're Buck Duane,"

went on Stevens. "I heerd you was a bad man with a gun."

This time Duane laughed, not at the doubtful compliment, but at the idea that the first outlaw he met should know him.

"Wal, Buck," said Stevens, in a friendly manner, "I ain't presumin' on your time or company. I see you're headin' for the river. But will you stop long enough to stake a fellow to a bite of grub?"

"I'm out of grub, and pretty hungry myself," admitted Duane.

"Been pushin' your hoss, I see. Wal, I recon you'd better stock up before you hit that stretch of country."

He made a wide sweep of his right arm, indicating the southwest, and there was that in his action which seemed significant of a vast and barren region.

"Stock up?" queried Duane thoughtfully.

"Shore. A feller has jest got to eat. I can rustle along without whiskey, but not without grub. That's what makes it so embarrassin' travelin' these parts dodgin' your shadow. Now I'm on my way to Mercer. It's a little two-bit town up the river a ways. I'm goin' to pack out some grub."

"Stranger, in this here country two's a crowd. It's safer. I never was much on this lone wolf dodgin' though I've done it of necessity. It takes a good man to travel alone any length of time. Why, I've been the sick I was just achin' fer some ranger to come along an' plug me. Give me a pardner any day. Now mebbe you're not that kind of a feller, an' I'm shore not presumin' to ask. But I jest declares myself sufficient."

"You mean you'd like me to go with you?" asked Duane.

Stevens grinned.

"Wal, I should smile. I'd be particular proud to be braced with a man of your reputation."

"See here, my good fellow, that's all nonsense," declares Duane in some haste.

"Shore I think modesty becomin' to a youngster," replied Stevens. "I hate a brag."

"But every man who's lived along the Texas border remembers a lot about your dad. It was expected of you, I reckon, an' much of your rep was established before you throwed your gun. I jest heerd that you was lightin' on the draw, an' when you cut loose with a gun why the figger on the ace of spades would cover your cluster of bullet holes. That's the word that's gone down the border."

"It's the kind of reputation most sure to fly far an' swift ahead of a man I'll gamble on that. It's the land in this country. An' the safest, too, the draw! I see now you're only a boy, though you're shore a strappin', husky one. Now, Buck, I'm not a spring chicken, an' I've been long on the dodge. Mebbe a little of my society won't hurt you none. You'll need to learn the country."

There was something sincere and likable about this outlaw.

"I dare say you're right," replied Duane quietly, "and I'll go to Mercer with you."

Next moment he was riding down the road with Stevens.

"Stevens, have you got any money?" asked Duane.

"Money!" exclaimed Luke blankly. "Say, I haven't owned a two-bit since—wal, fer some time."

"I'll furnish money for grub," returned Duane. "And for whiskey, too, providin' you hurry back here—without making trouble."

"Shore you're a downright good pard," declared Stevens in admiration as he took the money. "I give my word, Buck, an' I'm here to say I never broke it yet. Lay low an' look for me back quick."

Presently Stevens rode out of sight into the town. Duane waited, hoping the outlaw would make good his word.

Probably not a quarter of an hour had elapsed before Duane heard the clear reports of a rifle, the clatter of rapid hoofbeats, and yells unmistakably the kind to mean danger for a man like Stevens. Duane mounted and rode to the edge of the mesquite.

He saw a cloud of dust down the road and a bay horse running fast.

Stevens apparently had not been wounded by any of the shots, for he had a steady seat in his saddle, and his riding struck Duane as admirable. He carried a large pack over the pommel and he kept looking back.

The shots had ceased but the yells increased. Duane saw several men running and waving their arms. Then he spurred his horse and got into a swift stride so Stevens would not pass him. Presently the outlaw caught up with him.

"Was jest comin' out of the store," yelled Stevens. "Run plumb into a rancher who knowed me. He opened up with a rifle. Think they'll chase us."

They covered several miles before there were any signs of pursuit, and when horsemen did move into sight out of the cottonwoods, Duane and his companion drew further away.

Stevens was pale and his face bore beads of sweat. The whole front of his shirt was soaked with blood.

"You're shot!" cried Duane. "Wal, who'n hell said I wasn't? Would you mind givin' me a lift—on this here pack?"

Duane lifted the heavy pack down and then helped Stevens to dismount. The outlaw had a bloody foam on his lips and he was spitting blood.

"Oh! why didn't you say so?" cried Duane. "I never thought. You seemed all right."

"Wal, Luke Stevens may be as gabby as an old woman—but sometimes—he doesn't say anythin'. It wouldn't have done no good."

(Continued Next Week)

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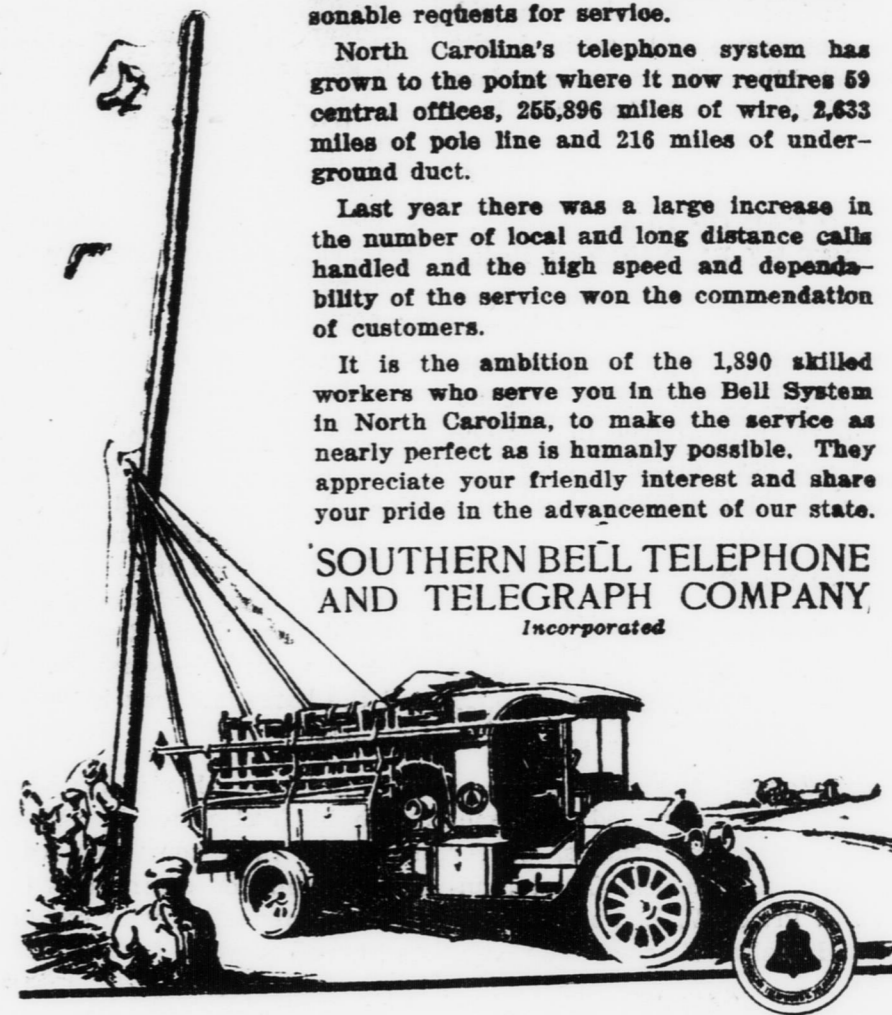
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