



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.

A quarrel later develops in which Duane kills Bland and rushes off with Jennie after a terrific struggle with Mrs. Bland. He plans to leave Jennie in good hands until a relative or friend is located, and then go on alone on the trail. He keeps careful guard over her.

Despite his care Jennie is lost. Then for three years Buck is on the trail and legends about him spread, and finally he takes the risk of calling on Captain MacNelly of the Rangers, who he has heard wants to see him. MacNelly greets him rather warmly.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

—the person who has been instrumental in interesting me in your case. But all the same, in spite of this, you're a Texas outlaw, accountable to the State. You're perfectly aware that under existing circumstances, if you fell into the hands of the law, you'd probably hang—at least go to jail for a long term."

"That's what kept me on the dodge all these years," replied Duane.

"Certainly," MacNelly removed his cigar.

His eyes narrowed and glittered. The muscles along his brown cheeks set hard and tense. He leaned closer to Duane, laid sinewy, pressing fingers upon Duane's knee.

"Listen to this," he whispered hoarsely. "If I place a pardon in your hand—make you a free, honest citizen once more—clear your name of infamy, make your mother, your sister proud of you—will you swear yourself to a service, any service I demand?"

Duane sat stock-still, stunned. Slowly, more persuasively, with show of earnest agitation, Captain MacNelly reiterated his startling query.

"My God!" burst from Duane. "What's this? MacNelly, you can't be in earnest!"

"Never more so in my life. I've a deep game. I'm playing it square. What do you say?"

He rose to his feet. Duane, as if impelled, rose with him. Ranger and outlaw then locked eyes that searched each other's souls. In MacNelly's Duane read truth, strong, fiery purpose, hope, even gladness, and a fugitive, mounting assurance of victory.

Twice Duane endeavored to speak, failed of all save a hoarse, incoherent sound until, forcing back a flood of speech, he found a voice:

"Any service? Every service! MacNelly, I give my word," said Duane.

"Right here ends the career of Buck Duane, outlaw and gun-fighter," said MacNelly, and seating himself, he took the pen from Duane's fingers and wrote several lines in several places upon the paper. Then, with a smile, he handed it to Duane.

"That makes you a member of Company A, Texas Rangers."

"So that's it!" burst out Duane, a light breaking in upon his bewilderment. "You want me for ranger service?"

"Sure. That's it," replied the captain dryly. "Now to hear what that service is to be. I've been a busy man since I took this job and as you may have heard, I've done a few things. I don't mind telling you that political influence put me in here, and that, up Austin way, there's a good deal of friction in the Department of State in regard to whether or not the ranger service is any good, whether it should be discontinued or not."

"I'm on the party's side who's defending ranger service. I contend that it's made Texas habitable. Well, it's been up to me to produce results. So far I have been successful. My great ambition is to break up the outlaw gangs along the river. I have never ventured in there yet, because I've been waiting to get the lieutenant I needed. You, of course, are the man I had in mind."

"It's my idea to start way up the Rio Grande and begin with Cheseldine. He's the strongest, the worst outlaw of the times. He's more than a rustler. It's Cheseldine and his gang who are operating on the banks. They're doing bank robbing. That's my private opinion; but it's not backed up by any evidence."

"Cheseldine doesn't leave evidences. He's intelligent, cunning. I assume, of course, that you are a stranger to him and to the country he dominates. It's five hundred miles west of your ground, big as that is."

"Well, I want you to drift over into Cheseldine's country. Whatever way you decide is best you will proceed to act upon. You are your own boss. You know such men and how they can be approached. You will take all the time needed, if it's months."

"It will be necessary for you to communicate with me, and that will be a difficult matter. For Cheseldine dominates several whole counties. You must find some way to let me know when I and my rangers are needed. The plan is to break up Cheseldine's gang. It's the toughest job on the border."

"Arresting him alone isn't to be heard of. He couldn't be brought out. Killing him isn't much better, for his select men, the ones he operates with, are as dangerous to the community as he is."

"We want to kill or jail this choice selection of robbers and break up the rest of the gang. To end them, to get among them somehow, to learn their movements, to lay your trap for us rangers to spring—that, Duane, is

your service to me; and God knows, it's a great one!"

"I have accepted it," replied Duane. "Your work will be secret. You are now a ranger, in my service; but no one except the few I choose to tell will know of it till we pull off the job. You will simply be Buck Duane, the Lone Wolf, till it suits our purpose to acquaint Texas with the fact that you are a ranger."

"You'll see there's no date on that pardon. No one will ever know just when you entered the service. Perhaps we can make it appear that all or most of your outlawry has really been good service to the State. At that, I'll believe it'll turn out so."

"Captain MacNelly, I'd like to know how this came about. I can't realize it yet. Some things are strange to me. Who interested you in my case? Won't you explain?"

"Sure I will," replied Captain MacNelly as he reached for another cigar. "It must have been three years ago when I first began to hear your name mentioned at Austin, in the adjutant-general's office and elsewhere. Just casually, you understand, and I took no particular notice."

"Then I heard that women of your family were working to get influence for you. This was before you became famous as an outlaw. Of course, a little later, after the Bland affair, your name grew to be a household word in Texas. From then on your reputation grew."

"About this time, which was about the time I became exceedingly busy with my rangers, I got an anonymous letter. It was from a woman, and it entreated me not to go on your trail. It was a remarkable letter. I have it somewhere, and shall find it for you."

"I was visited by a young woman who claimed to be a member of your household at Wellston. I took her for your sister or near relative—in fact, called her Miss Duane, which at the time she did not correct."

"She had been to see the Governor; and, of course, he had turned her down. The Governor is against outlaws, the same as he is against rangers. This girl wanted an audience with the adjutant-general, and in his absence she ran across me."

"I want to say here that she electrified me. Before she left my office I was ready to fight for her. I promised to speak to the adjutant-general and to use what influence I had in her behalf. She wanted a parole for you, if not a pardon."

"I was absent from Austin when she came the next time. She won the interest of Adjutant-General Reed, and he even went to the Governor with her. Sure, they only got turned down. I learned from Reed's secretary that this girl was a Miss Lee instead of Miss Duane. Evidently she was wealthy."

"It was a fact, however, that she lived at your mother's home in Wellston. If money could have helped your case there at the capital it sure would have been forthcoming."

"All this interested me. I wrote to Miss Lee, and told her that my duties would soon take me to the Nueces country again, and that I would find out all I could about you. She replied—a grateful, sweet, womanly letter.

"I wrote her from several towns on the border, and heard from her. It was in this way that I kind of kept in touch with your family. And it was on this trip that I hatched out my plan to make a ranger of you."

"When I got back to Austin I laid my plan before Adjutant-General Reed. He hailed it with enthusiasm. I tell you your cousin, Miss Lee—I presumed she was your cousin—certainly had won over Reed. We went to call upon the Governor."

"I'm not likely to forget that interview in a hurry. We called on him to give us a pardon for you. We promised we would make you render the State a service as ranger. We found ourselves precipitated into a fierce debate upon the old question of the ranger service."

(Continued Next Week)

One Sunday morn, the pastor noticed a new member at church. He went over to talk with the newcomer.

Well, well, I'm mighty glad to see you, Rufus. Guess you-all haven't been to church in a good while.

I had to come. I need strength, answered Rufus. You see, it's this way. I've got a job whitewashin' a chicken coop and weedin' a watermelon patch.

No matter where I hide, sighed the leopard, I'm always spotted.

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