



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. Buck plays the game, making Mrs. Bland think he loves her. To avert Bland's suspicion, Mrs. Bland pretends to her husband that Buck has come to visit Jennie. Bland urges Buck to become a regular member of his outlaw gang.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

Accounting for the short cut across grove and field, it was about five minutes' walk up to Bland's house. To Duane it seemed long in time and distance, and he had difficulty in restraining his pace. As he walked there came a gradual and subtle change in his feelings. Again he was going out to meet in conflict. He could have avoided this meeting. But despite the fact of his courting the encounter, he had not as yet felt that hot, inexplicable expulsion of blood. The motive of this deadly action was not personal, and somehow that made a difference. No outlaws were in sight. He saw several Mexican herders with cattle. Blue columns of smoke curled up over some of the cabins. The fragrant smell of it reminded Duane of his home—that he used to cut the wood for the stove. He noted a cloud of creamy mist rising above the river, dissolving in the sunlight. Then he entered Bland's lane. While yet some distance from the cabin he heard loud, angry voices of man and woman. Bland and Kate still quarreling! He took a quick survey of the surroundings. There was now not even a Mexican in sight. Then he hurried a little. Half-way down the lane he turned his head to peer through the cottonwoods. This time he saw Euchre coming with the horses. There was no indication that the old outlaw might lose his nerve at the end. Duane had feared this. Duane now changed his walk to a leisurely saunter. He reached the porch and then distinguished what was said inside the cabin. "If you do—Bland, by Heaven, I'll fix you and her!" That was panted out in Kate Bland's full voice. "Let me loose! I'm going in there, I tell you!" replied Bland hoarsely. "What for?" "I want to make a little love to her. Ha-Ha! It'll be fun to have the laugh on her new lover." "You lie!" cried Kate Bland. "Let me go!" His voice grew hoarser with passion. "No, no! I won't let you go! You'll choke the—truth out of her! You'll kill her!" "The truth!" gritted Bland. "Yes. I lied. Jen lied. But she lied to save you. You needn't—murder her—for that." Bland cursed horribly. Then followed a wrestling sound of bodies in violent straining contact—the scrape of feet—the jangle of spurs—a crash of sliding table or chair, and then the cry of a woman in pain. Duane stepped into the open door—inside the room. Kate Bland lay half across a table, where she had been flung, and she was trying to get to her feet. Bland's back was turned. He had opened the door into Jennie's room and had one foot across the threshold. Duane caught the girl's low, shuddering cry. "Good morning!" he called, loud and clear.

With catlike swiftness Bland wheeled—then froze on the threshold. His sight, quick as his action, caught Duane's menacing, unmistakable position. Bland's big frame filled the door. He was in a bad place to reach for his gun. But he would not have time to step. Duane read in his eyes the desperate calculation of chances. For a fleeting instant Bland shifted his gaze to his wife. Then his whole body seemed to vibrate with the swing of his arm. Duane shot him. He fell forward, his gun exploding as it dug into the floor, and it dropped loose from stretching fingers. Duane stood over him, stooped to turn him on his back. Bland looked up with clouded gaze, then gasped his last.

"Duane, you've killed him!" cried Kate Bland huskily. "I knew you'd have to." She staggered against the wall, her eyes dilating, her strong hands clenching her face half stunned, but showed no grief. "Jennie!" called Duane sharply. "Oh—is it you—Duane?" came a halting reply. "Yes. Come out. Hurry!" She came out with uneven steps, seeing only him, and she stumbled over Bland's body. Duane caught her arm, swung her behind him. He feared the woman when she realized how she had been duped. His action was protective, and his movement toward the door equally significant. "Duane!" cried Mrs. Bland. It was no time for talk. Duane edged on, keeping Jennie behind him. At that moment there was a pounding of iron-shod hoofs out in the lane. Kate Bland bounded to the door. When she turned back her amazement was changing to realization. "Where're you taking Jen?" she cried, her voice like a man's. "Get out of my way!" replied Duane. His look, perhaps, without speech, was enough for her. In an instant she was transformed into a fury. "You hound! All the time you were fooling me. You made love to me! You let me believe—you swore you loved me! Now I see what was queer about you! All for that slut! But you can't have her. You'll never leave here alive! Give me that girl! Let me get at her! She'll never win any more men in this camp!" She was a heavy, powerful woman, and it took all Duane's strength to ward off her onslaughts. She clawed at Jennie over his upheld arm. Every second her fury increased. "Help! Help! Help!" she shrieked in a voice that must have penetrated to the remotest cabin in the valley. "Let go! Let go!" cried Duane, low and sharp. He still held his gun in his right hand, and it began to be hard for him to ward the woman off. His coolness had gone with her shriek for help. "Let go!" he repeated, and he shoved her fiercely. Suddenly she snatched a rifle off the wall and backed away, her strong hands fumbling at the lever. As she jerked it down, throwing shell into the chamber and cocking the weapon, Duane leaped upon her. He struck up the rifle as it went off, the powder burning his face. "Jennie, run out! Get on a horse!" he said, still low and sharp. Jennie flashed out of the door. With an iron grasp Duane held to the rifle-barrel. He had grasped it with his left hand, and he gave such a powerful pull that he swung the woman off the floor. But he could not loose her grip. She was as strong as he. "Kate! Let go!" He tried to intimidate her. She did not see his gun thrust in her face, or reason had given way to such an extent to passion that she did not care. She cursed. Her husband had used the same curses, and from her lips they seemed strange, unsexed, more deadly. Like a tigress she fought him. Her face no longer resembled a woman's. The evil of that outlaw life, the wildness and rage, the meaning to kill was, even in such a moment, terribly impressed upon Duane. He heard a cry from outside—a man's cry, hoarse and alarming. It made him think of loss of time. This demon of a woman might yet block his plan. "Let go!" he whispered and felt his lips stiff. In the grimness of that instant he relaxed his hold on the rifle-barrel. With a sudden, redoubled, irresistible strength, she wrenched the rifle down and discharged it. Duane felt a blow—a shock—then a burning agony tearing through his breast. He staggered backward, almost falling. The woman's strong hands, awkward from passion, again fumbled at the lever of the gun. He caught the rifle-barrel again, this time in his right hand, and pulled. She tripped over a chair and crashed down. Duane leaped back, whirled, flew out of the door to the porch. The sharp cracking of a gun halted him. He saw Jennie holding to the bridle of his bay horse. Euchre sat astride the other and he had a Colt leveled, and he was firing down the lane. Then came a single shot, heavier, and Euchre's ceased. He fell from the horse. A swiftly shifted gaze showed to Duane a man coming down the lane. Chens Alloway! His gun was smoking. He broke into a run. Then, in an instant he saw Duane, tried to check his pace as he swung up his gun. But that slight pause was fatal. Duane shot, and Alloway was falling when his gun went off. His bullet whistled close to Duane and thudded into the cabin.

Duane bounded down to the horses. Jennie was trying to hold the plunging bay. Euchre lay flat on his back, dead, a bullet-hole in his shirt, his face set hard, and his hands twisted around gun and bridle. "Jennie, you've nerve all right," cried Duane as he dragged down the horse she was holding. "Up with you now. There! Never mind long stirrups! Hang up somehow!" He caught his bridle out of Euchre's clutching grip and leaped astride. The frightened horses jumped into a run and thundered down the lane into the road. Duane saw men running from cabins. He heard shouts. But there were no shots fired. Jennie seemed able to stay on her horse; but without stirrups she bounced so hard that Duane rode closer and reached out to grasp her arm. Thus they rode through the valley to the trail that led up over the steep and broken Rim-Rock. As they began to climb Duane looked back. No pursuers were in sight. "Jennie, we're going to get away!" he cried, exultation for her in his voice. She was gazing, horror-stricken, at his breast as, in turning to look back, he faced her. "Oh, Duane, your shirt's all bloody!" she faltered, pointing with trembling finger. With her word Duane became aware of two things—the hand he instinctively placed to his breast still held his gun—and he had sustained a terrible wound. He had been shot through the breast far enough down to give him grave apprehension of his life. Little pain attended the injury, and no sense of weakness yet. The clean-cut bullet-hole bled freely both at its entrance and where it had come, but with no signs of hemorrhage. He did not bleed at the mouth; however, he began to cough up a reddish tinged foam. Jennie, with pale face and mute lips looked at him. "I'm badly hurt, Jennie," he said; "but I guess I'll stick it out." "The woman—did she shoot you?" "Yes. She was a devil. Euchre told me to look out for her. I wasn't quick enough." "You didn't have to—to—" shivered the girl. "My God, no!" he replied. They did not stop climbing while Duane tore a scarf and made compresses, which he bound tightly over his wounds. The fresh horses made fast time up the rough trail. From open places Duane looked down. When they surmounted the steep ascent and stood on top of the Rim-Rock, with no signs of pursuit down the valley, and with the wild, broken fastnesses before them, Duane turned to the girl and assured her that they now had every chance of escape. "Jennie, we're going to get away," he said with gladness. "I'll be well in a few days. You don't know how strong I am. We'll hide by day and travel by night. I can get you across the river." "And then?" she asked. "We'll find some honest rancher." "And then?" she persisted. "Why—" he began slowly. "That's as far as my thought ever got. It was pretty hard, I tell you, to assure myself of so much. It means your safety. You'll tell your story. You'll be sent to some village or town and taken care of until a relative or friend is notified."

"And you?" she inquired in a strange voice. Duane kept silence. "What will you do?" she went on. "Jennie, I'll go back to the brakes. I daren't show my face among respectable people. I'm an outlaw." "You're no criminal!" she declared with deep passion. "Jennie, on this border the little difference between an outlaw and a criminal doesn't count for much." "You won't go back among those terrible men? You, with your gentleness and sweetness—all that's good about you! Oh, Duane, don't, don't go!" "I can't go back to the outlaws, at least Bland's band. No, I'll go alone. I'll lone wolf it, as they say on the border. What else can I do, Jennie?" "Oh, I don't know. Couldn't you hide? Couldn't you slip out of Texas—go far away?" "I could never get out of Texas without being arrested. I could hide, but a man must live. Never mind about me, Jennie." "Duane, if ever I'm safe out of this awful country," she cried, "I'll go to the Governor. I'll tell him your story. I'll tell him mine. I'll get you pardoned."

As he looked down upon her, a slight slender girl with bedraggled dress and disheveled hair, her face pale and quiet, a little stern in sleep, and her long, dark lashes lying on her cheeks, he seemed to see her fragility, her prettiness, her femininity as never before. But for him she might at that very moment have been a broken, ruined girl, lying back in that cabin of Blands. Tomorrow she would be gone, among good kind people, with a possibility of finding her relatives. He thanked God for that; nevertheless he felt a pang. She slept more than half the day. Duane kept guard, always alert, whether he was sitting, standing, or walking. The rain pattered steadily on the roof and sometimes came in gusty flurries through the door. The horses were outside in a shed that afforded poor shelter, and they stamped restlessly. Duane kept them saddled and bridled. (Continued Next Week)

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