

hounds. Find out who—there's something— I—oh—I—"

"Miss Lee, you're beside yourself," said Aiken, and his voice was cool and quiet. "This's no place for you. Don't distress yourself. You and the women need fear no injustice here. Go away. That'll be best for all of you."

Duane saw Miss Lee sink back fainting into the arms of men who carried her out of the crowd. Her voice had thrilled him. The sweet wildness of her action, her strange words, the one fleeting glance he had of her blanched face—these haunted Duane a moment, to pass away in stern divination of a crisis.

"Jeff, will you listen?" broke in Sibert hurriedly, his hand on the other man's arm.

Aiken nodded coolly. Duane, who had seen many men in perfect control of themselves under circumstances like these, recognized the spirit that dominated Aiken. He was white, cold, passionless. There were lines of bitter grief deep round his lips. If Duane ever realized the meaning of death he felt it then.

"Sure, this's your game, Aiken," said Sibert. "But hear me a minute. Reckon there's no doubt about this man bein' Buck Duane. He seen the placard out at the cross-roads. He rides in to Shirley. He says he's Buck Duane an' he's lookin' for Jeff Aiken. That's all clear enough.

"You know how these gun-fighters go lookin' for trouble. But here's what stumps me. Duane sits down there on the bench and let's old Abe Strickland grab his gun an' get the drop on him. More'n that, he gives me some strange talk about how if he couldn't make you believe he's innocent he'd better be dead.

"You see for yourself Duane ain't drunk or crazy or locoed. He doesn't strike me as a man who rode in here huntin' blood. So I reckon you'd better hold on till you hear what he has to say."

Then for the first time the drawn-

faced, hungry-eyed giant turned his gaze upon Duane. He had intelligence which was not yet subservient to passion. Moreover, he seemed the kind of man Duane would care most to have judge him in a critical moment like this.

"Listen," said Duane gravely, with his eyes steady on Aiken's. "I am Buck Duane. I never lied to any man in my life. I was forced into outlawry. I've never had a chance to leave the country. I've killed men to save my own life. I never harmed any woman.

"I rode thirty miles to-day deliberately to see what this reward was—who made it—what for. When I read the placard I went sick to the bottom of my soul. So I rode in here to find you—to tell you this. I never saw Shirley before to-day.

"It was impossible for me to have killed your wife. Last September I was two hundred miles north of here on the upper Nueces. I can prove that. Men who know me will tell you I couldn't murder a woman. I haven't any idea why such a deed should be laid on me. It's wild border gossip.

"I have no idea what reasons you have for holding me responsible. I only know you're wrong. You've been deceived. And see here, Aiken. You understand I'm a miserable man. I'm about broken, I guess. I don't care any more for life, for anything. If you can't look me in the eye, man to man, and believe what I say—why, by God, you can kill me!"

Aiken heaved a great breath.

"Buck Duane, whether I'm impressed or not by what you say needn't matter. You've had accusers, justly or unjustly, as will soon appear. The thing is, we can prove you innocent or guilty. My girl Lucy saw my wife's assailant."

He motioned for the crowd of men to open up.

"Somebody—you, Sibert—go for Lucy. Hurry. That'll settle this thing."

Duane heard as a man in an ugly dream. The faces round him, the hum of voices, all seemed far off. His life hung by the merest thread. Yet he did not think of that so much as of the brand of a woman murderer which might be soon sealed upon him by a frightened, imaginative child.

The crowd trooped apart and closed again. Duane caught a blurred image of a slight girl clinging to Sibert's hand. He could not see distinctly.

Aiken lifted the child, whispered soothingly to her not to be afraid. Then he fetched her closer to Duane.

"Lucy, tell me, did you ever see this man before?" asked Aiken huskily and low. "Is he the one who came in the house that day—struck you down—and dragged mama—"

Aiken's voice failed.

A lightning flash seemed to clear Duane's blurred sight.

He saw a pale, sad face and violet eyes fixed in gloom and horror upon his. No terrible moment in Duane's life ever equaled this one of silence—of suspense.

"It ain't him!" cried the child.

Then Sibert was flinging the noose off Duane's neck and unwinding the bonds round his arms. The spellbound crowd awoke to hoarse exclamations.

"See there, my locoed gents, how easy you'd hang the wrong man!" burst out the cowboy as he made the rope end hiss. "You-all are a lot of wise rangers. Haw! Haw!"

He freed Duane and thrust the bone-handled gun back in Duane's holster.

"You Abe there. Reckon you pulled a stunt! But don't try the like again. And, men, I'll gamble there's a lot of bad work Buck Duane's named for—which all he never done. Clear away there. Where's his hoss? Duane, the road's open out of Shirley."

Sibert swept the gaping watchers aside and pressed Duane toward the horse, which another cowboy held. Mechanically Duane mounted, felt a

lift as he went up. Then the cowboy's hard face softened in a smile.

"I reckon it ain't uncivil of me to say—hit that road quick!" he said frankly.

He led the horse out of the crowd. Aiken joined them, and between them escorted Duane across the plaza. The crowd appeared irresistibly drawn to follow.

Aiken paused with his big hand on Duane's knee. In it, unconsciously, probably, he still held the gun.

"Duane, a word with you," he said. "I believe you're not so black as you've been painted. I wish there was time to say more. Tell me this, anyway—do you know the ranger Captain MacNelly?"

"I do not," replied Duane in surprise.

"I met him only a week ago over in Fairfield," went on Aiken hurriedly. "He declared you never killed my wife. I didn't believe him—argued with him. We almost had hard words over it. Now—I'm sorry. The last thing he said was: 'If you ever see Duane don't kill him; send him into my camp after dark.'"

"He meant something strange. What, I can't say. But he was right and I was wrong. If Lucy had batted an eye I'd have killed you. Still, I wouldn't advise you to hunt up MacNelly's camp. He's clever. Maybe he believes there's no treachery in his new ideas of ranger tactics. I tell you for all it's worth. Good-by. May God help you further as He did this day!"

Duane said good-by and touched the horse with his spurs.

"So-long, Buck!" called Sibert, with a frank smile breaking warm over his brown face, and he held his sombrero high.

CHAPTER XVI.

UNDER CONTRACT.

WHEN Duane reached the crossing of the roads the name Fairfield on the

sign-post seemed to be the thing that tipped the oscillating balance of decision in favor of that direction. He answered here to unfathomable impulse. If he had been driven to hunt up Jeff Aiken, now he was called to find this unknown ranger captain.

In Duane's state of mind clear reasoning, common sense, or keenness were out of the question. He went because he felt that he was compelled.

Dusk had fallen when he rode into a town which inquiry discovered to be Fairfield. Captain MacNelly's camp was stationed just out of the village limits on the other side.

No one except the boy Duane questioned appeared to notice his arrival. Like Shirley, the town of Fairfield was large and prosperous, compared to the innumerable hamlets dotting the vast extent of southwestern Texas. As Duane rode through, being careful to get off the main street, he heard the tolling of a church bell that was a melancholy reminder of his old home.

There did not appear to be any camp on the outskirts of the town. But as Duane sat his horse, peering round and undecided what further move to make, he caught the glint of flickering lights through the darkness.

Heading toward them, he rode perhaps a quarter of a mile to come upon a grove of mesquits. The brightness of several fires made the surrounding darkness all the blacker. Duane saw the moving forms of men and heard horses. He advanced naturally, expecting any moment to be halted.

"Who goes there?" came the sharp call out of the gloom.

Duane pulled his horse. The gloom was impenetrable.

"One man—alone," replied Duane.

"A stranger?"

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

"I'm trying to find the ranger camp."

"You've struck it. What's your errand?"

"I want to see Captain MacNelly."

"Get down and advance. Slow. Don't move your hands. It's dark, but I can see."

Duane dismounted and, leading his horse, slowly advanced a few paces. He saw a dully bright object, a gun, before he discerned the man who held it. A few more steps showed a dark figure blocking the trail. Here Duane halted.

"Come closer, stranger. Let's have a look at you," the guard ordered curtly.

Duane advanced again until he stood before the man. Here the ray of lights from the fires flickered upon Duane's face.

"Reckon you're a stranger all right. What's your name and your business with the captain?"

Duane hesitated, pondering what best to say.

"Tell Captain MacNelly I'm the man he's been asking to ride into his camp after dark," finally said Duane.

The ranger bent forward to peer hard at this night visitor. His manner had been alert and now it became tense.

"Come here—one of you men—quick," he called without turning in the least toward the camp-fire.

"Hello! What's up, Pickens?" came the swift reply.

It was followed by rapid thud of boots on soft ground. A dark form crossed the gleams from the firelight. Then a ranger loomed up, to reach the side of the guard.

Duane heard whispering, the purport of which he could not catch. The second ranger swore under his breath. Then he turned away and started back.

"Here, ranger, before you go, understand this. My visit is peaceful—friendly, if you'll let it be. Mind, I was asked to come here after dark."

Duane's clear, penetrating voice carried far. The listening rangers at the camp-fire heard what he said.

"Ho, Pickens—tell that fellow to wait," replied an authoritative voice.

Then a slim figure detached itself

from the dark, moving group at the camp-fire and hurried out.

"Better be foxy, cap," shouted a ranger in warning.

"Shut up—all of you," was the reply.

This officer, obviously Captain MacNelly, soon joined the two rangers who were confronting Duane. He had no fear. He strode straight up to Duane.

"I'm MacNelly," he said. "If you're my man don't mention your name—yet."

All this seemed so strange to Duane, in keeping with much that had happened lately.

"I met Jeff Aiken to-day," said Duane. "He sent me—"

"You've met Aiken!" exclaimed MacNelly, sharp, eager, low. "By all that's bully!" Then he appeared to catch himself, to grow restrained.

"Men, fall back—leave us alone a moment."

The rangers slowly withdrew.

"Buck Duane! It's you?" he whispered eagerly.

"Yes."

"If I give my word you'll not be arrested—you'll be treated fairly—will you come into camp and consult with me?"

"Certainly."

"Duane, I'm sure glad to meet you," went on MacNelly and extended his hand.

Amazed and touched, scarcely realizing this actuality, Duane gave his hand and felt no unmistakable grip of warmth.

"It doesn't seem natural, Captain MacNelly, but I believe I'm glad to meet you," said Duane soberly.

"You will be. Now we'll go back to camp. Keep your identity mum for the present."

He led Duane in the direction of the camp-fire.

"Pickens, go back on duty," he ordered, "and, Beeson, you look after this horse."

When Duane got beyond the line of mesquits, which had hid a good

view of the camp site, he saw a group of perhaps fifteen rangers sitting round the fires near a long, low shed where horses were feeding, and a small adobe house at one side.

"We've just had grub, but I'll see you get some. Then we'll talk," said MacNelly. "I've taken up temporary quarters here. Have a rustler job on hand. Now when you've eaten come right into the house."

Duane was hungry, but he hurried through the ample supper that was set before him, urged on by curiosity and astonishment. The only way he could account for his presence there in a rangers' camp was that MacNelly hoped to get useful information out of him. Still that would hardly have made this captain so eager. There was a mystery here, and Duane could scarcely wait for it to be solved.

While eating he had bent keen eyes around him. After a first quiet scrutiny the rangers apparently paid no more attention to him. They were all veterans in service, Duane saw that, and rugged, powerful men of iron constitution.

He was not long in presenting himself at the door of the house.

"Come in and have a chair," said MacNelly, motioning for the one other occupant of the room to rise. "Leave us, Russell, and close the door. I'll be through these reports right off."

MacNelly sat at a table upon which was a lamp and various papers. Seen in the light, he was a fine-looking soldierly man of about forty years, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a bronzed face, shrewd, stern, strong, yet not wanting in kindness. He scanned hastily over some papers, fussed with them, and finally put them in envelopes.

Without looking up, he pushed a cigar-case toward Duane, and, upon Duane's refusal to smoke, he took a cigar, rose to light it at the lamp chimney, and then, settling back in his chair, he faced Duane, making a vain attempt to hide what must have been

the fulfilment of a long-nourished curiosity.

"Duane, I've been hoping for this for two years," he began.

Duane smiled a little—a smile that felt strange on his face. He had never been much of a talker; and speech here seemed more than ordinarily difficult.

MacNelly must have sensed that.

He took a long, earnest gaze at Duane, and his nervous spontaneity, the manner which had been bright, promising volubility, changed to one of grave thoughtfulness.

"I've lots to say—but where to begin," he mused. "Duane, you've had a hard life since you went on the dodge. I never met you before, don't know what you looked like as a boy; but I can see what—Well, even ranger life isn't all roses."

He rolled his cigar between his lips and puffed clouds of smoke.

"Ever hear from home since you left Wellston?" he asked abruptly.

"No."

"Never a word?"

"Not one," replied Duane sadly.

"That's tough. I'm glad to be able to tell you that up to just lately your mother, sister, uncle, all your folks, I believe, were well. I've kept posted. But haven't heard lately."

Duane averted his face a moment, hesitated till the swelling left his throat, and then said:

"It's worth what I went through today to hear that."

"I can imagine how you feel about it. When I was in the war—But, let's get down to the business of this meeting."

He pulled his chair close to Duane's.

"You've had word more than once in the last two years that I wanted to see you?"

"Three times, I remember," replied Duane.

"Why didn't you hunt me up?"

"I supposed you imagined me one of those gun-fighters who couldn't take a dare and expected me to ride up to your camp and be arrested."

"That was natural, I suppose," went on MacNelly. "You didn't know me, otherwise you would have come. I've been a long time getting to you. But the nature of my job, as far as you're concerned, made me cautious. Duane, you're aware of the hard name you bear all over the Southwest?"

"Once in a while I'm jarred into realizing," replied Duane.

"It's the hardest, barring Murrell and Cheseldine, on the Texas border. But there's this difference. Murrell in his day was known to deserve his infamous name. Cheseldine in this day also."

"But I've found hundreds of men in southwest Texas who're your friends, who swear you never committed a crime. The farther south I get the clearer this becomes. What I want to know is the truth."

"Have you ever done anything criminal? Tell me the truth, Duane. It won't make any difference in my plan. And when I say crime I mean what I would call crime on any reasonable Texan."

"That way my hands are clean," replied Duane.

"You never held up a man, robbed a store for grub, stole a horse when you needed him bad—never anything like that?"

"Somehow I always kept out of that just when pressed the hardest."

"Duane, I'm glad!" MacNelly exclaimed, gripping Duane's hand. "Glad for your mother's sake! Glad for the—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 deal to do. 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.

A light played over MacNelly's face, warming out all the grim darkness. He held out his hand. Duane met it with his in a clasp that men unconsciously give in moments of stress.

When they unclasped and Duane stepped back to drop into a chair, MacNelly fumbled for another cigar—he had bitten the other into shreds—and, lighting it as before, he turned to his visitor calm and cool as he had not been during the interview.

He had the look of a man who had justly won something at considerable cost. His next move was to take a long leather case from his pocket and extract from it several folded papers.

"Here's your pardon from the Governor," he said quietly. "You'll see when you look it over that it's conditional. When you sign this paper I have here the condition will be met."

He smoothed out a paper, handed Duane a pen, ran his forefinger along a dotted line.

Duane's hand was shaky. Years had passed since he had held a pen. It was with difficulty that he achieved his signature. Buckley Duane. How strange the name looked!

"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 side who's defending the 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 rus-

tlar. 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 find 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 paper. 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."

MacNelly paused a moment in his rapid talk, chewed his cigar, drew his brows together in a dark frown, and went on:

"No man on the border knows so well as you the deadly nature of this service. It's a thousand to one that you'll be killed.

"I'd say there was no chance at all for any other man beside you. Your reputation will go far among the outlaws. Maybe that and your nerve and your gun-play will pull you through. I'm hoping so. But it's a long, long chance against your ever coming back."

"That's not the point," said Duane. "But in case I get killed out there, what—"

"Leave that to me," interrupted Captain MacNelly. "Your folks will know at once of your pardon and your ranger duty. If you lose your life out there I'll see your name cleared—the service you render known. You can rest assured of that."

"I'm satisfied," replied Duane. "That's so much more than I've dared to hope."

"Well, it's settled, then. I'll give you money for expenses. You'll start as soon as you like—the sooner the better. I hope to think of other suggestions, especially about communicating with me."

"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.

"My idea was, of course, that it was from your mother or sister. The thing about it that struck me was the old Texas line drawn between the criminal and the outlaw. At that time I had no intention of going upon your trail. I was early in the ranger game, and—well, it seemed wiser not to look up Buck Duane. But I got to thinking, and, naturally, in your favor.

"Different trails led me down toward the Nueces country, and here I learned a good deal about you. There were men who would not declare they were your friends, but all the same they championed you.

"It was on this southern trip that I first conceived the idea of making a proposition to you to become a ranger. However, at that stage of the game I never sent any word to you.

"Upon my return to Austin, where I go often to make reports to the adjutant-general, 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 run 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 capitol 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.

"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 gunsharp 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.'

"So he made out the pardon, and entrusted it to me with good wishes as sincere as he was doubtful of our success.

"The next thing was to locate you. That was not an easy job. A lone wolf, you know! It was absolutely necessary that I proceed cautiously. The success of my plan depended upon your becoming a secret ranger.

"This much I did not tell Miss Lee. But I encouraged her all I could; said that I did not mean to arrest you. There was a whole year in which I lost track of you altogether. We thought you had cashed in sure. Then I heard of you again. But your trail always faded in the sand. I sent rangers to different towns.

"At last in desperation I suggested to Miss Lee that your uncle, or somebody who could be trusted, go from town to town in the Nueces country and try to get track of you—especially make known his identity to supposed friends of yours and leave them a message for you.

"Well, your uncle traveled all over the West, and I understand Miss Lee

visited border towns herself. They found friends of yours; and yet you say you have heard of my wanting to see you but just three times. That's about all, I guess. And it was Jeff Aiken who sent you to me?"

Duane made some slight motion of assent that signified he had at least heard the question. He seemed dazed. All this story was beyond his understanding. He found his mind groping on unfamiliar ground.

For years it had been steeped in gloom, in the dark moods common to a fugitive exposed to the elements, alone, suspicious of everything, incapable of wholesome thought. The sudden contrast bewildered him. Out of it all struck one mounting fact—while he had thought himself a forgotten outcast there had been loyal and powerful influences at work.

"That woman—cousin, or relative of mine. Who could she be? I remember so poorly. My sister was only a child." Suddenly he started up violently. "Miss Lee! You said her name was Miss Lee!"

"Yes," replied MacNelly.

"That was the name Aiken called a woman who was distressed by the scene in Shirley—when the mob threatened to hang me. She held the mob back, then interceded for me with Aiken. Miss Lee he called her."

"So she was over there. Well, tell me about it," said MacNelly curiously.

Swiftly Duane narrated the circumstances of his arrival, detention, and escape in Shirley.

"By all that's bully!" exclaimed the captain. "She would have done just that. A splendid young woman!"

"I imagined her just a hysterical girl, scared or sickened into the crazy way women act sometimes," said Duane. "Yet she looked so strange at me. Who was she? If I ever saw her before I've forgotten. I remember so poorly. I almost forget now what she was like. Medium height, slim, white-faced, with dark eyes very intent."

"Duane, you've sure described Miss Lee," replied MacNelly. "Here, cudgel your memory. She must be a cousin, a near relative. Think."

"MacNelly, I can't place her. My God, man, I can't remember what my mother was like! I think, though, I'd recognize Uncle Jim."

"Well, Duane, maybe you'll place Miss Lee after a while, when you can think clearly. You're upset now. But there's one thing sure. The best way to place her will be to think back and call up the girls who were fond of you as a boy—passionately fond of you."

"There never was one."

MacNelly laughed. "I'll gamble there was. There's one, and don't you forget it. You can't fool me on women." Then his face darkened. "The thing I regret is she'll have to know of this service you're bound to. That'll be tough on her and your mother. It can't be helped. I wish there were no women on the border."

"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. To-morrow I'll send a ranger over to Shirley. There's a train and stage, too. Now, let's turn in, Duane. We've talked a deal. And I was tired before we began. Make yourself a bed there. Good night."

Long after the lights were out and the low hum of voices had ceased round the camp-fire Duane lay wide awake, eyes staring into the blackness, marveling over the strange events of the day. He was humble, grateful to the depths of his soul. A crushing burden had been lifted from his heart.

It was broad daylight when he awakened. MacNelly was calling him to breakfast.

Outside sounded voices of men, crackling of fires, snorting and stamping of horses, the barking of dogs.

Duane rolled out of his blankets and made good use of the soap and towel and razor and brush near by on a bench—things of rare luxury to an outlaw on the ride. The face he saw in the mirror was as strange as the past he had tried to recall. Then he stepped to the door and went out.

The rangers were eating in a circle round a tarpaulin spread upon the ground.

"Fellows," said MacNelly, "shake hands with Buck Duane. He's on secret ranger service for me—service that'll likely make you all hump soon. Mind you keep mum about it."

The rangers surprised Duane with a roaring greeting, the warmth of which he soon divined was divided between pride of his acquisition to their ranks and eagerness to meet that violent service of which their captain hinted. They were jolly, wild fellows, with just enough gravity in their welcome to show Duane their respect and appreciation while not forgetting his lone wolf record. When he had seated himself in that circle, now one of them, a feeling subtle and uplifting pervaded his spirit.

MacNelly advised Duane to stay indoors during the day, especially in case there were any villagers loitering round. The captain and his company, with the exception of a couple of rangers, then rode off in the direction of the village.

For Duane that day seemed short. He did nothing but lounge round and think, yet the time flew by. Every moment of his new freedom he would have made longer. The rangers returned in several squads, the last of which contained Captain MacNelly.

"Good news, Duane," he said, all smiles. "But let's eat first. Bet you never in your wolf days were you as hungry as I am. You do look hungry, though, but not for grub. Well, possess your soul in peace for a little."

After supper one of the rangers told Duane that Captain MacNelly wanted him in the house.

"Things going fine, Duane," was the captain's greeting. "We got those rustlers where we want them—and that's in jail. Also had a draft cashed. Money for you was bothering me. Now that's all right."

"My man came back from Shirley with news that'll please you. He had a talk with Jeff Aiken and Miss Lee. Of course, it wouldn't do for you to go over to Shirley. And I didn't think it wise for Miss Lee to come over to meet you in Fairfield. Too close. Anyway, she grasped the situation at once. She's clever."

"She has friends or relatives. I forget which, up in Ensenada. She was going there before you turned up in Shirley. Let's see, she sent a paper with names, directions—Colonel Silas Waite, Ensenada. You can reach Ensenada by rail."

"It's more than a hundred miles, a big town north where you'll not stand much risk of being recognized. But in case any of these ambitious sheriffs try to hold you, instead of sticking a gun under their noses just show your ranger certificate."

"You're to go to Colonel Waite's house and ask for Miss Lee. That's all of that except, by George! I wouldn't mind being you for that call, anyway. Here's the money. Make it go as far as you can. Better strike straight for El Paso, snook round there, and hear things. Then go to Valentine. That's near the river and within fifty miles or so of the edge of the Rim-Rock."

"Somewhere up there Cheseldine holds forth. But he doesn't hide all the time in the rocks. Only after some daring raid or hold-up. Cheseldine's got border towns on his staff, or scared of him, and these places we want to know about."

"Write me care of the adjutant at Austin. I don't have to warn you to be careful where you mail letters. Ride a hundred, two hundred, miles if necessary, or go clear to El Paso."

MacNelly stopped with an air of

finality, and then Duane slowly rose. "I'll start at once," he said, extending his hand to the captain. "I wish—I'd like to thank you!"

"Man, don't thank me!" replied MacNelly, crushing the proffered hand. "I've sent a lot of good men to their deaths, and maybe you're another. But as I've said, you've one chance in a thousand. And, by Jove, I'd hate to be Cheseldine or any other man you were trailing! No, not good-by! *Adios*, Duane! May we meet again!"

CHAPTER XVII.

JENNIE.

EARLY the next morning Duane left Fairfield, proceeded to Hildreth, where he had to wait to change trains, and then traveled on, reaching Ensenada about ten o'clock at night. That being rather late for a call, he curbed his impatience and went to an inn. The following day he rose with a strange, restless excitement, full of vague pre-sentiments and conjectures.

After breakfasting he went out into the street to find that there was a plaza, common to many Texas towns, opposite the hotel. He sauntered on, meeting pedestrians and horsemen on early morning errands. Here he sat upon a bench and tried to realize the actuality of his present.

The absence of his old and accustomed riding clothes, jeans, chaps, boots, spurs—the newness of a different plain garb with its long coat that hid his belt and gun—to these matters he could not so soon accustom himself.

It was impossible to shake off the old ever-present habit of vigilance. Equally impossible was it to feel natural. A deep joy at what he considered his deliverance from outlawry abided with him and was as strange as all the rest.

Presently he would stand face to face with this Miss Lee, this mysterious and unremembered person who was so closely in touch with his family,

and from her lips he would hear all about his mother, his sister, his home. That filled him so with unfamiliar emotion that he longed for the meeting with her, yet also dreaded it. His ignominy seemed to cling round him. He had so long been a hunted, hated outcast.

But he was no more an outlaw; he was free, a man of honest calling, a ranger entrusted with a service as important to the State as its commission was perilous to him. For the first time in years he was in a community of honest men, and not prepared to flee at a moment's notice.

Ensenada lay many miles north of the territory associated with his name. Still there was never any telling where or when he might meet recognition.

Suppose a sheriff would see him, stride up to him, clap a hand on his shoulder and say: "Buck Duane! Outlaw, come with me!"

Duane would not need that swiftness of wrist that had made him so dreaded on the border. He had in his pocket a stronger argument than a gun. An inexpressible wonder and gratitude flowed from his heart. Slowly, gradually, with some kind of pang, his bitter weight of ignominy seemed to be lifted from him, making him glad to look into the faces of passing men.

By and by he hailed a boy and presented the youngster with a coin.

"What's that, sonny?" he asked.

"Why, sir, it's two bits," replied the boy, a broad smile breaking over his face.

"Do you know where Colonel Waite lives?"

"Sure."

"Take me there."

Duane followed his guide across the plaza and down the main street. He passed various people, all of whom took no notice of him. But Duane felt warmth steal along his veins at the mere sight of them.

How little they divined the meaning of their presence to him who had been an exile and an outlaw!

A comely old lady, sweet-faced and mild-eyed, looked up at him, struck by his giant stature. He passed school-boys and girls with bright faces. The street had awakened to business, and he met farmers, ranchers, stockmen—all dusty, loud-voiced, cheery, with the deep red of Texas sun on their cheeks.

Suddenly he espied a row of mettlesome horses haltered to a long hitching rail. The sleek and racy thoroughbreds, the big saddles, the coiled lariats told of the town visit of cowboys. Another glance showed a wide, high, gaudy-signed front of a saloon. Involuntarily Duane stiffened, seemed to be pierced from head to foot by the old cool alertness.

How many hundreds of times he had been forced to walk in bitter expectation past drinking-places such as this! How many times had he met, striding forth, a rum-crazed cowboy waving a gun!

Duane hurried onward, conscious that no honest calling, no ranger service, would ever make him exempt from the wild pursuits of men of that class. Somebody would always want to kill him because he was Buck Duane.

Presently the youthful guide turned off into a street where there were fine houses, well-kept lawns and shade-trees. A couple of blocks down the street ended, in common with most Texas streets, abruptly on the plain; and at this point, sitting well back in a grove, was a big white house. This, was the home of Colonel Waite.

The walk up to the big colonial porch seemed long to Duane. He heard the leaves fluttering and caught a sweet scent of flowers. Somebody at the back of the house was talking sharply to a horse, and there followed the familiar pound of iron hoofs on hard ground.

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.