The LAST of the DUANES

by Zane Grey

Illustrated by Vernon 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.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

"Feller's name was Brown. Me an' him fell out over a hoss I stole from him over in Huntsville. We had a shootin' scrape then. Wal, as I was straddlin' my hoss back in Mercer I seen this Brown an' seen him before he seen me.

"Could have killed him too. But I wasn't breakin' my word to you. I kind of hoped he wouldn't spot me. But he did—an' fust shot he got me here. What do you think of this hole?"

"It's pretty bad," replied Duane, and he could not look the cheerful outlaw in the eyes.

"I reckon it is. Wal, I've had ome bad wounds I lived over. Guess nebbe I can stand this one. Now, Buck, get me some place in the brakes—leave me some grub an' water at my hand—an' then you clear out."

"Leave you here alone?" asked Duane sharply.

"Shore. You see, I can't keep up with you. Brown an' his friends will foller us acrost the river a ways. You've got to think of number one in this game."

"What would you do in my case?" asked Duane curiously.

"Wal, I reckon I'd clear out an' save my hide," replied Stevens.

Duane felt inclined to doubt the outlaw's assertion. For his own part he decided his conduct without further speech.

First, he watered the horses, filled canteens and water-bag, and then tied the pack upon his own horse. That done, he lifted Stevens upon his horse, and holding him in saddle, turned into the brakes, being careful to pick out hard or grassy ground that left little signs of tracks.

All that night, Duane, gloomy and thoughtful, attentive to the wounded outlaw, walked the trail and never halted till daybreak. He was tired then, and very hungry. Stevens seemed in bad shape, for he was still spirited and cheerful. Duane made camp. The outlaw refused food, but asked for both whiskey and water. Then he stretched out.

"Buck, will you take off my boots?" he asked with a faint smile on his pallid face.

Duane removed them, wondering if the outlaw had the thought that he did not want to die with his boots on.

"Pard, you—stuck—to me!" the outlaw whispered.

Duane caught a hint of gladness in the voice—he traced a faint surprise in the haggard face. Stevens seemed like a little child.

To Duane the moment was sad, elemental, big with a burden of mystery he could not understand.

Duane buried him in a shallow arroyo and heaped up a pile of stones to mark the grave. That done he saddled his comrade's horse, hung the weapons over the pommel, and mounting his own s eed he rode down the trail in the gathering twilight.

Presently the trail widened into a road, and that into a kind of square lined by a number of adobe and log buildings, of rudest structure. Within sight were horses, dogs, a couple of steers, Mexican women with children, and white men, all of whom appeared to be doing nothing.

His advent created no interest until he rode up to the white men, who were lolling in the shade of a house. This place evidently was a store and saloon, and from the inside came a hum of voices.

As Duane reined to a halt one of he loungers in the shade rose with a loud exclamation.

"Bust me if thet ain't Luke's hoss!"

The others accorded their interest, if not assent, by rising to advance toward Duane.

"How about it, Euchre? Ain't thet Luke's bay?" queried the first man.

"Plain as your nose," replied the fellow called Euchre.

"There ain't no doubt about thet then," laughed another, "fer Bosomer's nose is shore plain on the landscape."

These men lined up before Duane and as he cooly regarded them he thought they could have been recognized anywhere as desperadoes.

The man called Bosomer, who struck out in advance of the others, was a hard looking customer, with yellow eyes and an enormous nose. He had sandy hair and a skin the color of dust.

"Stranger, who are you, an' where did you git thet bay hoss?" he demanded.

His yellow eyes took in Stevens' horse, then the weapons hung on the saddle, and finally turned their glinting, hard light upward to Duane.

"Stranger, who are you?" asked another man, somewhat more civilly.

"My name's Duane," replied Duane curtly.

"An' how'd you come by the hoss?"

Duane answered briefly, and his words were followed by a short silence, during which the men looked at him. Bosomer began to twist his bearded tips.

"Reckon he's dead all right, or nobody'd hev his hoss an' guns," said Euchre.

"Mr. Duane," began Bosomer, in low, stinging tones, "I happen to be Luke Steven's side partner."

Duane looked him over, from dusty worn-out boots to his slouchy sombrero. That look seemed to inflame Bosomer.

"An' I want the hoss an' them guns," he shouted.

"You or anybody else can have them for all I care. I just fetched them in. But the pack is mine," replied Duane. "And say—I befriended your pard. If you can't use a civil tongue you'd better cinch it."

"Civil? Haw! Haw!" rejoined the outlaw. "I don't know you. How do we know you didn't plug Stevens, an' stole his hoss, an' jest happened to stumble down here?"

"You'll have to take my word, that's all," Duane replied sharply.

"Stranger, Bosomer is shore hot-headed," said the man Euchre. He did not appear unfriendly, nor were the others hostile.

At this juncture several more outlaws crowded out of the door, and the one in the lead was a tall man of stalwart physique. His manner proclaimed him a leader.

He had a long face, a flaming red beard, and clear cold blue eyes that fixed in close scrutiny upon

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Duane. He was not a Texan; in truth Duane did not recognize one of these outlaws as native to his state.

"I'm Bland," said the tall man authoritatively. "Who're you and what're you doing here?"

Duane looked at Bland as he had at the others. This outlaw chief appeared to be reasonable, if he was not courteous. Duane told his story again, this time a little more in detail.

"I believe you," replied Bland at once. "Think I know when a fellow's lying."

"I reckon you're on the right trail," put in Euchre. "That about Luke wantin' his boots took off—thet satisfies me. Luke hed a mortal dread of dyin' with his boots on."

At this sally the chief and his men laughed.

"You said Duane—Buck Duane?" queried Bland. "Are you a son of that Duane who was a gun-fighter some years back?"

"Yes," replied Duane.

"Never met him, and glad I didn't," said Bland with grim humor.

Boromer appeared at the door, pushing men who tried to detain him, and as he jumped clear of a lax reaching hand he uttered a snarl like an angry dog.

Manifestly the short while he had spent inside the saloon had been devoted to drinking and talking himself into a frenzy. Bland and the other outlaws quickly moved aside, letting Duane alone. When Bosomer saw Duane standing motionless and watchful, a strange change passed quickly in him. He halted in his tracks, and as he did that the men who had followed him out piled over each other in their hurry to get to one side.

Duane saw all the swift action, felt intuitively the meaning in it and in Bosomer's sudden change of front. The outlaw was keen, and he had expected a shrinking or at least a frightened antagonist.

But Duane did not speak a word. He had remained motionless for a long moment, his eyes pale and steady, his right hand like a claw.

That instant gave birth in Duane to power to read in his enemy's eyes the thought that preceded action. But he did not want to kill another man; he did not intend to. When Bosomer's hand moved Duane's gun in an outlaw an' rustler such as me was spouting fire, and Bosomer fell with his right arm shattered. He would never be able to draw a gun again.

When Duane went out with Euchre the sun was setting behind a blue range of mountains across the river in Mexico. The valley appeared to open to the southwest.

"The only feller who's goin' to put a close eye on you is Benson," said Euchre. "He runs the place an' sells drinks. The gang calls him Jackrabbit Benson because he's always got his eye peeled an' his ear cocked. Don't notice him if he looks you over, Buck.

"Benson is scared to death of every newcomer who rustles into Bland's camp. An' the reason, I take it, is because he's done somebody dirt. He's hidin'. Not from a sheriff or ranger! Men who hide from them don't act like Jackrabbit Benson.

"He's hidin' from some guy who's huntin' him to kill him. Wal, I'm always expectin' to see some feller ride in here and throw a gun on Benson. Can't say I'd be grieved."

"What have you against him?" inquired Duane, as he sat down beside Euchre.

"Waal, mebbe I'm cross-grained," replied Euchre apologetically. "Shore I can't be touchy. But I never stole nothin' but cattle from some rancher who never missed 'em, anyway. That sneak Benson—he was the means of puttin' a little girl in bland's way."

"Girl!" queried Duane, now with real attention.

"Shore. Bland's great on women. I'll tell you about this girl when we get out of here. Some of the gang are goin' to be sociable, an' I can't talk about the chief."

During the ensuing half hour a number of outlaws passed by Duane and Euchre, halted for a greeting, and sat down for a moment. They were all gruff, loud-voiced, merry, and good-natured. Duane replied civilly and agreeably when he was personally addressed, but he refused all invitations to drink and gamble. Evidently he had been accepted, in a way, as one of their clan. No one made any hint of an allusion to his affair with Bosomer. Duane saw readily that Euchre was well liked. One outlaw borrowed money from him; another asked for tobacco.

Next morning Duane found that a moody and despondent spell had fastened on him. Wishing to be alone, he went out and walked a trail leading around the river bluff. He thought and thought.

When he returned to the shack Euchre was cooking dinner.

"Say, Buck, I've news for you," he said, and his tone conveyed either pride in his possession of such news, or pride in Duane. "Feller named Bradley rode in this mornin'. He'd heard some about you.

"Told about the ace of spades they put over the bullet holes in thet cowboy Bain you plugged. Then there was a rancher shot at a water-hole twenty miles south of Weldon. Reckon you didn't do it?"

"No, I certainly did not," replied Duane.

"Wal, you get the blame. I ain't nothin' fer a feller to be mad at, but I'd rather not meet up with gun-play he never made. An', Buck, if you ever get famous as seems likely, you'll be blamed fer many a crime. The border'll make an outlaw an' murderer out of you. Wal, thet's enough of thet. I've more news. You're goin' to be popular."

"Popular. What do you mean?"

"I met Bland's wife this morn'n' She seen you the other day when you rode in. She shore wants to meet you an' so do some of the other women in camp. They always want to meet the new fellers who've just come in. It's lonesome for women here an' they like to hear news from the towns."

"Wait, wait here, I don't want to be introduced, I'd rather not meet my women," rejoined Duane.

"Shore I did you wouldn't. Don't blame you much. I was hopin', though, you'd take a little to thet poor lone one kid."

"What kid?" inquired Duane, in surprise.

"Didn't I tell you about Jennie—the girl Bland's holdin' here—the one Jackrabbit Benson had a hand in stealing?"

"You mentioned a girl. That's all. Tell me now," replied Duane abruptly.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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