



THE LAST OF THE DUANES

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

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE

Buck Duane, quick on the draw, kills Cal Blain in self-defense and becomes an outlaw. After adventures on the road he goes to Bland's camp. There he wounds a man named Essomer and becomes a bosom friend of another named Euchre. He meets Mrs. Bland and also a girl Jennie, held prisoner by Bland, whom he rescues after a series of intrigues in which he is forced to deceive Mrs. Bland.

This leads to Duane's killing of Bland, the outlaw leader, and rushing off with Jennie, who is lost later. Duane roams the roads for years as an outlaw, finally going to meet Captain MacNelly of the Rangers, who had asked to see him. MacNelly is kind to him, and offers him a pardon if he will accept an offer to become a Ranger and go after Cheseldine's gang. MacNelly had become interested in Duane after a Miss Lee had spoken in his behalf. Duane promises MacNelly to do him any service. Meanwhile MacNelly gives Duane much welcome news.

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.

Duane sets forth on the hunt for Cheseldine. At Ord he locates the band of outlaws. At Bradford, later, he gives the night operator, Buell, instructions, saying he is going to arrest a man.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

"This will probably happen after I take the train with my man. What I want you to do is to post the other operator. Then in case this does happen to either of you be cool and pretend to send the message given you. But send the wrong message—anything at random. Bluff the thing so these allies of my man will think they can stall operations east."

Buell promised with a heightened color and considerable show of pleasure to go at once and relieve the day operator, who, he said, wanted some time off duty, and to stay by his instrument as long as needed.

"Who're you after?" he asked excitedly.

"You'll know presently. Another thing—my horse is over at the inn. I'll have to leave him and I'd like you to take care of him till you hear from me. If you don't hear—he's yours."

The time passed. When he went out he saw several Mexicans, a cowboy, and two men, and they all watched him curiously. Next he ran into Sheriff Bridger.

He laid a heavy hand on Bridger. "I want Cheseldine. Is he coming?"

The sheriff gasped, and his swarthy face turned green. He looked sick. He could not speak.

Over his shoulder Duane saw Cheseldine coming with a group of men, all intent upon themselves.

"In Buck Duane, Texas ranger," he said, close to Bridger's ear. And he drew his gun and pressed it against the sheriff. "Look down!" he added.

Bridger saw the gun and almost collapsed.

"Give me your hand-cuffs," went on Duane.

Bridger produced them and held them out with shaking fingers. Duane snatched them, and with a look at Bridger that meant death, he shoved him back.

Then Duane with gun high leaped in front of the approaching men. "Cheseldine!" he yelled piercingly. All of them halted as if the world had petrified. One of them turned a ghastly stricken white.

"Hands out! Not up! In front of you! Quick!"

As Duane's look had meant death so here did his voice. The manacles clicked. Cheseldine was a prisoner.

Duane turned to the paralyzed men.

"Gentlemen, you look honest," he said. "But I can take no chances. You must be judged by your company. I'm Duane, Texas Ranger. I arrest this man Cheseldine. I advise you all to be careful with your hands."

He grasped Cheseldine and backing away led him up to the station, pushed him against the wall. Duane's eyes covered every point before him. Bridger had disappeared.

Cheseldine's friends, recovering from their stupefaction, broke into a frenzy of excitement. But they did not approach any closer. One by one the little crowd of astounded men was enlarged by others. Sight of Duane and his gun was enough, both to make them gape and hold them back.

Cheseldine remained white but calm. He hid nerve. He seemed to want to hide his manacled hands.

"Duane, why did you make an exception of me?" he asked.

Duane did not reply. At the moment he heard the train whistle. Probably Cheseldine was wondering why he had not met the same fate as Bland, Alloway, Hardin. Duane wondered grimly the same thing.

The eastbound rolled into the station. Duane, waving the crowd back with his gun, made Cheseldine walk ahead of him, climb the steps of the car.

"Hurry this train!" called Duane, to the amazed conductor.

Then he got on, entered the car, put Cheseldine in a seat and sat facing him and all the passengers.

The train started up almost immediately, and left behind on the platform a yelling, gesticulating crowd. Duane had a glimpse of Buell waving his hand from the station window.

It was a fast train, yet the ride seemed slow. Duane disliking to face Cheseldine and the watching conjecturing passengers in the car, changed his seat to one behind his prisoner. They had not spoken.

Cheseldine sat with bowed head, deep in thought. Occasionally the train halted briefly at a station.

They got off the car at Val Verde. The station was a good deal larger than that at Bradford, and there was considerable action and bustle incident to the arrival of the train.

Duane's sweeping gaze searched faces, rested upon a man who seemed familiar. This fellow's look too, was that of one who knew Duane, and was waiting for a sign, a cue. Then Duane recognized him—MacNelly, clean-shaven, without mustache he appeared different—

younger.

"Duane! Lord I'm glad to see you!" was the captain's greeting.

Then at closer look into Duane's face his warmth fled—something he saw there checked his enthusiasm, or at least its utterance.

"MacNelly, shake hands with Cheseldine," said Duane, low-voiced.

The ranger captain stood dumb, motionless. But he saw Cheseldine's instant action and awkwardly he reached for the outstretched hand.

"Any of your men down here?" queried Duane sharply.

"No. They're up town."

"Come, Cheseldine, walk between us, and look straight ahead. Don't see anybody."

They set off up town. Cheseldine walked as if he were with friends on the way to dinner, except that his lips were mute. MacNelly walked like a man in a trance. There was not a word spoken in four blocks.

Presently Duane espied a stone building on a corner of the broad street. There was a big sign: Rangers' Bank. Duane touched Cheseldine's elbow pointed to the bank.

"Cheseldine do you want to go in the bank and see if the shipment of gold has come—the big haul?" asked Duane sarcastically. He hated to taunt the man but could not resist that much.

Cheseldine gave a violent start. Perhaps in that moment he understood. He made no reply.

"There's the hotel" said MacNelly. "Some of my men are there. We're scattered around."

They crossed the street went in through lobby office saloon, to a large room, like a hall, and here were men reading and smoking.

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Duane knew them—rangers!

When he snapped the handcuffs back on Cheseldine it was with a strange air of finality. It was as if he renounced. MacNelly the rangers, and certainly Cheseldine, all noted Duane's strange action and look.

"There, Cheseldine!"

And with a something almost of passion and violence he pushed the outlaw toward MacNelly. He was done with him. Did that action mean that, as ranger, he was turning Cheseldine over to the law, when as Buck Duane he wanted to meet him, to face him, to make him draw, to kill him?

MacNelly beckoned to his men.

"Boys, here he is. Cheseldine! Russell, you and Mills take him in the small room and guard him. Don't take your eyes off him till we decide what to do."

The rangers led Cheseldine away.

"Duane what had we better do with him for the present?" queried MacNelly. "There's a jail here. We can put him away till we're through. But would that be best? We've been lying low."

"No. How many men have you?"

"Fifteen."

"Keep two men guarding Cheseldine."

MacNelly left to go into the other room and returned, closing the door. Then he almost embraced Duane, would probably have done so but for the dark grimness that seemed to be coming over the man.

Instead he glowed. He sputtered, he tried to talk, to wave his hands. He was beside himself. And his rangers crowded closer, eager, like hounds ready to run. They all talked at once and the word most significant and frequent in their speech was Cheseldine.

MacNelly clapped his fist in his hand.

"This will make the adjutant sick with joy. Maybe he won't have it on the Governor. We'll show them about the ranger service. Cheseldine! How'd you ever do it? Oh, I knew you were a wonder. But I was sure you'd kill him."

"He didn't give me a chance," replied Duane. "Now, captain, not the half, nor the quarter of this job's done. The gang's coming down the road. I saw them from the train. They'll ride into town on the dot—two-thirty."

"How many?" asked MacNelly.

"Poggin, Blossom, Kane, Pan Handle Smith, Boldt, Jim Fletcher and another man I don't know. These

are the picked men of Cheseldine's gang. I'll bet they'll be the fastest, hardest bunch you rangers ever faced."

"Poggin! that's the hard nut to crack! I've heard their records since I've been in Val Verde. Where is Knell? They say he's a boy, but hell and blazes."

"Knell's dead."

"Ah!" exclaimed MacNelly softly. Then he grew businesslike, cool, and of harder aspect. "Duane, it's your game today. I'm only a ranger under orders. We've absolute faith in you. Make your plan, quick, so I can go around and post the boys who're not here."

"Put one man at each end of this street just at the edge of town. Let him hide there with a rifle to block the escape of any outlaw that we might fail to get. I had a good look at the bank building. It's well situated for our purpose."

"Put four men up in that room over the bank, four men, two at each open window. Let them hide till the game begins. They want to be there so in case these foxy outlaws get wise before they're down on the ground, or inside the bank. The rest of your men put inside behind the counters where they'll hide."

"Now go over to the bank, spring the thing on the bank officials and don't let them shut up the bank. You want their aid. Let them make sure of their gold. But the clerks and cashier ought to be at their desks or window when Poggin rides up."

"He'll glance in before he gets down. They make no mistakes, these fellows. We must be slicker than they are or lose. When you get the bank people wise, send your men over one by one. No hurry—no excitement—no unusual thing to attract notice in the bank."

"All right. That's great. Tell me, where do you intend to wait?"

"I'll wait in front—just inside the door," replied Duane with an effort.

"Why?" demanded the captain.

"Well," began Duane slowly, "Poggin will get down first and start in. But the others won't be far behind. They'll not get swift until inside. The thing is—they mustn't get clear inside, because the instant they do they'll pull guns. That means death to somebody. If we can we want to stop them just at the door."

"But will you hide?" asked MacNelly.

"Hide!" The idea had not occurred to Duane.

"There's a wide-open doorway. A sort of round hall, a vestibule with steps leading up to the bank. There's a door in the vestibule too. It leads somewhere. We can put men in there. You can be there."

Duane was silent.

"See here, Duane," began MacNelly nervously. "You shan't take any unnecessary risk here. You'll hide with the rest of us?"

"No!" The word was wrenched from Duane.

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