

THE LAST OF THE DUANES

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



About the middle of the afternoon Jennie awoke. They cooked a meal, and afterward sat beside the little fire. She had never been, in his observation of her, anything but a tragic figure, an unhappy girl, the farthest removed from serenity and poise. That characteristic capacity agitation struck him as stronger in her this day. He attributed it, however, to the long strain, the suspense nearing an end. Yet sometimes, when her eyes were on him, she did not seem to be thinking of her freedom, of her future.

"This time tomorrow you'll be in Shelbyville," he said.

"Where will you be?" she asked quickly.

"Me? Oh, I'll be making tracks for some lonesome place," he replied.

The girl shuddered.

"I've been brought up in Texas. I remember what a hard lot the men of my family had. But poor as they were, they had a roof over their heads, a hearth with a fire, a warm bed—somebody to love them.

"And you, Duane, Oh, my God! What your life must be! You must ride and hide and watch eternally. No decent food, no pillar, no friendly word, no clean clothes, no woman's hand! Horses, guns, trails, rocks, holes—these must be the important things in your life. You must meet—"

She ended with a sob and dropped her head on her knees. Duane was amazed, deeply touched.

"My girl, thank you for that thought of me," he said, with a tremor in his voice. "You don't know how much that means to me."

She raised her face and it was tearstained, eloquent, beautiful.

"I've heard tell—the best of men go to the bad out there. You won't. Promise me you won't. I never knew any man—like you—like you. I—I—we may never see each other again—after to day. I'll never forget you. I'll pray for you and I'll never give up trying to—to do something.

"Don't despair. It's never to late. It was my hope that kept me alive—out there at Bland's—before you came. I was only a poor weak girl. But if I could hope—so can you. Stay away from men! Be a lone wolf! Fight for your life! Stick out your exile—and maybe—some day—"

Then she lost her voice. Duane clasped her hand, and promised to remember her words. In her despair for him she had spoken wisdom—pointed out the only course.

Duane's vigilance, momentarily broken by emotion, had no sooner reassured itself than he discovered the bay horse, the one Jennie rode had broken his halter and gone off. The soft wet earth had deadened the sound of his hoofs. His tracks were plain in the mud. There were clumps of mesquit in sight, among which the horse might have strayed. It turned out however, that he had not done so.

Duane did not want to leave Jennie, alone in the cabin, so near the road. So he put her up on his horse and bade her follow. The rain had ceased for the time being, though evidently the storm was not yet over. The tracks led up a wash to a wide flat where mesquit, prickly pear, and thornbush grew so thickly that Jennie could not ride into it.

Duane was thoroughly concerned. He must have her horse. Time was flying. It would soon be night. He could not expect her to scramble quickly through that brake on foot. Therefore he decided to risk leaving her at the edge of the thicket and go in alone.

Suddenly there came an unmistakable thump of horses' hoofs off somewhere to the fore.

Then a scream rent the air. It ended abruptly. Duane leaped forward and tore his way through the thorny brake. He heard Jennie cry again—an appealing call, quickly hushed. It seemed more to his right, and he plunged that way.

He burst into a glade where a smoldering fire and ground covered with footprints and tracks showed that campers had lately been. Rushing across this, he broke his passage

out to the open. But he was too late. His horse had disappeared. Jennie was gone. There was no sound.

It came to him then like a blow that he loved the girl.

For three long and terrible years Buck Duane rode up and down the Texas border.

His fame grew steadily until he was the most noted and most misrepresented outlaw of his day.

Hundreds of men in the border towns claimed friendship with him. Every honest rancher between Brownsville and El Paso would have been glad to shake his hand and hide him. Every outlaw along the river feared him; every crooked gambler in the monte dens played fair when Duane happened to drop in; every imitation bad man in the southwest of Texas wanted to kill him, bragged on his name, hunted him when fired by drink.

The better half of that widely scattered populace especially in localities Duane had visited, was loath to believe him perpetrator of the crimes laid to him. The ignorant and outlawed class fastened on his name all the rustling, hold-ups, robberies, murders, when direct evidence did not point to someone else.

In a sense, the reputation of every famous outlaw developed by these wild years had suffered more or less from this natural exaggeration and misrepresentation. But no outlaw before him had ever had such a host of admirers and partisans who fiercely gave the lie to any accusation of robbery or crime attributed to him.

It was widely known that he had never earned a dollar in his outlaw career. It was sworn by many and reputable men that he had never stolen one. Few towns or yillages on that border had no storekeeper who had not a tale to tell about Duane, the Lone Wolf.

One afternoon, from the top of a long hill, Duane saw the green fields and trees and shining roofs of a town he considered must be Shirley; and at the bottom of the hill he came upon an interesting road. There was a placard nailed on the cross-road sign-post. Duane drew rein near it and leaned close to read the faded print:

\$1,000 REWARD FOR BUCK DUANE DEAD OR ALIVE

Peering closer to read the finer, more faded print, Duane learned that he was wanted for the murder of Mrs. Jeff Aiken at her ranch near Shirley. The month of September was named, but the date was illegible. The reward was offered by the woman's husband, whose name appeared, with that of a sheriff's, at the bottom of the placard.

Duane read the thing twice. When he straightened he was sick with the horror of his fate, wild with passion at those misguided fools who could believe that he had harmed a woman.

When Duane reached the crossing of the roads the named Fairfield on the sign-post seemed to be the thing that tipped the oscillating balance of decision in favor of that direction. He answered here to unfathomable impulse.

In Duane's state of mind clear reasoning, common sense, or keenness were out of the question. He went because he felt that he was compelled.

Dusk had fallen when he rode into a town which inquiry discovered to be Fairfield. Captain MacNelly's camp was stationed just out of the village limits on the other side.

No one except the boy Duane questioned appeared to notice his arrival. Like Shirley, the town of Fairfield was large and prosperous, compared to the innumerable hamlets dotting the vast extent of southwestern Texas. As Duane rode through, being careful to get off the main street, he heard the tolling of a church bell that was a melancholy reminder of his old home.

There did not appear to be any camp on the outskirts of the town. But as Duane sat his horse, peering around and undecided what further move to make, he caught the glint of flickering lights through the darkness.

Heading toward them, he rode perhaps a quarter of a mile to come up-

on a grove of mesquits. The brightness of several fires made the surrounding darkness all the blacker. Duane saw the moving forms of men and heard horses. He advanced naturally, expecting any moment to be halted.

"Who goes there?" came the sharp call out of the gloom.

Duane pulled his horse. The gloom was impenetrable.

"One man—alone," replied Duane.

"A stranger?"

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

"I'm trying to find the ranger camp."

"You've struck it. What's your errand?"

"Get down and advance. Slow. Don't move your hands. It's dark, but I can see."

Duane dismounted and, leading his horse, slowly advanced a few paces. He saw a dully bright object, a gun, before he discerned the man who held it. A few more steps showed a dark figure blocking the trail. Here Duane halted.

"Come closer, stranger. Let's have a look at you," the guard ordered curtly.

Duane advanced again until he stood before the man. Here the ray of lights from the fire flickered upon Duane's face fantastically.

"Recon you're a stranger all right. What's your name and your business with the captain?"

Duane hesitated, pondering what best to say.

"Tell Captain MacNelly I'm the man he's been asking to ride into his camp after dark," finally said Duane.

The ranger bent forward to peer hard at this night visitor. His manner had been alert and now it became tense.

"Come here—one of you men—quick," he called without turning in the least toward the camp-fire.

"Hello! What's up, Pickens?" came the swift reply.

It was followed by rapid thud of boots on soft ground. A dark form crossed the gleams from the firelight. Then a ranger loomed up, to reach the side of the guard.

Duane heard whispering, the purport of which he could not catch. The second ranger swore under his breath. Then he turned away and started back.

"Here, ranger, before you go, understand this. My visit is peaceful—friendly, if you'll let it be. Mind, I was asked to come here after dark."

Duane's clear, penetrating voice carried far. The listening rangers at the camp-fire heard what he said.

"Ho, Pickens—tell that fellow to wait," replied an authoritative voice.

Then a slim figure detached itself from the dark, moving group at the camp-fire and hurried out.

"Better be foxie, Capt," shouted a ranger in warning.

"Shut up—all of you," was the reply.

This officer, obviously Captain MacNelly, soon joined the two rangers who were confronting Duane. He had no fear. He strode straight up to Duane.

"I'm MacNelly," he said. "If you're the man don't mention your name—yet."

All this seemed so strange to Duane, in keeping with much that had happened lately.

"Buck Duane! It's you?" he whispered eagerly.

"Yes."

"If I give my word you'll not be arrested—you'll be treated fairly—will you come into camp and consult with me?"

"Certainly."

"Duane, I'm sure glad to meet you," went on MacNelly and extended his hand.

Amazed and touched, scarcely realizing this actuality, Duane gave his hand and felt no unmistakable grip of warmth.

"It doesn't seem natural, Captain MacNelly, but I believe I'm glad to meet you," said Duane soberly.

"You will be. Now we'll go back

to camp. Keep your identity mum for the present."

He led Duane in the direction of the camp-fire.

(Continued Next Week)

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