

THE LAST OF THE DUANES

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

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE

Buck Duane, quick on the draw, kills Cal Bain in self-defense and finds himself an outlaw. Flying from pursuit, he meets Luke Stevens, another outlaw, and the two become pals. Luke narrowly escapes capture and Duane is shocked to find his brother outlaw severely wounded.

Duane buries Stevens. Then he goes on to Bland's camp, where he gets into a fight with a man called Bosomer and wounds the latter. He makes a friend of an outlaw at Bland's called Euchre, who tells him of Mrs. Bland and the girl Jennie.

Duane meets Jennie, and promises to try his utmost to get her away from Bland's camp. To avert suspicion, it is planned that he pretend to care for Mrs. Bland. Euchre introduces him to the latter and he engages in conversation with her.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

Evidently the outlaw's wife liked Euchre, for her keen glance rested with amusement upon him.

"As for Jen, I'll tell you her story some day," went on the woman. "It's a common enough story along this river. Euchre here is a tender-hearted old fool, and Jen has taken him in."

When Euchre had shuffled into the house Mrs. Bland turned to Duane with curiosity and interest in her gaze.

"I'll tell you, Duane," she said earnestly. "I'm sure glad if you mean to bide a while. I'm an outlaw's wife, and I hate him and the life I have to lead. I come of a good family in Brownsville."

"I never knew Bland was an outlaw till long after he married me. We were separated at times, and I imagined he was away on business. But the truth came out. Bland shot my own cousin, who told me. My family cast me off, and I had to flee with Bland."

"I was only eighteen, then. I've lived here since. I never see a decent woman or man. I never hear anything about my old home or folks or friends. I'm buried here—buried alive with a lot of thieves and murderers. Can you blame me for being glad to see a young fellow—a gentleman—like the boys I used to go with?"

"I tell you it makes me feel full—I want to cry. I'm sick for somebody to talk to. I have no children, thank God. If I had I'd not stay here. I'm sick of this hole. I'm lonely—"

There appeared to be no doubt about the truth of all this. Genuine emotion checked—then halted the hurried speech. She broke down and cried. It seemed strange to Duane that an outlaw's wife—and a woman who fitted her consort and the wild nature of their surroundings—should have weakness enough to weep.

"Would Bland object if I called on you occasionally?" inquired Duane. "No, he wouldn't. He likes me to have friends. Ask him yourself when he comes back. The trouble has been that two or three of his men fell in love with me, and when half drunk got to fighting. You're not going to do that."

"I'm not going to get half drunk, that's certain," replied Duane.

Without any solicitation or encouragement from Duane, the Bland woman fell passionately in love with him. His conscience was never troubled about the beginning of that affair. She launched it herself. It took no great perspicuity on his part to see that.

He was playing a game of love. Playing with life and death! Sometimes he trembled, not that he feared Bland or Alloway, or any man, but at the depths of life he had come to see into. He was carried out of his old mood.

Not once since this daring motive had stirred him had he been haunted by fancies of Bain beside his bed. Rather had he been haunted by Jennie's sad face—her wistful smile—her eyes.

He never was able to speak a word to her. What little communication he had with her was through Euchre, who carried short messages. But he caught glimpses of her every time he went to the Bland house. She contrived somehow to pass door or window, to give him a look when chance afforded.

And Duane discovered with surprise that these moments were more thrilling to him than any with Mrs. Bland. Often Duane knew Jennie was sitting just inside the window, and then he felt inspired in his talk, and it was all made for her. So at least she came to know him while as yet she was almost a stranger.

Jennie had been instructed by Euchre to listen, to understand that this was Duane's only chance to help keep her mind from constant worry, to gather the import of every word which had a double meaning.

Euchre said that the girl had begun to wither under the strain, to burn

up with intense hope, which had flamed within her. But all the difference Duane could see was a paler face and darker, more wonderful eyes. The eyes seemed to be entreating him to hurry, that time was flying, that soon it might be too late.

Then there was another meaning in them—a light—a strange fire wholly inexplicable to Duane. It was only a flash, gone in an instant. But he remembered it because he had never seen it in any other woman's eyes.

Inside Duane's body there was a strife; his heart pounded, his blood raced, his breast bore a heavy pang. Something hot had dug into his vitals and the pain remained. In the depths of his mind, his soul, there was chaos.

He left something dying in him. He suffered. Hope seemed far away. Despair had seized upon him and was driving him into reckless mood when he thought of Jennie.

He had forgotten her. He had forgotten that he had promised to save her. He had forgotten that he meant to snuff out as many lives as might stand between her and freedom.

The very remembrance sheered off his morbid introspection. She made a difference. How strange for him to realize that! He felt grateful to her. He had been forced into outlawry; she had been stolen from her people and carried into captivity.

They had met in the river fastness, he to instill hope into her despairing life, she to be the means, perhaps, of keeping him from sinking to the level of her captors. He became conscious of a strong beating desire to see her, talk with her.

These thoughts had run through his mind while on his way to Mrs. Bland's house. He had let Euchre go on ahead because he wanted more time to compose himself.

Darkness had almost set in when he reached his destination. There was no light in the house. Mrs. Bland was waiting for him on the porch.

She embraced him, and the sudden, violent, unfamiliar contact sent such a shock through him that he all but forgot the deep game he was playing. She, however, in her agitation did not notice his shrinking.

"Duane, you love me?" she whispered.

"Yes—yes," he burst out, eager to get it over, and even as he spoke he caught the pale gleam of Jennie's face through the window.

He felt a shame—he was glad she could not see. Did she remember that she had promised not to misunderstand any action of his? What did she think of him, seeing him out there in the dusk with this bold woman in his arms?

Somehow that dim sight of Jennie's pale face, the big dark eyes, thrilled him, inspired him to his hard task of the present.

"Listen, dear," he said to the woman, and he meant his words for the girl. "I'm going to take you away from this outlaw den if I have to kill Bland Alloway, Rudd—anybody who stands in my path. You were dragged here. You are good—I know it. There's happiness for you somewhere—a home among good people who will care for you. Just wait till—"

His voice trailed off and failed from excess of emotion. Kate Bland closed her eyes and leaned her head on his breast.

Duane felt her heart beat against his, and conscience smote him a keen blow. If she loved him so much! But memory—understanding of her character hardened him again, and he gave her such commiseration as was due her sex, and no more.

"It's Bland!" whispered the woman, grasping Duane with shaking hands. "You must run! No, he'd see you. That'd be worse. It's Bland. I know his horse's trot."

"But you said he wouldn't mind my calling here," protested Duane. "Euchre's with me. It'll be all right."

"Maybe so," she replied, with visible effort at self-control. Manifestly she had a great fear of Bland. "If I could only think!"

Then she dragged Duane to the door, and pushed him in.

"Euchre, come out with me. Duane, you stay with the girl. I'll tell Bland you're in love with her. Jen, if you give us away I'll wring your neck!" The swift action and fierce whisper told Duane that Mrs. Bland was herself again. Duane stepped close to Jennie, who stood near the window.

Neither spoke, but her hands were outstretched to meet his own. They were small, trembling hands, cold as ice. He held them closely, trying to convey what he felt—that he would protect her. She leaned against him, and they looked out of the window.

The approaching outlaws, halted a road or so from the porch. Then Mrs. Bland uttered an exclamation, ostensibly meant to express surprise, and hurried out to meet them.

panion, but he believed it was Alloway.

"Dog-tired we are and starved," said Bland heavily. "Who's here with you?"

"That's Euchre on the porch. Duane is inside at the window with Jen," replied Mrs. Bland.

"Duane!" he exclaimed. Then he whispered low—something Duane could not catch.

"Why, I asked him to come," said the chief's wife. She spoke easily and naturally, and made no change in tone. "Jen has been ailing. She gets thinner and whiter every day. Duane came here one day with Euchre, saw Jen, and went loony over her pretty face, same as all you men. So I let him come."

"Kate, you let Duane make love to Jennie?" queried Bland incredulously. "Yes, I did," replied the wife stubbornly. "Why not? Jen's in love with him. If he takes her away and marries her, she can be a decent woman."

Bland kept silent a moment, then his laugh peeled out loud and harsh. "Jennie," whispered Duane, "that was clever of Mrs. Bland. We'll keep up the deception. Any day now be ready."

She pressed close to him, and a barely audible "Hurry" came breathing into his ear.

Then he stepped out into the moonlight and spoke. Bland returned the greeting and, though he was not amiable, he did not show resentment.

"Met Jasper as I rode in," said Bland presently. "Duane, I want you to stop quarreling with my men. If you were one of us—that'd be different. I can't keep my men from fighting. But I'm not called on to let an outsider hang around my camp and plug my rustlers."

"I guess I'll have to be hitting the trail for somewheres," said Duane.

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"Why not join my band? You've got a bad start already, Duane, and if I know this border you'll never be a respectable citizen again. You're a born killer. I know every bad man on this frontier."
"More than one of them have told me that something exploded in their brain, and when sense came back there lay another dead man. It's not so with me. I've done a little shooting too; but I never wanted to kill another man just to rid myself of the last one."
"My dead men don't sit on my chest at night. That's the gun-fighter's trouble. He's crazy. He has to kill a new man—he's driven to it to forget the last one."

"But I'm no gun-fighter," protested Duane. "Circumstances made me—"
"No doubt," interrupted Bland with a laugh. "Circumstances made me a rustler. You don't know yourself. You're young; you've got a temper; your father was one of the most dangerous men Texas ever had. I don't see any other career for you. Instead of going it alone—a lone wolf, as the Texans say—why not make friends with other outlaws? You'll live a while longer."

Euchre squirmed in his seat. "Boss, I've been givin' the boy exactly the same line of talk. That's why I took him in to bunk with me. If he makes pards among us there won't be any more trouble. An' he'd be a grand feller for the gang. Slickest of all the gun-throwers I ever seen! An' I've rustled around over the southwest."

(Continued Next Week)

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