

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 Bosomer 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.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY
"The Governor got mad and flayed us alive. Most rangers were lazy, useless gun-fighting shysters! Reed lost his temper. He's hot for the service. But I kept cool, and told the Governor straight out that if he'd pardon you I'd break up Cheseldine's gang on the river. That sort of floored the Governor. He got interested."

"I talked to him for an hour, explained how there were only two ways to exterminate Cheseldine and the like. Either with an army or with the ranger service, employing such a scout as you. The army idea wasn't possible. But he was impressed by the other. He said: 'Set an outlaw to catch an outlaw, eh?'"

"Then he pondered a while and at last rang for his secretary. 'My political enemies say I'm not liberal-minded,' he went on. 'Now, I'm going to make this a test case of the ranger service. I'll pardon this gun-sharp Duane on condition you make him a ranger. That is, he'll not be pardoned until he is a ranger. Then we'll see how the scheme works out.'" "MacNelly, I want to see this Miss Lee," said Duane.

"I was thinking of that. It's a good chance. Maybe there'll never be another one." He paused a moment, chewing his cigar. "All right; I see no reason against your meeting her," he went on. "But let me arrange the matter as suits me. Tomorrow I'll send a ranger over to Shirley. There's a train and stage, too. No, let's turn in, Duane. We've talked a deal. And I was tired before we began. Make yourself a bed there. Good night."

Duane stepped upon the porch and rang the bell. After what appeared to be a long time a negro maid opened the door.

"A-caller to see Miss Lee," said Duane.

The maid asked him in and led him to a parlor. It was a large room, light enough, yet full of unfamiliar shapes. He stood there uncertain, waiting. The maid returned to say that Miss Lee would be right in.

Whoever Miss Lee was, she must have connections with wealthy people. Duane felt long-absent associations become vivid in his mind.

Slowly he turned. A slender woman in white stood in the door, one hand clinging to the curtains, the other at her breast. She was whiter than her dress—as white as a flower. Her eyes were dark, strained, staring, beautiful. The look of them Duane had seen before.

Duane's lips uttered her name, yet he had a vague sense of not hearing his own voice. The movement of his lips, his hand, seemed to animate her. She had been as still as a statue, and now she was as if shot through and through with life. That supporting hand upon the curtain appeared to uphold her quivering form.

"Oh, Duane, don't you—know me?" She moved, she swept out her hands and the wonder of her eyes dimmed in a flood of tears. She stepped blindly. Duane's sight, straining with all the abnormal keenness of stunned faculties leaping back to power, caught a slight but unmistakable limp in her step.

In a flash all that had been strange about her vanished. He knew that faltering step. He was back in another world—one he had feared over in his heart and closed forever.

"My God! Who are you?" he cried hoarsely.

Then she met him, arms outstretched.

"Jennie! Jennie! Jennie!" she sobbed.

Swift as light Duane caught her up and held her crushed to his breast. The past, like denuding scales, fell from him. He stood holding her tight, with the feel of her warm, throbbing

breast and the clasp of her clinging arms as fles hand blood realities to fight a terrible fear that this was only another and the worst of those moments haunted by fantoms.

Despite a stunned consciousness, he never lost the true sense of the exquisite life of that moment. He felt her and the might of it was stronger than all the demons of his unhappy years. Jennie was not dead. She was alive—alive—alive! And he held her as if she had been his soul—his strength on earth—his hope of heaven—against his lips.

The strife of doubt all past, the encroaching of old dark moods fell short and faded. He found his sight again. And there rushed over him a tide of emotion unutterably sweet and full, strong, like an intoxicating wine, deep as his nature, something glorious and terrible as the blaze of the sun to one long in darkness.

He had become an outcast, a wanderer, a gunman, a victim of circumstances—he had loved and lost and suffered worse than death in that loss—he had gone down the endless bloody trail, a killer of men, a fugitive whose mind slowly and inevitably closed to all except the instinct to survive and a black despair.

And now, with this woman in his arms, her swelling breast against his, in this moment almost of resurrection, he bent under a storm of passion and joy possible only to him who had endured so much.

"Jennie! Jennie!" he whispered unsteadily. "No dream—no ghost—but you! I didn't know you."

"Yes, Jennie. And you never knew me!" She stirred and lifted her face from his breast. Her hands unclasped from his neck, fell to his shoulders, and caught there. A stain of red came into her white face. "Have I changed—so much—from that time over the Rim-Rock?"

"Changed! You're not the same girl! You've only that old look in your eyes. I saw you limp—that told me."

"I'm still a little lame."

"It was that. How everything rushed back! I saw you as on that first day in the cabin. It's all clearer than the thousand times I've dreamed it. Euchre and Bland and that fierce woman, his wife, and Alloway! The little shack where you hid and nursed me. Jennie, I went back there—lived there a whole year with dreams and ghosts."

He shuddered and looked out of the window, far beyond, in cold and sick fancy, to the wilds of desert gorge. Jennie lifted a hand and touched his cheek with ineffable tenderness.

"I lived there alone—alone like a crippled wolf. Oh, the lonely nights—the black night with their faces. But, Jennie, I found one thing—my salvation then."

He bent over her, looking deep into her dark, wet eyes.

"What?" she whispered.

"I found I loved you and one of my bitterest regrets was that you never knew it. Hear it now! I love you! I've always loved you! I learned to love you there at Bland's cabin when we planned to save you. But it never came to me till I'd lost you."

"Then the memory was all that kept my mind from going. Your eyes used to haunt me, Jennie. I could see them dark and sad and watchful as you peered through the window at me with that woman, Kate Bland. It all comes back."

"Jennie, you must have much to tell me; and I have much to tell you. When I think of what you must have done! Jennie, haven't you loved me—a little?"

She uttered a low laugh that was half sob and her arms slipped up to his neck again.

"A little! I nearly died of love for you," she whispered. "I've never lived a wakeful hour without loving you peered through the window at me. Oh, Duane, Duane, I love you!"

Their lips met in their first kiss. The sweetness, the fire, of her mouth seemed so new, so strange, so irresistible to Duane. His sore and hungry heart throbbed with thick and heavy beats. He felt the outcast's need of love and he gave up to the entrailing moment.

She met him half-way, returned kiss for kiss, clasp for clasp, her face scarlet her eyes closed, till, her passion and strength spent, she fell back upon his shoulder.

Duane suddenly thought she was going to faint. He divined then that she had understood him, would have denied him nothing, not even her life, in that moment. But she was overcome, and he suffered a pang of regret at his unrestraint.

"Jennie—don't mind it—I'm rough—I was carried away," he said. "I never knew life could be so sweet."

"I don't mind—I'm glad," she replied, slipping out of his arms. "But my breath went—and—and—Come, let's sit down here by the window."

She led him to a sofa and they sat down. It seemed then that each looked at the other with different eyes, hers dark and sad troubled, his glowing and soft, full of wonder.

Jennie slipped to her knees and her trembling hands reached up to Duane. "Don't tell me MacNelly has made you a ranger?" she implored.

"That's it," replied Duane and brought himself to face her. He feared a breakdown or at least a storm of weeping. But apparently she grew calmer now that the truth was out.

"He didn't make you a ranger just for an excuse for the pardon?"

"No. It's secret special service."

"Ah! What is it, Duane?"

"I'm to make my way west, find where Cheseldine hides out with his picked men, get in with them, and when they're ready to ride out on another raid or bank robbery I'm to plan a trap so MacNelly can kill them or capture them."

"Oh, Heaven; Duane, was it for that MacNelly got your pardon? He might as well have killed you. To send you on a mission like that! Duane, it's impossible. With your reputation, your known hatred of border criminals—with the death of Bland, Alloway, Hardin, all those outlaws against you, why, it would be utterly hopeless—impossible."

"No, Jennie, not that. It could be done by good management and luck."

"I mean you'd never succeed—and then come back," said Jennie. "You might do the same out there as you did in Bland's camp. But the risk's greater. I remember all about Cheseldine. I've never heard his name since we got away from Bland; but now it all comes back—Bland and Alloway, Hardin, too, in their talks."

"Duane, let me go back to MacNelly."

"What for?"

"To entreat him to release you."

"Why, he wouldn't. He's keen to do this thing. And I don't blame him. MacNelly's a fine fellow; he's not wanting in sympathy. But he's got a man's job, and you couldn't move him."

"Yes, I could. At least, if I couldn't persuade him, I could buy your release. The ranger service is poorly paid. They need money. He could do much with money. I'll pay him ten thousand dollars to release you."

"Jennie! Oh, you mustn't think of such a thing! He wouldn't consent. Remember, I'm practically bound to Governor Stone as well as Captain MacNelly."

"What Governor Stone would never know wouldn't hurt him," muttered Jennie.

The fire in her eyes had spread. Faint red spots appeared in her white cheeks. Her bosom rose and fell with deep, hurried breaths. Duane saw in her the fighting spirit of Texas and sensed a bursting storm.

"Dear Jennie, look at it this way," he said persuasively. "Thank Heaven I'm a free man now! Think how glad my mother will be. I've a hard job on hand. But you know I'm pretty well able to tackle it. I'll break up Cheseldine's band. And maybe I'll get away safe. There's a chance. Can't you imagine what I'll do with that chance—when all the time I'll know you love me—are waiting for me?"

For all the effect this speech produced he might as well have kept silent. Her eyes, blank now and blazing, were on him.

"Duane, return the pardon to MacNelly and go back to the Nueces. Be an outlaw again. I'll go with you." (Continued Next Week)

AS IT GOES
First Law: What are we going to have this morning?
Second Law: (wearily)—Roll call mostly, it seemeth, old chap.

Thin Lady: You're a coward. You're even afraid of your own shadow.
Fat Lady: Well, why wouldn't I be? It looks like a crowd following me.

Housewife: "Would you like some cake?"
Tramp: "Yes."
"Yes, what?"
"Yes, dear."

"Jack told me he could live on my kisses for ever."
"Are you going to let him?"
"Not till I find out what I'm going to live on!"

"Did the widow who was after Sam, marry him?"
"No, he escaped her."
"What did he die of?"

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