

PART 5

So he put her up on his horse and bade her follow. The rain had ceased for the time being, though evidently the storm was not yet over. The tracks led up a wash to a wide flat where mesquit, prickly pear, and thorn-bush grew so thickly that Jennie could not ride into it.

Duane was thoroughly concerned. He must have her horse. Time was flying. It would soon be night. He could not expect her to scramble quickly through that brake on foot. Therefore he decided to risk leaving her at the edge of the thicket and go in alone.

As he went a sound startled him. Was it the breaking of a branch he had stepped on or thrust aside? He heard the impatient pound of his horse's hoofs.

Then all was quiet.

Still he listened, not wholly satisfied. He was never satisfied in regard to safety: he knew too well that there never could be safety for him in this country.

The bay horse had threaded the aisles of the thicket. Duane wondered what had drawn him there. Certainly it had not been grass, for there was none. Presently he heard the horse tramping along and then he ran. The mud was deep and the sharp thorns made going difficult. He came up with the horse, and at the same moment crossed a multitude of fresh horse tracks.

He bent lower to examine them, and was alarmed to find that they had been made very recently, even since it had ceased raining. They were tracks of well-shod horses.

Duane straightened up with a cautious glance all round. His instant decision was to hurry back to Jennie. But he had come a goodly way through the thicket, and it was impossible to rush back.

Once or twice he imagined he heard crashings in the brush, but did not halt to make sure. Certain he was now that some kind of danger threatened.

Suddenly there came an unmistakable thump of horses' hoofs off somewhere to the fore.

Then a scream rent the air. It ended abruptly. Duane leaped forward and tore his way through the thorny brake. He heard Jennie cry again—an appealing call, quickly hushed. It seemed more to his right, and he plunged that way.

He burst into a glade where a smoldering fire and ground covered with footprints and tracks showed that campers had lately been. Rushing across this, he broke his passage out to the open. But he was too late.

His horse had disappeared. Jennie was gone. There were no riders in sight. There was no sound.

It came to him then like a blow that he loved the girl.

CHAPTER XI.

QUEST.

INTO that instant of silence, as Duane stood undecided, came a slight mechanical clicking—a sound of all sounds which had power to make him leap like a tiger. He heard the cocking of guns. He had been ambushed.

Perhaps the jump for his horse saved his life. Gunshots burst from the thicket and bullets whistled close to him. The frightened horse was running before Duane had gotten a leg over the saddle. It did not take long to leave that thicket out of sight.

Duane gave the cabin a wide berth. He held, however, to some muddy tracks that led out to the road. Here he dismounted to study the tracks, and soon recognized the tracks of his own horse, upon which he had left Jennie.

It led off toward Shelbyville. Duane, with eyes roving everywhere, deliberated a moment.

"Rustlers," he said; "perhaps Bland's own men. They were camping in that wash, or maybe they came down the wash from cross-country.

They saw smoke in the cabin and waited. Jennie's horse scented or heard their horses, broke the halter, and made off. I must have entered the thicket to the right of them. When I got out of sight some of them slipped up and grabbed Jennie, then cut out for the road. The others lay for me on my way back."

In the reaction of his emotions from amaze, alarm, distress to passion, he had scarcely time to consider his discovery of love for Jennie. It came to him now—full, clamoring, wonderful. The sudden loss of her had told him.

"That was it—I loved her," he soliloquized. "All the time I loved her! And now she's gone—again in the hands of some outlaw brutes!"

Then leaped up in Duane the hot instinct he had so long fought. This time he gave it full sway—welcomed it. All in a moment he was seized by all the demons of hell, and that passion wrought in him a changed soul. He recognized the moment—the inevitableness of it—the ruthlessness of the Duanes at last claiming him.

Dark, grim, terrible, he faced the road to Shelbyville. And with no more hope for himself, none for Jennie, he took the trail of her abductors, death in his soul, with absolutely no further sense of fear, with a mounting, bitter, awful realization that he had come into his own. He meant now to use the fatal skill inherited from his father.

He hardly noticed that rain had again commenced to fall. Certainly he felt no chill. A fire raged within him. As long as daylight lasted he kept on the trail of his own horse; when darkness prevented that he confined himself to making certain he passed no branch road. At daylight the weather cleared, and by nine o'clock, when he sighted a village, his clothes were once more dry.

On the outskirts of this town, which he supposed was Shelbyville, he came up with a farmer, driving a wagon.

"Hello, is this place Shelbyville?" asked Duane.

"'Mawnin', stranger," replied the farmer. "No, this ain't Shelbyville. You're nigh a hundred miles from thar. This heah town is Huntsville."

Duane concluded that in traveling he had gotten on the wrong road or turned around. It did not matter, however, for he saw the fresh-made tracks of his own horse in the soft earth.

"See anything of a bunch of men and a girl?" queried Duane.

"Nope! But I seen some hoss-tracks."

Duane rode on into the town. It resembled all the other towns of southwestern Texas, except it had more saloons than those places which claimed respectability. He saw a tavern where riders and horses were cared for, and here he dismounted.

Evidently strangers were not new there, for he excited no interest among a number of rough men in the saloon and eating-room. He first saw that his horse was well fed; then he satisfied his own hunger. That done, he lounged outside and accosted the first man he met.

This fellow was evidently a workman come in for a drink. Duane asked a few civil questions and received like replies. Then he spoke pointblank: "I trailed some men into this town. They stole my horse and made off with a girl."

"You follered thet outfit in all alone! Stranger, you ain't lackin' nerve," returned the workman. "Reckon I can't be much help to you. I know somethin', though. There was two gangs rid into Huntsville last night or this mornin'. An' as I got it both of 'em was packin' women. Thet ain't uncommon."

"There was a shootin' 'fray before sunup. But thet ain't uncommon, either. Stranger, you go over there to thet wagon-shop acrost the way an' see old Hubbard. He always knows what's goin' on in this burg."

Thus advised, Duane strode over to the shop and into the presence of a fine old man with white hair and keen eyes and a shrewd face. Duane briefly repeated his query for information.

"Young man, you're a ranger," said Hubbard positively.

"No."

"Well, you look a lot like one. An' for my part I'm darn sorry. Huntsville ought to be cleaned up by rangers. Hope you ain't—but I ain't inquirin' into your business. Not me. What was you askin'?"

Duane was more explicit this time.

"Friend, I saw that outfit. There was a slip of a girl in a dirty wet dress ridin' a big black. She 'peared to be goin' along willin' enough. They rode right through town, so far as I seen. Thet was before breakfast. Later I went down-town to see what might be goin' on.

"The leader of that outfit was a cattleman named Sellers. He goes all over the country buyin' cattle. Fact is, as I know, Sellers is a scout for raiders—what bunch I can't say. Anyway, this Sellers had the girl. I heard Rod Brown say that much. He was the only man in town to have a word with the outfit. They was travelin' fast."

"Rod Brown. Who's he?" asked Duane.

"Rodney Brown! Ain't you heard of him? Well, it wouldn't do to let him know thet. Brown's the sheriff. At any rate, he says he was elected. Nobody disputes him much. He's a hoss-trader."

"Where can I find him?"

"Stranger, are you wantin' to see Rod Brown real bad?"

Duane nodded.

"I reckon in thet case I'll be glad to take you over," replied Hubbard dryly.

Duane followed him down the street, past stores and saloons, to a plain adobe house with a sign over the door. The sign bore the newly paint-

ed word "sheriff" on a background of other advertisements in very old paint not altogether obliterated. Several men lounged in a little office, all smoking, and when Hubbard entered with Duane they quit talking.

Duane knew this man before any one spoke—a tall Texan, shifty-eyed, hard-faced, with a nose like a beak, colored by liquor, and an overbearing look. The man craved authority, and, next to that, notoriety.

"Rodney, here's a caller," said Hubbard. "Didn't ask his name."

Hubbard laughed and stepped to one side. He had nerve and a sense of humor; perhaps also he had a grudge against the horse-trader.

Brown looked Duane up and down, suddenly started violently, then sat motionless, his face slowly growing ashen pale.

Duane knew that Brown thought he had recognized him.

"I'm trailing some men with a girl. Mr. Hubbard here said you saw this gang and might give me information."

"What—gang?" inquired Brown, as if playing for time.

Here Hubbard interposed and said much the same he had told Duane.

"Sure! I seen the outfit. Three men an' a girl," replied Brown.

"Wasn't the leader that cattle-scout, Sellers?" went on Hubbard.

"Not as I know," said Brown bluntly.

"Rod, I reckon you forget. Because you took particular pride in tellin' me so this mornin'."

"See here, you old gossip, are you givin' me the lie?" growled the sheriff.

"No offense, Rod. I'm just sure you told me, thet's all."

Duane had a subtle impression of a falsehood on Brown's part. The man was uneasy, nervous, excited; but he appeared to be recovering from some kind of a shock, probably fright. Duane's quiet manner no doubt deceived him. Men of his temperament

could never see danger in this kind of an approach.

"Are you Buck Duane?" he asked blusteringly.

"Never mind who I am. That's no concern of yours."

"Mebbe it is. I'm sheriff here, an' Duane's outlawed."

Duane looked at the man without replying. Brown appeared to gather courage with the sound of his own voice.

"Now, this here girl I seen to-day—she was a thin, pale kid, with big eyes an' bright hair. She wore a dress thet once was white, an' it had a stripe runnin' down. Thet anythin' like the one you're huntin'?"

"Yes," replied Duane.

"Answered to the name Jennie. Was a little lame. Wore Mexican sandals. Is thet the girl?"

Brown leaned forward, speaking quickly. A red spot showed in each sallow cheek.

Duane did not see fit to reply to this last query.

Suddenly Sheriff Brown seemed to become roused. Silence augmented his excitement. He got up guardedly enough, but, all the same, he got up, and that added to his growing confidence. The hand he shook at Duane, the left hand—his right was hanging stiff below his hip—had the swing of authority. He might have been a school-teacher admonishing a bad boy.

"This here girl—I know her. I seen her out at Bland's when I went there to arrest a man. Now she was ridden off with by a feller who had some luck at gun-play, I'm told. Thet feller was Buck Duane. He's described as a young chap, husky, big, an' broad, with smooth face—a blond feller, packin' his gun low down, apin' all them gun-throwers. Ever see the gent?"

Weariness, annoyance, disgust—all the emotions of similar nature that once might have bothered Duane in a hurried relation with such a man—were now not felt by him, perhaps were no longer possible for him. He

had only one emotion here, and that was a fixed thing—no worse after he had met Brown than before.

"I neither deny nor affirm," said Duane. "Who I am is none of your business. You'll greatly oblige me by telling me more about this abducted girl. Was she in the hands of Sellers?"

"Nope. You was misinformed. There was some greasers scrappin' here this mornin'. Mebbe they had her."

Brown now presented a sullen aspect. He seemed speculative and his body shook with a tremor. To an ordinary observer he might merely have become resentful and incommunicative. To Duane, however, gifted with his penetrative instinct, the truth about this sordid man was simply that he wanted to find an excuse and a way to kill.

But he lacked the nerve. Presently he quailed and let Duane go on his way.

CHAPTER XII.

THREE YEARS.

FOR three long and terrible years Buck Duane rode up and down the Texas border.

His fame grew steadily until he was the most noted and most misrepresented outlaw of his day.

Hundreds of men in the border towns claimed friendship with him. Every honest rancher between Brownsville and El Paso would have been glad to shake his hand and hide him. Every outlaw along the river feared him; every crooked gambler in the *monte* dens played fair when Duane happened to drop in; every imitation bad man in the southwest of Texas wanted to kill him, bragged on his name, hunted him when fired by drink.

The better half of that widely scattered populace, especially in localities Duane had visited, was loath to be-

lieve him perpetrator of the crimes laid to him. The ignorant and outlawed class fastened on his name all the rustling, hold-ups, robberies, murders, when direct evidence did not point to some one else.

In a sense, the reputation of every famous outlaw developed by these wild years had suffered more or less from this natural exaggeration and misrepresentation. But no outlaw before him had ever had such a host of admirers and partizans who fiercely gave the lie to any accusation of robbery or crime attributed to him.

It was widely known that he had never earned a dollar in his outlaw career. It was sworn by many and reputable men that he had never stolen one. Few towns or villages on that border had no storekeeper who had not a tale to tell about Duane, the Lone Wolf.

One told of how at evening, as he was about to close up, a big, gray-faced man with eyes like daggers stepped in.

"I'm Duane. I won't steal. But I must eat. Will you give me a pack of grub?"

Another told proudly of credit asked for by the outlaw.

A rancher's story was told and retold. A wild-looking, dusty giant had ridden up to him. "I'm Duane. There's a posse after me. They think I robbed the post-office at San Blas. But I didn't. I can't prove it. I'm Duane. My horse is ready to drop. Will you lend me one—a strong, fast horse? I've got to have one. Don't make me draw on a rancher—don't make me a horse-thief!"

Such stories counteracted belief in the infamy with which he had been branded.

He traveled alone, and few were the gangs of outlawed men and crooked towns like Huntsville that had not felt his teeth. Hence the name—Lone Wolf.

He was described by those who had seen him as young in years, but mid-

dle-aged in appearance; face grave and still; eyes like lightning; hair turning gray; thin lips set in stern, bitter line; a lean, bulging jaw. His frame was powerful yet spare, showing the years of hard riding.

During the first of his career that was history he had wandered from town to town through all the unsettled part of southwest Texas. No one knew his motive. It was thought that, like many gun-fighters, he roved from place to place, driven, hunted, and always hunting his next victim.

He had never been arrested. He had never been caught by rangers, and rumor said often he had been in towns at the same time with one or more of those noted officers. No single-handed ranger, however brave, would have been likely to court death. There were so-called sheriffs, of which Texas had many of the stripe, who tried to earn the reward for Duane's capture, dead or alive.

Perhaps most fatally significant of the spirit of the times was the fact that Duane seldom rode into a town where his presence did not fire the ambition of some cowboy or gambler or ruffian.

Strange, bloody ambition! To kill him for no reason except that he was Duane, the Lone Wolf! The majority of these depraved men were no doubt persuaded or dragged out of Duane's path. In many cases, however, there were no friends or comrades to prevent.

Then came the wild inception, the excitement following the thought, the jest and brag over the bar, a march from saloon to saloon, louder, bolder, wilder as drink after drink bolstered courage and clogged sense, until at last a crazed fool, at the head of a procession, went gunning for Duane.

How many fights Duane had during those years no one ever knew except Duane. He never spoke of them. Certainly no man ever asked him. When he did ride into a town on a rare visit he would eat and smoke

with people he knew, but seldom talk. And he never stayed long nor returned to the same place before many months had passed.

His meeting with the cattleman Sellers, which occurred in Brownsville near the end of that three-year period, was the only authenticated case where it was known that Duane deliberately hunted a man.

This became known, or rather guessed, when Duane stood over the dying Sellers, and was heard to ask: "Did you kill her?"

But Sellers died before he could speak.

In Brownsville and northward, where Sellers was best known, time and accumulated facts brought to light the strange truth. Sellers had been trailed for three years by Duane.

He had never a home—he became that most miserable of fugitives, a craven man unable to shake his pursuer. Sellers was never known to rest well; he always watched; he traveled on and on; he grew thin, haggard, gray-haired. No one of the few friends he paid a flying visit from time to time knew what troubled him until after his death.

They did know, however, and proved, that he never rode through Huntsville with a woman, and never had one accompanying him during the three years' pursuit. But they never disputed a possibility that Sellers might not have wronged Duane somehow in relation to the only woman ever mentioned in connection with the famous outlaw. At any rate, on other scores, Sellers justly deserved his fate.

And he was praised a little and remembered longer because at the meeting that terminated fatally for him he had showed nerve, and his shot left in Duane a bullet he would always carry.

After that meeting rumor kept busy piling deeds upon Duane, but as a matter of fact for many months there was no record of his having visited any of the border towns.

This might have been owing to a wound or a spell of moody inaction, such as sometimes fettered these gun-fighters, or to the unusual activity of a new and striking figure on the border—that of MacNelly, a captain of Texas Rangers.

CHAPTER XIII.

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES.

AFTER nearly six months of hiding in the Nueces gorge the loneliness and inaction of his life drove Duane out of the trails, seeking anything rather than to hide longer alone, a prey to the scourge of his thoughts.

The moment he rode into sight of men a remarkable transformation occurred to him. A strange warmth stirred in him—a longing to see the faces of people, to hear their voices—a pleasurable emotion, sad and strange.

But it was only a precursor of his old bitter sleepless and eternal vigilance. When he hid alone in the brakes he was safe from all except his deeper, better self; when he escaped from this into the haunts of men his force and will went to the preservation of his life.

Mercer was the first village he rode into. He had many friends there. Mercer claimed to owe Duane a debt. On the outskirts of the village there was a grave overgrown by brush so that the rude-lettered post which marked it was scarcely visible to Duane as he rode by. He had never read the inscription. But he thought now of Hardin, no other than the erstwhile ally of Bland. For many months Hardin had harassed the stockmen and ranchers in and round Mercer.

On an evil day for him he or his outlaws had beaten and robbed a man who once succored Duane when sore in need. Duane met Hardin in the little plaza of the village, called him every hard name known to border

men, taunted him to draw, and killed him in the act.

Duane went to the house of one Jones, a Texan who had known his father, and there he was warmly received. The feel of an honest hand, the voice of a friend, the prattle of children who were not afraid of him or his gun, good, wholesome food and change of clothes—these things made a changed man of Duane.

To be sure, he did not often speak. The price on his head, the weight of his burden, made him silent. But eagerly he drank in all the news that was told him.

In the years of his absence from home he had heard never a word about his mother or uncle. Those who were his real friends on the border would have been the last to make inquiries, to write or receive letters that might give a clue to Duane's whereabouts.

Duane remained all day with this hospitable Jones, and as twilight fell was loath to go and yielded to a pressing invitation to remain overnight. It was seldom indeed that Duane slept under a roof.

Early in the evening, while Duane sat on the porch with two awed and hero-worshipping sons of the house Jones returned from a quick visit down to the post-office. Summarily he sent the boys off. He labored under intense excitement.

"Duane, there's rangers in town," he whispered. "It's all over town, too, that you're here. You rode in long after sunup. Lots of people saw you. I don't believe there's a man or boy that'd squeal on you; but the women might. They gossip, and these rangers are handsome fellows, devils with the women."

"What company of rangers?" asked Duane quietly.

"Company A, under Captain MacNelly, that new ranger. He made a big name in the war; and since he's been in the ranger service he's done wonders. He's cleaned up some bad places south, and he's working north."

"MacNelly. I've heard of him. Describe him to me."

"Slight built chap, but wiry and tough. Clean face, black mustache and hair; sharp, black eyes. He's got a look of authority. MacNelly's a fine man, Duane. Belongs to a good Southern family. I'd hate to have him look you up."

Duane did not speak.

"MacNelly's got nerve and his rangers are all experienced men. If they find out you're here they'll come after you. MacNelly's no gun-fighter, but he wouldn't hesitate to do his duty, even if he faced sure death. Which he would in this case. Duane, you mustn't meet Captain MacNelly. Your record is clean, if it is terrible. You never met a ranger or any officer except a rotten sheriff now and then like Rod Brown."

Still Duane kept silence. He was not thinking of danger, but of the fact of how fleeting must be his stay among friends.

"I've already fixed up a pack of grub," went on Jones. "I'll slip out to saddle your horse. You watch here."

He had scarcely uttered the last words when soft, swift footsteps sounded on the hard path. A man turned in at the gate. The light was dim, yet clear enough to disclose an unusually tall figure. When it approached nearer he was seen to be walking with both arms raised, hands high. He slowed his stride.

"Does Burt Jones live here?" he asked in a low, hurried voice.

"I reckon. I'm Burt. What can I do for you?" replied Jones.

The stranger peered around, stealthily came closer, still with his hands up.

"It is known that Buck Duane is here. Captain MacNelly's camping on the river just out of town. He sends word to Duane to come out there after dark."

The stranger wheeled and departed as swiftly and strangely as he had come.

"Bust me! Duane, whatever do you make of that?" exclaimed Jones.

"A new one on me," replied Duane thoughtfully.

"First fool thing I ever heard of MacNelly doing. Can't make head nor tails of it. I'd have said offhand that MacNelly wouldn't double-cross anybody. He struck me as a square man, sand all through. But he must mean treachery. I can't see anything else in that deal."

"Maybe the captain wants to give me a fair chance to surrender without bloodshed," observed Duane. "Pretty decent of him if he meant that."

"He invites you out to his camp after dark. Something strange about this, Duane. But MacNelly's a new man out here. He does some queer things. Perhaps he's getting a swelled head. Well, whatever his intentions, his presence round Mercer is enough for us. Duane, you hit the road and put some miles between you and the amiable captain before daylight. Tomorrow I'll go out there and ask him what the devil he meant."

"That messenger he sent—he was a ranger," said Duane.

"Sure he was, and a nervy one. It must have taken sand to come bracing you that way. Duane, the fellow didn't pack a gun. I'll swear to that. Pretty odd, this trick. But you can't trust it. Hit the road, Duane."

A little later a black horse with muffed hoofs, bearing a tall, dark rider who peered keenly into every shadow, trotted down a pasture lane back of Jones's house, turned into the road, and then, breaking into swifter gait, rapidly left Mercer behind.

Fifteen or twenty miles out Duane drew rein in a forest of mesquit, dismounted, and searched about for a glade with a little grass. Here he staked his horse on a long lariat, and using his saddle for a pillow, his saddle-blanket for covering, he went to sleep.

Next morning he was off again, working south. During the next few

days he paid brief visits to several villages that lay in his path; and in each some one particular friend had a piece of news to impart that made Duane profoundly thoughtful.

A ranger had made a quiet, unobtrusive call upon these friends and left this message: "Tell Buck Duane to ride into Captain MacNelly's camp some time after night."

Duane concluded, and his friends all agreed with him, that the new ranger's main purpose in the Nueces country was to capture or kill Buck Duane, and that this message was simply an original and striking ruse, the daring of which might appeal to certain outlaws.

But it did not appeal to Duane. His curiosity was roused; it did not, however, tempt him to any foolhardy act. He turned southwest and rode a hundred miles until he again reached the sparsely settled country.

Here he heard no more of rangers. It was a barren region he had never but once ridden through, and that ride had cost him dear. He had been compelled to shoot his way out. Outlaws were not in accord with the few ranchers and their cowboys who ranged there.

He learned that both outlaws and Mexican raiders had long been at bitter enmity with these ranchers. Being unfamiliar with roads and trails, Duane had pushed on into the heart of this district when all the time he really believed he was traveling round it. A rifle-shot from a ranch-house, a deliberate attempt to kill him because he was an unknown rider in those parts, discovered to Duane his mistake, and a hard ride to get away persuaded him to return to his old method of hiding by day and traveling by night.

He got into rough country, rode for three days without covering much ground, but believed he was getting on safer territory. Twice he came to a wide bottomland green, with willow and cottonwood and thick as chaparral, somewhere through the middle of

which ran a river he decided must be the lower Nueces.

One evening as he stole out from a covert where he had camped he saw the lights of a village. He tried to pass it on the left, but was unable to because the brakes of this bottomland extended almost to the outskirts of the village, and he had to retrace his steps and go round to the right. Wire fences and horses in pasture made this a task; so it was well after midnight before he accomplished it.

He made ten miles or more then by daylight, and after that proceeded cautiously along a road which appeared to be well worn from travel. He passed several thickets where he would have halted to hide during the day but that he had to find water.

He was a long while in coming to it, and then there was no thicket or clump or mesquit near the water-hole that would afford him covert; so he kept on.

The country before him was ridgy and began to show cottonwoods here and there in the hollows and yucca and mesquit on the higher ground. As he mounted a ridge he noted that the road made a sharp turn and he could not see what was beyond it. He slowed up and was making the turn, which was down-hill between high banks of yellow clay, when his mettlesome horse heard something to frighten him or shied at something and bolted.

The few bounds he took before Duane's iron arm hauled him in were enough to reach the curve. One flashing glance showed Duane the open once more, a little valley below with a wide, shallow, rocky stream, a clump of cottonwoods beyond, a somber group of men facing him, and two dark, limp, strangely grotesque figures hanging from branches.

The sight was common enough in southwest Texas, but Duane had never before found himself so unpleasantly close.

A hoarse voice pealed out: "There's another one!"

"Stranger, ride down an' account fer yourself!" yelled another.

"Hands up!"

"That's right, Jack—don't take no chances—plug him!"

These remarks were so swiftly uttered as almost to be continuous.

Duane was wheeling his horse when a rifle cracked. The bullet struck his left forearm and he thought broke it, for he dropped the rein.

The frightened horse leaped. Another bullet whistled past Duane. Then the bend in the road saved him, probably from certain death. Like the wind his fleet steed went down the long hill.

Duane was in no hurry to look back. He knew what to expect. His chief concern of the moment was for his injured arm. He found that the bones were still intact, but the wound, having been made by a soft bullet, was an exceedingly bad one. Blood poured from it.

Giving the horse his head, Duane wound his scarf tightly round the holes and with teeth and hand tied it tightly. That done, he looked back over his shoulder.

Riders were making the dust fly on the hillside road. There were more coming round the cut where the road curved. The leader was perhaps a quarter of a mile back and the others strung out behind him.

Duane needed only one glance to tell him that they were fast and hard riding cowboys in a land where all riders were good. They would not have owned any but strong, swift horses.

Moreover, it was a district where ranchers had suffered beyond all endurance the greed and brutality of outlaws.

Duane had simply been so unfortunate as to run right into a lynching party at a time of all times when any stranger would be in danger and any outlaw put to his limit to escape.

Duane did not look back again till he had crossed the ridgy piece of ground and had got to the level road. He had gained upon his pursuers.

When he ascertained this he tried to save his horse—to check a little that killing gait. This horse was a magnificent animal—big, strong, fast; but his endurance had never been put to a grueling test. And that worried Duane. His life had made it impossible to keep one horse very long at a time, and this one was an unknown quantity.

Duane had only one plan—the only plan possible in this case—and that was to make the river bottoms, where he might elude his pursuers in the willow brakes.

Fifteen miles or so would bring him to the river, and this was not a hopeless distance for any good horse if not too closely pressed.

Duane concluded presently that the cowboys behind were losing a little in the chase because they were not extending their horses. It was decidedly unusual for such riders to save their mounts. Duane pondered over this, looking backward several times to see if their horses were stretched out.

They were not, and the fact was disturbing. Only one reason presented itself to Duane's conjecture, and it was that with him headed straight on that road his pursuers were satisfied not to force the running.

He began to hope and look for a trail or a road turning off to right or left. There were none. A rough mesquit-dotted and yucca-spined country extended away on either side.

Duane believed that he would be compelled to take to this hard going. One thing was certain—he had to go round the village. The river, however, was on the outskirts of the village, and once in the willows he would be safe.

Dust clouds far ahead caused his alarm to grow. He watched with his eyes strained; he hoped to see a wagon, a few stray cattle. But, no—he soon descried several horsemen. Shouts and yells behind him attested to the fact that his pursuers likewise had seen the newcomers on the scene.

More than a mile separated these two parties, yet that distance did not keep them from soon understanding each other. Duane waited only to see this new factor show signs of sudden, quick action, and then with a muttered curse he spurred his horse off the road into the brush.

He chose the right side because the river lay nearer that way. There were patches of open, sandy ground between clumps of cactus and mesquit, and he found that, despite a zigzag course, he made better time. It was impossible for him to locate his pursuers. They would come together, he decided, and take to his tracks.

What, then, was his surprise and dismay to run out of a thicket right into a low ridge of rough, broken rock, impossible to get a horse over. He wheeled to the left along its base.

The sandy ground gave place to a harder soil, where his horse did not labor so. Here the growths of mesquit and cactus became scantier, affording better travel, but poor cover.

He kept sharp eyes ahead, and, as he had expected, soon saw moving dust clouds and the dark figures of horses. They were half a mile away and swinging obliquely across the flat, which fact proved that they had entertained a fair idea of the country and the fugitive's difficulty. Without an instant's hesitation Duane put his horse to his best efforts, straight ahead. He had to pass those men.

When this was seemingly made impossible by a deep wash, from which he had to turn, Duane began to feel cold and sick.

Was this the end? Always there had to be an end to an outlaw's career. He wanted then to ride straight at these pursuers; but reason outweighed instinct. He was fleeing for his life. Nevertheless the strongest instinct at the time was his desire to fight.

He knew when these three horsemen saw him, and a moment afterward he lost sight of them as he got into the

mesquits again. He meant now to try to reach the road, and pushed his mount severely, though still saving him for a final burst. Rocks, thickets, bunches of cactus, washes—all operated against his following a straight line.

Almost he lost his bearings, and finally would have ridden toward his enemies had not good fortune favored him in the matter of an open, burned-over stretch of ground.

Here he saw both groups of pursuers, one on each side, and almost within gunshot. Their sharp yells, as much as his cruel spurs, drove his horse into that pace which now meant life or death for him. And never had Duane bestrode a gamer, swifter, stancher beast.

He seemed about to accomplish the impossible. In the dragging sand he was far superior to any horse in pursuit, and on this sandy, open stretch he gained enough to spare a little in the brush beyond. Heated now and thoroughly terrorized, he kept the pace through thickets that almost tore Duane from his saddle.

Duane dashed out into another open place, dotted by few trees, and here, right in his path, within pistol range, stood horsemen waiting.

They yelled, they spurred toward him, but did not fire at him. He turned his horse—faced to the right. Only one thing kept him from standing his ground to fight it out. He remembered those dangling, limp figures hanging from the cottonwoods. These ranchers would rather hang an outlaw than do anything. They might draw all his fire and then capture him. His horror of hanging was so great as to be all out of proportion compared to his gun-fighter's instinct of self-preservation.

A race began then—a dusty, crashing drive through gray mesquits. Duane could scarcely see, he was so blinded by stinging branches across his eyes.

The hollow wind roared in his ears.

He lost his sense of the nearness of his pursuers. But they must have been close. Did they shoot at him? He imagined he heard shots; but that might have been the cracking of dead snags.

His left arm hung limp, almost useless; he handled the rein with his right, and most of the time he hung low over the pommel. The gray walls flashing by him, the whip of twigs, the rush of wind, the heavy, rapid pound of hoofs, the violent motion of his horse—these vied in sensation with the smart of sweat in his eyes, the rack of his wound, the cold, sick cramp in his stomach.

With these also was dull, raging fury. He had to run when he wanted to fight. It took all his mind to force back that bitter hate of himself, of his pursuers, of this race for his useless life.

Suddenly he burst out of a line of mesquits into the road. A long stretch of lonely road! How fiercely, with hot, strange joy, he wheeled his horse upon it! Then he was sweeping along, sure now that he was out in front.

His horse still had strength and speed, but showed signs of breaking. Presently Duane looked back. Pursuers, he could not count how many, were loping along in his rear. He paid no more attention to them, and with teeth set he faced ahead, grimmer now in his determination to foil them.

He passed a few scattered ranch-houses, where horses whistled from corrals and men curiously watched him fly past. He saw one rancher running, and he felt intuitively that this fellow was going to join in the chase.

Duane's steed pounded on, not noticeably slower but with a lack of former smoothness, with a strained, convulsive, jerking stride which showed he was almost done.

Sight of the village ahead surprised Duane. He had reached it sooner than he expected. Then he made a discovery—he had entered the zone of wire

fences. As he dared not turn back now, he kept on, intending to ride through the village.

Looking backward, he saw that his pursuers were half a mile distant—too far to alarm any villagers in time to intercept him in his flight. As he rode by the first houses his horse broke and began to labor. Duane did not believe he would last long enough to go through the village.

Saddled horses in front of a store gave Duane an idea, not by any means new, and one he had carried out successfully before. As he pulled in his heaving mount and leaped off a couple of ranchers came out of the place, and one of them stepped to a clean-limbed, fiery bay. He was about to get into his saddle when he saw Duane, and then he halted, a foot in the stirrup.

Duane strode forward, grasped the bridle of this man's horse.

"Mine's done—but not killed," he panted. "Trade with me."

"Wal, stranger, I'm shore always ready to trade," drawled the man. "But ain't you a little swift?"

Duane glanced back up the road.

His pursuers were entering the village.

"I'm Duane—Buck Duane," he cried menacingly. "Will you trade? Hurry!"

The rancher, turning white, dropped his foot from the stirrup and fell back.

"I reckon I'll trade," he said.

Bounding up, Duane dug spurs into the bay's flanks. The horse snorted in fright, plunged into a run. He was fresh, swift, half wild. Duane flashed by the remaining houses on the street out into the open.

But the road ended at that village or else led out from some other quarter, for he had ridden straight into the fields and from them into rough desert. When he reached the cover of mesquit once more he looked back to find six horsemen within rifle-shot of him and more coming behind.

His new horse had not had time to warm before Duane reached a high,

sandy bluff below which lay the willow brakes. As far as he could see extended an immense flat strip of red-tinged willow.

How welcome it was to his eye! He felt like a hunted wolf that, weary and lame, had reached his hole in the rocks.

Zigzagging down the soft slope, he put the bay to the dense wall of leaf and branch. But the horse balked.

There was little time to lose. Dismounting, he dragged the stubborn beast into the thicket. This was harder and slower work than Duane cared to risk.

If he had not been rushed he might have had better success. So he had to abandon the horse—a circumstance that only such sore straits could have driven him to. Then he went slipping away swiftly through the narrow aisles.

He had not got under cover any too soon. For he heard his pursuers piling over the bluff, loud-voiced, confident, brutal. They crashed into the willows.

"Hi, Sid, heah's your hoss!" called one, evidently to the man Duane had forced into a trade.

"Say, if you locoed gents will hold up a little I'll tell you somethin'," replied a voice from the bluff.

"Come on, Sid; we got him corraled," said the first speaker.

"Wal, mebbe, an' if you hev it's liable to be hot. Thet feller was Buck Duane!"

Absolute silence followed that statement. Presently it was broken by a rattling of gravel and then low voices.

"He can't git acrost the river, I tell you," came to Duane's ears. "He's corraled in the brake. I know thet hole."

Then Duane, gliding silently and swiftly through the willows, heard no more from his pursuers. He headed straight for the river. Threading a passage through a willow brake was an old task for him. Many days and nights had gone to the acquiring of