

THE LAST OF THE DUANES

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

MacNelly stared, and then a strange, comprehending light seemed to flit over his face.

"Duane I can give you no orders today," he said distinctly. "I'm only offering advice. Need you take any more risks? You've done a grand job for the service—already. You've paid me a thousand times for that pardon. You've redeemed yourself."

"The Governor the adjutant-general—the whole State will rise up and honor you. The game's almost up. We'll kill these outlaws or enough of them to break forever their power. I say as a ranger, need you take more risk than your captain?"

Still Duane remained silent. He was locked between two forces. And one a tide that was bursting at its bounds seemed about to overwhelm him. Finally that side of him the retreating self, the weaker, found a voice.

"Captain, you want this job to be sure?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"I've told you the way. I alone know the kind of men to be met. Just what I'll do or where I'll be I can't say yet. In meeting this the moment decides. But I'll be there!"

MacNelly spread wide his hands, looked helplessly at his curious and sympathetic rangers and shook his head.

"Now you've done your work—laid the trap—is this strange move of yours going to be fair to Jennie Lee?" asked MacNelly in deliberate, low voice.

Like a great tree chopped at the roots Duane vibrated to that. He looked up as if he had seen a ghost.

Mercilessly the ranger captain went on:

"Jennie Lee came to me in Austin. She was heartbroken. She reproached me. She begged me. She told me of your mother. She did all she could to get me to fetch you back and if I hadn't been powerless I would have done so."

"You can go back to her, Duane! It never seemed possible, but now it's true. Fight with us from cover—then go back to her. You will have served the Texas Rangers as no other man has. I'll accept your resignation. You'll be free, honored, happy—and rich. Jennie's rich, Duane. And she loves you! My God! how that girl loves you! She's—"

But Duane cut him short with a fierce gesture. He lunged up to his feet and the rangers fell back. Dark silent, grim as he had been, still there was a transformation singularly more sinister, stranger.

"Enough. I'm done," he said somberly. "I've planned. Do we agree—or shall I meet Poggin and his gang alone?"

MacNelly cursed and again threw up his hands, this time in baffled chagrin. There was deep regret in his dark eyes as they rested upon Duane.

"I accept, Duane," he rejoined quietly. "I'll go about the arrangements at once."

Duane was left alone.

Never had his mind been so quick, so clear, so wonderful in its understanding of what had heretofore been intricate and elusive impulses of his strange nature. His determination was to meet Poggin. Meet him before any one else had a chance—Poggin first—and then the others! He was as unalterable in that decision as if, on the instant of its acceptance, he had become stone.

At a few minutes before half-past two a dark compact body of horse-men appeared far down, turning into the road. They came at a sharp trot—a group that would have attracted attention anywhere at any time.

They came a little faster as they entered town—then faster still—now they were four blocks away—now three—now two. Duane backed down the middle of the vestibule, up the steps, and halted in the center of the wide doorway.

There seemed to be a rushing in his ears through which pierced sharp ringing clip-clop of iron hoofs. He could see only the corner of the street. But suddenly into that shot lean-limbed dusty bay horses. There was a clattering of nervous hoofs pulled to a halt.

Duane saw the tawny Poggin speak to his companions. He dis-

mounted quickly. They followed suit. They had the manner of ranchers about to conduct some business. No guns showed.

Poggin started leisurely for the bank-door, quickening step a little. The others, close together, came behind him. Blossom Kane had a bag in his left hand. Jim Fletcher was left behind, and he had already gathered up the bridles.

Poggin entered the vestibule first, with Kane on one side, Boldt on the other, a little behind him.

As he strode in he saw Duane.

"Great Scott!" he cried.

"Something inside Duane burst, piercing all of him with cold. Was it that fear?"

"Buck Duane!" echoed Kane.

One instant Poggin looked up, and Duane looked down.

Like a striking jaguar Poggin moved. Almost as quick, Duane threw his arm.

The guns boomed almost together. Duane felt a blow just before he pulled trigger. His thoughts came swift like the strange dots before his eyes.

His rising gun had loosened in his hand. Poggin had drawn quicker.

A tearing agony encompassed his breast. He pulled—pulled—at random.

Thunder of booming shots all around him.

Red flashes—jets of smoke—shrills, yells.

The end—yes—the end!

With fading sight he saw Kane go down, then Boldt. But supreme torture—bitterer than death—Poggin stood, mane like a lion's back to the wall, bloody-faced, grand, with his guns spouting red!

All faded—darkened. The thunder deadened. Duane fell, seemed floating.

There it drifted—Jennie Lee's sweet face, white, sad with dark tragic eyes—fading—fading—fading—

Light shone before Duane's eyes—thick, strange light that came and went. It seemed a long time with dull and booming sounds rushing by, filling all. It was a dream in which there was nothing. Drifting under a burden—darkness—light—sound—movement. Obscure struggling thought—vague sense of time—long time.

There was blackness and fire, creeping, consuming fire. He was rolled and wrapped in it—and a dark cloud carried him away, enveloped him.

He saw then, dimly, a room that was strange, strange people moving about, over him, with faint voices, far away, things in a dream.

He saw again, clearly, and consciousness returned, still strange, still unreal, full of those vague and far-away things. He was not dead, then. He lay stiff, like a stone, with a weight ponderous as a mountain upon him. And slow dull beating burning agony racked all his bound body.

A man bent over him, looked deep into his eyes, and seemed to whisper from a distance: "Duane—Duane—Ah, he knew me!"

After that another long time of darkness; when the light came again, clearer, this same dark-eyed earnest man bent over him. It was MacNelly—and with recognition the past flooded back.

Duane tried to speak. His lips were weak and limp. Their movement was barely perceptible.

"Have you—sent—for her?"

"No, oh no. It's not that bad.

You've a chance. Why, man, you'll get well. You'll pack a sight of lead all your life, Duane. The whole Southwest knows your story. You need never be ashamed again of the name Buck Duane. It'll live in Texas with that of Davy Crockett. Think of Jennie—home—mother!"

Then there was a white house—home—and his heart beat thick.

How familiar it all was—how strange, too! And all seemed magnified.

The someone in white cried low and knelt by his bed.

His mother flung wide her arms with strange gesture.

"That man—that's his father! Where is my boy? My son, oh, my son!"

It was sheer pleasure to lie by the west window and watch Uncle Jim whistle his stick and listen to him talk. He was old now and broken. He told so many interesting things about people Duane had known, people who had grown up and married, failed, succeeded, gone away, died. But it was hard to keep Uncle Jim off the subjects of guns, fights, outlaws. He could not seem to divine how mention of those things made Duane shrink.

Uncle Jim, old, childish now, and he had a pride in Duane. He wanted to hear it all—all of Duane's exile. And if there was one thing more than another that pleased him it was to speak of the bullets Duane carried in his body.

"Nine bullets, wasn't it? Nine in the last scrap. By gum! A man's a man to carry them. And you had three before?"

"Yes, uncle," replied Duane.

"Nine and three—that makes twelve. An even dozen. You could pack more than that, my boy, and get away with them. There's Cole Younger—I've seen him. He's got twenty-three. But he's a bigger man than you—more flesh.

"Funny, wasn't it, about the doctors only cuttin' one bullet out of you—that one in your breast bone?

It was a forty-one caliber, an unusual cartridge.

"There was one bullet left in Poggin's gun, and it was the same kind as the one cut out. By gum! boy, that bullet would have killed you if it'd stayed there."

"It would, indeed, uncle," said Duane, and the old, haunting, somber mood returned.

But Jennie was with him most of the time, and when she was by there was a deep, quiet joy such as had never been his.

She knelt by him at the window, her sweet face still white, but with warm life beneath the marble, her dark eyes still intent, haunted by shadows but no longer tragic.

"The pain Duane—is it any worse today, dear?" she asked.

"No, it's the same. It will always be the same, Jennie. I'm full of lead, you know. But I don't mind that."

"It's the old mood—the fear?"

"Yes. It haunts me. I'll be able to go out soon. Then it'll come back."

"No—no, Duane," she said.

"Some drunken cowboy—some fool with a gun will hunt me out," he said miserably. "Buck Duane! To kill Buck Duane!"

"Hush! Listen to me," she whispered, with tender arms round him. "I understand. But you will never have to draw again, Duane. You'll never kill another man, thank God! For you will have me with you always. Soon you'll be well. Then, Duane, we'll—we'll be married."

"We'll take Uncle Jim and mother and go far from Texas, north somewhere—to Indiana, Michigan, anywhere that you want. I have money, Duane! Isn't it wonderful? The little ragged girl you met out in El—out in the Rio Grande!"

Do you remember my greaser sandals—no stockings! And I was lame then. Oh, it all comes back! But that's past. We'll buy a farm, and you will be busy with horses and cattle and sheep.

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"You'll forget. I'll love you so. Maybe—I-I hope—oh, I pray—there'll be children. We'll be happy, Duane."

They watched the sun set golden over the line of low hills in the West, down over the Nueces, far beyond the wild country of the Rio Grande which they were never to see again.

(The End.)

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