

PART 1

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The Last of the Duanes



By Zane Grey

(A FULL BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL COMPLETE.)

CHAPTER I.

"—LIKE SON."

SO it was in him then—an inherited fighting instinct—a blood lust—a driving intensity to kill. He was the last of the Duanes—that old fighting stock of Texas.

But not the memory of his dead father, nor the pleading of his soft-voiced mother, nor the warning of this uncle who stood before him now had brought so much to Duane realization of the dark passionate strain in his blood. It was the recurrence, a hundredfold increased in power, of a strange emotion that for the last three years had arisen in him.

"Yes, Cal Bain's in town, full of bad whisky, an' huntin' for you," repeated the elder man gravely.

"It's the second time," muttered Duane, as if to himself.

"Son, you can't avoid a meetin'. Leave town till Cal sobers up. He ain't got it in for you when he's not drinkin'."

"But what's he want me for?" demanded Duane. "To insult me again? I won't stand that twice."

"He's got a fever that's rampant in Texas these days, my boy. He wants gun-play. If he meets you he'll try to kill you."

Here it stirred Duane again—that bursting gush of blood, like a wind of flame shaking all his inner being, and subsiding to leave him strangely chilled.

"Kill me—what for?" he asked.

"Lord knows there ain't any reason. But what's that to do with most

of the shootin' these days? Didn't five cowboys over to Everall's kill each other dead all because they got to jerk-in' at a quirt among themselves? An' Cal has no reason to love you. His girl was sweet on you."

"I quit when I found out she was his girl."

"I reckon she ain't quit. But never mind her or reasons. Cal's here just drunk enough to be ugly. He's achin' to kill somebody. He's one of them four-flush gun-fighters. He'd like to be thought bad. There's a lot of wild cowboys who're ambitious for a reputation."

"They talk about how quick they are on the draw. They ape Bland, an' Kingfisher, an' Hardin', an' all the big outlaws. They make threats about joinin' the gangs along the Rio Grande. They laugh at the sheriffs an' brag about how they'd fix the rangers. Cal's sure not much for you to bother with, if you only keep out of his way."

"You mean for me to run?" asked Duane in scorn.

"I reckon I wouldn't put it that way. Just avoid him. Duane, I'm not afraid Cal would get you if you met down there in town. You've your father's eyes, an' his slick hand with a gun. What I'm most afraid of is that you'll kill Bain."

Duane was silent, letting his uncle's earnest words sink in, trying to realize their significance.

"If Texas ever recovers from that fool war, an' kills off these outlaws, why, a young man will have a look-out," went on the uncle. "You're twenty-three now, an' a powerful sight of a fine fellow, barrin' your temper. You've a chance in life."

"But if you go to gun-fightin', if you kill a man, you're ruined. Then you'll kill another. It'll be the same old story. An' the rangers would make you an outlaw."

"The rangers mean law an' order for Texas. This even-break business doesn't work with them. If you resist

arrest they'll kill you. If you submit to arrest then you go to jail, an' mebbe you hang."

"I'd never hang," muttered Duane darkly.

"I reckon you wouldn't," replied the old man. "You'd be like your father. He was ever ready to draw—too ready. In times like these with the Texas rangers enforcin' the law your dad would have been driven to the river. An' son, I'm afraid you're a chip off the old block. Can't you hold in—keep your temper—run away from trouble?"

"What you say is all very well, uncle," returned Duane; "but the only way out for me is to run, and I won't do it. Cal Bain and his outfit have already made me look like a coward. He says I'm afraid to come out and face him. A man simply can't face that in this country. Besides, Cal would shoot me in the back some day if I didn't face him."

"Well, then, what're you goin' to do?" inquired the elder man.

"I haven't decided yet."

"No, but you're comin' to it mighty fast. That spell is workin' in you. You're different to-day. I remember how you used to be moody, an' lose your temper, an' talk wild. Never was much afraid of you then. But now you're gettin' cool an' quiet, an' you think deep, an' I don't like the light in your eye. It reminds me of your father."

"I wonder what dad would say to me to-day, if he were alive and here," said Duane.

"What do you think? What could you expect of a man who never wore a glove on his right hand for twenty years?"

"Well, he'd hardly have said much. Dad never talked. But he would have done a lot—And I guess I'll go downtown and let Cal Bain find me."

Then followed a long silence, during which Duane sat with downcast eyes, and the uncle appeared lost in sad thought of the future. Presently he

turned to Duane with an expression that denoted resignation, and yet a spirit which showed wherein they were of the same blood.

"You've got a fast horse—the fastest I know of in this country. After you meet Bain hurry back home. I'll have a saddle-bag packed for you and the horse ready."

With that he turned on his heel and went into the house, leaving Duane to revolve in his mind his singular speech. He wondered presently if he shared his uncle's opinion of the result of a meeting between himself and Bain.

His thoughts seemed vague. But on the instant of final decision, when he had settled with himself that he would meet Bain, such a storm of passion assailed him that he felt as if he was being shaken with ague. Yet it was all internal—inside his breast—for his hand was like a rock, and for all he could see not a muscle about him quivered.

He went into the house and buckled on his belt and gun. The gun was a Colt forty-five, six shot, and heavy, with an ivory handle. He had packed it, on and off, for five years. Before that it had been used by his father. There were a number of notches filed in the bulge of the ivory handle.

This gun was the one his father had fired twice after being shot through the heart; and his hand had stiffened so tightly upon it in the death-grip that his fingers had to be pried open. It had never been drawn upon any man since it had come into Duane's possession. But the cold bright polish of the weapon showed how it had been used.

Duane could draw it with inconceivable rapidity, and at twenty feet he could split a card pointing edge-wise toward him.

Duane meant to avoid meeting his mother; this, however, was not necessary, as she was absent from home. He went out and down the path toward the gate.

The air was full of the fragrance of blossoms and the melody of birds. Out-

side in the road a neighbor woman stood talking to a countryman in a wagon; they spoke to him, and he heard but did not reply.

Then he began to stride down the road toward the town.

As towns go, Wellston was small enough, but important in that unsettled part of the great State because it was the trading center of several hundred miles of territory. On the main street there were perhaps fifty buildings, some brick, some frame, mostly adobe, and one-third of the lot, by far the most prosperous, were saloons. From the road Duane turned into the street.

It was a wide thoroughfare, lined by hitching rails, and saddled horses, and vehicles of various kinds. Duane's eye ranged down the street, taking in all at a glance, particularly persons moving leisurely up and down. Not a cowboy was in sight.

Duane slackened his stride, and by the time he reached Sol White's place, which was the first saloon, he was walking slowly. Several people spoke to him and turned to look back after they had passed. He paused at the door of the saloon, took a sharp survey of the interior, then stepped inside.

The saloon was large and cool; full of men and noise and smoke. The noise ceased upon his entrance, and the silence ensuing presently broke to the clink of Mexican silver dollars at a monte table.

Sol White, who was behind the bar, straightened up when he saw Duane, then, without speaking, he bent over to rinse a glass. All eyes, except those of the Mexican gamblers, were turned upon Duane; and these glances were keen, speculative, questioning. These men knew Bain was looking for trouble; they probably had heard his boasts. But what did Duane intend to do?

Sol White stood with his big red hands out upon the bar; he was a tall, raw-boned Texan, with a long mustache, waxed to sharp points.

"Howdy, Buck," was his greeting to Duane. He spoke carelessly, and averted his dark gaze for an instant.

"Howdy, Sol," replied Duane slowly. "Say, Sol, I hear there's a gent in town looking for me bad."

"Reckon there is, Buck," replied White. "He came in heah aboot an hour ago. Shore he was some riled an' a roarin' for gore. Told me confidential a certain party had given you a white silk scarf, an' he was bent on wearin' it home spotted red."

"Anybody with him?" queried Duane.

"Burt an' Sam Outcault, an' a little cow-puncher I never seen before. They all was coixin' him to leave town. But he's looked on the flowin' glass, Buck, an' he's heah for keeps."

"Why doesn't Sheriff Oaks lock him up if he's that bad?"

"Oaks went away with the rangers. There's been another raid at Flesher's ranch. The Kingfisher gang, likely. An' so the town's shore wide open."

Duane stalked outdoors and faced down the street. He walked the whole length of the long block, meeting many people — farmers, ranchers, clerks, merchants, Mexicans, cowboys, and women.

It was a singular fact that when he turned to retrace his steps the street was almost empty. He had not returned a hundred yards on his way before the street was wholly deserted. A few heads protruded from doors and round corners.

Duane walked on. When he came to within fifty paces of a saloon he swerved out into the middle of the street, stood there for a moment, then went ahead and back to the sidewalk. He passed on in this way the length of the block.

Sol White was standing in the door of his saloon.

"Buck, I'm a tippin' you off," he said, quick and low-voiced. "Cal Bain's over at Everall's. If he's a huntin' you bad as he brags he'll show there."

Duane crossed the street and started down. Notwithstanding White's statement, Duane was wary and slow at every door. Nothing happened, and he traversed almost the whole length of the block without seeing a person. Everall's place was on the corner.

Duane knew himself to be cold, steady. He was conscious of a strange fury that made him want to leap ahead. He seemed to long for this encounter more than anything he had ever wanted. But vivid as were his sensations he felt as if in a dream. Before he reached Everall's he heard loud voices, one of which was raised high. Then the short door swung outward as if impelled by a vigorous hand. A bow-legged cowboy, wearing woolly chaps, burst out upon the sidewalk. At sight of Duane he seemed to bound into the air and he let out a savage roar.

Duane stopped in his tracks at the outer edge of the sidewalk, perhaps a dozen rods from Everall's door.

If Bain was drunk he did not show it in his movements. He swaggered forward, rapidly closing up the gap. Red, sweaty, disheveled, and hatless, his face distorted and expressive of the most malignant intent, he seemed a wild and sinister figure. He had already killed a man, and this appeared manifest in his demeanor.

His hands were extended before him, the right hand a little lower than the left. At every step he bellowed his rancor in speech mostly curses. Gradually he slowed his walk, then halted. A good twenty-five paces separated the men.

"Won't nothin' make you draw, you — — —!" he shouted.

"I'm waiting on you, Cal," replied Duane.

Bain's right hand stiffened—moved. Duane threw his gun like a boy throws a ball underhand—a draw his father had taught him. He pulled twice, his shots almost as one.

Bain's big Colt boomed while it was pointed downward and he was falling.

His bullet scattered dust and gravel at Duane's feet. He fell loosely without contortion.

In a flash all was reality for Duane. Something tigerish in him made him leap forward now—to be quick enough to see his victim conscious. He held his gun ready for the slightest movement on the part of Bain.

But Bain lay upon his back, and all that moved were his breast and his eyes. No blood showed. How strangely the red had left his face—and also the distortion! The devil that had showed in Bain was gone. He was sober and conscious. He tried to speak but failed. His eyes expressed something pitifully human. They changed—rolled—set blankly.

Then he died.

Duane drew a deep breath and sheathed his gun. He felt calm and cool, glad the fray was over. He did not feel a regret. One violent expression burst from him.

"The darned fool!"

When he looked up there were men round him.

"Plumb center," said one.

Another, a cowboy who evidently had just left the gaming table, leaned down and pulled open Bain's shirt. He had the ace of spades in his hand. He laid it on Bain's breast, and the black figure on the card covered the two bullet holes just over Bain's heart.

Duane wheeled and hurried away. He heard another man say:

"Reckon Cal got what he deserved. Buck Duane's first gun-play. Like father like son!"

CHAPTER II.

OUTLAWED.

WHEN he came to the gate of his home and saw his uncle there with a mettlesome horse, saddled, with canteen, rope, and bags all in place, a subtle shock pervaded his spirit.

It had slipped his mind—the consequence of his act.

But sight of the horse, the look of his uncle recalled the fact that he must now become a fugitive. An unreasonable anger took hold of him.

"The darned fool!" he exclaimed hotly. "Meeting Bain wasn't much, Uncle Jim. He dusted my boots, that's all. And for that I've got to go on the dodge."

"Son, you killed him, then?" asked the uncle huskily.

"Yes. I stood over him—watched him die. I did as I would have been done by."

"I knew it. Long ago I saw it comin'. But now we can't stop to cry over spilt blood. You've got to leave town an' this part of the country."

"Mother!" exclaimed Duane.

"She's away from home. You can't wait. I'll break it to her—what she always feared."

Suddenly Duane sat down and covered his face with his hands.

"Good Heavens! Uncle, what have I done?" His broad shoulders shook.

"Listen, son, an' remember what I say," replied the elder man earnestly. "Don't ever forget. You're not to blame. I'm glad to see you take it this way. Because maybe you'll never grow hard an' callous. You're not to blame. This is Texas. You're your father's son. These are wild times."

"The law as the rangers are laying it down now can't change life all in a minute. Even your mother, who's a good, true woman, has had her share in making you what you are this moment. For she was one of the pioneers—the fightin' pioneers of this State."

"These years of wild times, before you was born, developed in her an instinct to fight, to save her life—her children, an' that instinct has cropped out in you. It will be many years before it dies out of the boys born in Texas."

"I am a murderer," said Duane, shuddering.

"No, son, you're not. An' you never will be. But you've got to be

an outlaw till time makes it safe for you to come home."

"An outlaw?"

"I said it. If we had money an' influence we'd risk a trial. But we've neither. An' I reckon the scaffold or jail is no place for Buckley Duane. Strike for the wild country, an' wherever you go an' whatever you do—be a man.

"Live honestly, if that's possible. If it isn't, be as honest as you can. If you have to herd with outlaws try not to become bad. There are outlaws who're not all bad—many who have been driven to the river by such a deal as this you had.

"When you get among these men avoid brawls. Don't drink, don't gamble. I needn't tell you what to do if it comes to gun-play, as likely it will. You can't come home. When your crime is lived down, if that time ever comes, I'll get word into the unsettled country. It'll reach you some day. That's all. Remember, be a man. Good-by."

Duane, with blurred sight and contracting throat, gripped his uncle's hand and bade him a wordless farewell. Then he leaped astride the black and rode out of town.

As swiftly as was consistent with a care for his steed Duane put a distance of fifteen or eighteen miles behind him. With that he slowed up, and the matter of riding did not require all his faculties.

He passed several ranches and was seen by men. This did not suit him, and he took an old trail across country. It was a flat region with a poor growth of mesquit and prickly-pear cactus. Occasionally he caught a glimpse of low hills in the distance.

It was sunset when he decided to camp at a likely spot he came across. He led the horse to water, and then began searching through the shallow valley for a suitable place to camp.

At last he found a secluded spot, under cover of thick mesquits and oaks, at a goodly distance from the

old trail. He took saddle and pack off the horse. He looked among his effects for a hobble, and finding that his uncle had failed to put one in he suddenly remembered that he seldom used a hobble, and never on this horse.

He cut a few feet off the end of his lasso and used that. The horse, unused to such hampering, had to be driven out upon the grass.

Duane made a small fire, prepared and ate his supper. This done, ending the work of that day, he sat down and filled his pipe. Twilight had waned into dusk. A few wan stars had just begun to show and brighten.

Above the low, continuous hum of insects sounded the evening carol of robins. Presently the birds ceased their singing and then the quiet was more noticeable. When night set in and the place seemed all the more isolated and lonely for that Duane had a sense of relief.

It dawned upon him all at once that he was nervous, watchful, sleepless. The fact caused him surprise, and he began to think back, to take note of his late actions and their motives. The change one day had wrought amazed him.

He who had always been free, easy, happy, especially when out alone in the open, had become in a few short hours bound, serious, preoccupied. The silence that had once been sweet now meant nothing to him except a medium whereby he might the better hear the sounds of pursuit.

This being an outlaw, then, meant eternal vigilance. No home—no rest—no content—no life worth the living! He must be a lone wolf or he must herd among men obnoxious to him. If he worked for an honest living he still must hide his identity and take risks of detection.

If he did not work on some distant outlying ranch how was he to live? The idea of stealing was repugnant to him. The future seemed gray and somber enough. And he was twenty-three years old.

The black circle of darkness weighed down upon him, closed in round him. Suddenly he sat bolt upright and then froze in that position. He had heard a step. It was behind him—no—on the side. Some one was there. He forced his hand down to his gun, and the touch of cold steel was another icy shock.

But what was the matter with the light of his camp-fire? It had taken on a strange green luster and seemed to be waving off into the outer shadows. Duane heard no step, saw no movement; nevertheless there was another present at that camp-fire vigil. Duane saw him.

He lay there in the middle of the green brightness—prostrate—motionless—dying. Cal Bain! His features were wonderfully distinct, clearer than any cameo, more sharply outlined than those of any picture. It was a hard face softening at the threshold of eternity.

The red tan of sun, the coarse signs of drunkenness, the ferocity and hate so characteristic of Bain were no longer there. This face represented a different Bain—showed all that was human in him fading, fading as swiftly as it blanched white. The lips wanted to speak, but had not the power.

The eyes held an agony of thought. They revealed what might have been possible for this man if he lived—that he saw his mistake too late. Then they rolled, set blankly, and closed in death.

That haunting visitation left Duane sitting there in a cold sweat, a horrible remorse gnawing at his vitals, realizing the curse that was on him. He divined that never would he be able to keep off that fantom. He remembered how his father had been eternally pursued by the furies of accusing guilt—how he had never been able to forget in work or in sleep those men he had killed.

The hour was late when Duane's mind let him sleep, and then dreams

troubled him. In the morning he bestirred himself so early that in the gray gloom he had difficulty in finding his horse. Day had just broken when he struck the old trail again.

He rode hard all morning and halted in a shady spot to rest and graze his horse. In the afternoon he took to the trail at an easy trot.

The country grew wilder. Bald, rugged mountains broke the level of the monotonous horizon. About three in the afternoon he came to a little river which marked the boundary line of his hunting territory.

The decision he made to travel upstream for a while was owing to two facts—the river was high, with quicksand bars on each side, and he felt reluctant to cross into that region where his presence alone meant that he was a marked man. The bottom lands through which the river wound to the southwest were more inviting than the barrens he had traversed.

The rest of that day he rode leisurely up-stream. At sunset he penetrated the brakes of willow and cottonwood to spend the night. It seemed to him that in this lonely cover he would feel easy and content.

But he did not. Every feeling, every imagining he had experienced the previous night returned somewhat more vividly and accentuated by newer ones of the same intensity and color.

In this kind of travel and camping he spent three more days, during which he crossed a number of trails, and one road where cattle—stolen cattle, probably—had recently passed. This time exhausted his supply of food, except salt, pepper, coffee, and sugar, of which he had a quantity.

There were deer in the brakes, but as he could not get close enough to kill them with a revolver he had to satisfy himself with a rabbit. He knew he might as well content himself with the hard fare that assuredly would be his lot.

Somewhere up this river there was a village called Huntsville. It was

distant about a hundred miles from Wellston and had a reputation throughout southwestern Texas. He had never been there.

The fact was this reputation was such that honest travelers gave the town a wide berth. Duane had considerable money, for him, in his possession, and he concluded to visit Huntsville, if he could find it, and buy a stock of provisions. The following day, toward evening, he happened upon a road which he believed might lead to the village.

There were a good many fresh horse-tracks in the sand, and these made him thoughtful. Nevertheless, he followed the road, proceeding cautiously. He had not gone very far when the sound of rapid hoof-beats caught his ears. They came from his rear. In the darkening twilight he could not see any great distance back along the road.

Voices, however, warned him that these riders, whoever they were, had approached closer than he liked.

To go farther down the road was not to be thought of, so he turned a little way in among the mesquits and halted, hoping to escape being seen or heard. As he was now a fugitive it seemed every man was his enemy and pursuer.

The horsemen were fast approaching. Presently they were abreast of Duane's position, so near that he could hear the creak of saddles, the clink of spurs.

"Shore he crossed the river below," said one man.

"I reckon you're right, Bill. He's slipped us," replied another.

Rangers or a posse of ranchers in pursuit of a fugitive! The knowledge gave Duane a strange thrill. Certainly they could not have been hunting him. But the feeling their proximity gave him was identical to what it would have been had he been this particular hunted man.

He held his breath, he clenched his teeth, he pressed a quieting hand upon

his horse. Suddenly he became aware that these horsemen had halted. They were whispering. He could just make out a dark group closely massed. What had made them halt so suspiciously?

"You're wrong, Bill," said a man in a low but distinct voice. "The idee of hearin' a hoss heave! You're wuss'n a ranger. An' you're bent on killin' that rustler. Now I say let's go home an' eat."

"Wal, I'll jest take a look at the sand," replied the man called Bill.

Duane heard the clink of spurs on steel stirrup and the thud of boots on the ground. There followed a short silence which was broken by a sharply breathed exclamation.

Duane waited for no more. They had found his trail. He spurred his horse straight into the brush. At the second crashing bound there came yells from the road and then shots.

Duane heard the hiss of a bullet close by his ear, and as it struck a branch it made a peculiar singing sound. These shots and the proximity of that lead missile roused in Duane a quick, hot resentment, which mounted into a passion almost ungovernable. He must escape, yet it seemed that he did not care whether he did or not. Something grim kept urging him to halt and return the fire of these men.

After running a couple of hundred yards he raised himself from over the pommel, where he had bent to avoid the stinging branches, and tried to guide his horse. In the dark shadows under mesquits and cottonwoods he was hard put to it to find open passages; however, he succeeded so well and made such little noise that gradually he drew away from his pursuers. The sound of their horses crashing through the thickets died away.

Duane reined in and listened. He had distanced them. Probably they would go into camp till daylight, then follow his tracks. He started on again, walking his horse, and peered

sharply at the ground, so that he might take advantage of the first trail he crossed.

It seemed a long while until he came upon one. He followed it until a late hour, when, striking the willow brakes again and hence the neighborhood of the river, he picketed his horse and lay down to rest, but not to sleep.

Gray dawn found him in the saddle again, headed for the river. Half an hour of riding brought him to the dense chaparral and willow thickets. These he threaded to come at length to the ford. It was a gravel bottom and therefore an easy crossing.

Once upon the opposite shore he reined in his horse and looked darkly back. This action marked his acknowledgment of his situation: he had voluntarily sought the refuge of the outlaws; he was beyond the pale. A bitter and passionate oath passed his lips as he spurred his horse into the brakes on that alien shore.

He rode perhaps twenty miles, not sparing his horse, nor caring whether or not he left a plain trail.

"Let them hunt me!" he muttered.

When the heat of the day began to be oppressive, and hunger and thirst made themselves manifest, Duane began to look about him for a place to halt for the noon hours. The trail led into a road which was hard-packed and smooth from the tracks of cattle. He doubted not that he had come across one of the roads used by border raiders.

He headed into it, and had scarcely traveled a mile when, turning a curve, he came point-blank upon a single horseman riding toward him. Both riders wheeled their mounts sharply and were ready to run and shoot back. Not more than a hundred paces separated them. They stood then for a moment watching each other.

"Mawnin', stranger," called the man, dropping his hand from his hip.

"Howdy," replied Duane shortly.

They rode toward each other, clos-

ing half the gap, then they halted again.

"I seen you ain't no ranger," called the rider, "an' shore I ain't none."

He laughed loudly as if he had made a joke.

"How'd you know I wasn't a ranger?" asked Duane curiously. Somehow he had instantly divined that this horseman was not an officer, or even a rancher trailing stolen stock.

"Wal," said the fellow, starting his horse forward at a walk, "a ranger'd never git ready to run the other way, from one man."

He laughed again. He was small and wiry, slouchy of attire, and armed to the teeth, and he bestrode a fine bay horse. He had quick dancing brown eyes, at once frank and bold, and a coarse bronzed face. Evidently he was a good-natured ruffian.

Duane acknowledged the truth of the assertion, and turned over in his mind how shrewdly the fellow had guessed him to be a hunted man.

"My name's Luke Stevens, an' I hail from the river. Who're you?" said this stranger.

Duane was silent.

"I reckon you're Buck Duane," went on Stevens. "I heered you was a bad man with a gun."

This time Duane laughed, not at the doubtful compliment, but at the idea that the first outlaw he met should know him.

"Wal, Buck," said Stevens, in a friendly manner, "I ain't presumin' on your time or company. I see you're headin' for the river. But will you stop long enough to stake a feller to a bite of grub?"

"I'm out of grub, and pretty hungry myself," admitted Duane.

"Been pushin' your hoss, I see. Wal, I reckon you'd better stock up before you hit that stretch of country."

He made a wide sweep of his right arm, indicating the southwest, and there was that in his action which seemed significant of a vast and barren region.

"Stock up?" queried Duane thoughtfully.

"Shore. A feller has jest got to eat. I can rustle along without whiskey, but not without grub. Thet's what makes it so embarrassin' travelin' these parts dodgin' your shadow. Now I'm on my way to Mercer. It's a little two-bit town up the river a ways. I'm goin' to pack out some grub."

Stevens's tone was inviting. Evidently he would welcome Duane's companionship, but he did not openly say so. Duane kept silence, however, and then Stevens went on.

"Stranger, in this here country two's a crowd. It's safer. I never was much on this lone wolf dodgin', though I've done it of necessity. It takes a good man to travel alone any length of time. Why, I've been thet sick I was jest achin' fer some ranger to come along an' plug me. Give me a pardner any day. Now mebbe you're not thet kind of a feller, an' I'm shore not presumin' to ask. But I jest declares myself sufficient."

"You mean you'd like me to go with you?" asked Duane.

Stevens grinned.

"Wal, I should smile. I'd be particular proud to be braced with a man of your reputation."

"See here, my good fellow, that's all nonsense," declared Duane in some haste.

"Shore I think modesty becomin' to a youngster," replied Stevens. "I hate a brag. An' I've no use fer these four-flush cowboys thet're always lookin' fer trouble an' talkin' gun-play. Buck, I don't know much about you.

"But every man who's lived along the Texas border remembers a lot about your dad. It was expected of you, I reckon, an' much of your rep was established before you throwed your gun. I jest heerd thet you was lightnin' on the draw, an' when you cut loose with a gun why the figger on the ace of spades would cover your cluster of bullet holes. Thet's the word thet's gone down the border.

"It's the kind of reputation most sure to fly far an' swift ahead of a man in this country. An' the safest, too, I'll gamble on thet. It's the land of the draw! I see now you're only a boy, though you're shore a strappin', husky one. Now, Buck, I'm not a spring chicken, an' I've been long on the dodge. Mebbe a little of my society won't hurt you none. You'll need to learn the country."

There was something sincere and likable about this outlaw.

"I dare say you're right," replied Duane quietly, "and I'll go to Mercer with you."

Next moment he was riding down the road with Stevens.

CHAPTER III.

LUKE STEVENS'S BOOTS.

LATE that day, a couple of hours before sunset, Duane and Stevens, having rested their horses in the shade of some mesquits near the town of Mercer, saddled up and prepared to move.

"Buck, as we're lookin' fer grub an' not trouble, I reckon you'd better hang up out here," Stevens was saying as he mounted. "You see, towns an' sheriffs an' rangers are always lookin' fer new fellers gone bad. They sort of forget most of the old boys, except those as are plumb bad.

"Now, nobody in Mercer will take notice of me. Reckon there's been a thousand men run into the river country to become outlaws since the debut of yours truly. You jest wait here an' be ready to ride hard. Mebbe my be-settin' sin will go operatin' in spite of my good intentions. In which case there'll be—"

His pause was significant. He grinned and his brown eyes danced with a kind of wild humor.

"Stevens, have you got any money?" asked Duane.

"Money!" exclaimed Luke blankly. "Say, I haven't owned a two-bit piece since—wal, fer some time."

"I'll furnish money for grub," returned Duane. "And for whisky, too, providing you hurry back here—with-out making trouble."

"Shore you're a downright good pard," declared Stevens in admiration as he took the money. "I give my word, Buck, an' I'm here to say I never broke it yet. Lay low an' look for me back quick."

With that he spurred his horse and rode out of the mesquits toward the town. At that distance, about a quarter of a mile, Mercer appeared to be a cluster of low adobe houses set in a grove of cottonwoods. Pastures of alfalfa were dotted by horses and cattle. Duane saw a sheep herder driving in a meager flock.

Presently Stevens rode out of sight into the town. Duane waited, hoping the outlaw would make good his word.

Probably not a quarter of an hour had elapsed before Duane heard the clear reports of a rifle, the clatter of rapid hoof-beats, and yells unmistakably the kind to mean danger for a man like Stevens. Duane mounted and rode to the edge of the mesquits.

He saw a cloud of dust down the road and a bay horse running fast. Stevens apparently had not been wounded by any of the shots, for he had a steady seat in his saddle, and his riding struck Duane as admirable. He carried a large pack over the pommel, and he kept looking back.

The shots had ceased but the yells increased. Duane saw several men running and waving their arms. Then he spurred his horse and got into a swift stride so Stevens would not pass him. Presently the outlaw caught up with him.

Stevens was grinning, but there was now no fun in the dancing eyes. It was a devil that danced in them. His face seemed a shade paler.

"Was jest comin' out of the store," yelled Stevens. "Run plumb into a rancher who knowed me. He opened up with a rifle. Think they'll chase us."

They covered several miles before there were any signs of pursuit, and when horsemen did move into sight out of the cottonwoods, Duane and his companion steadily drew farther away.

"No hosses in thet bunch to worry us," called out Stevens.

Duane had the same conviction and he did not look back again. He rode somewhat to the fore and was constantly aware of the rapid thudding of hoofs behind as Stevens kept close.

At sunset they reached the willow brakes and the river. Duane's horse was winded and lashed with sweat and lather. It was not until the crossing had been accomplished that Duane halted to rest his animal.

Stevens was riding up the low sandy bank. He reeled in the saddle. With an exclamation of surprise Duane leaped off and ran to the outlaw's side.

Stevens was pale and his face bore beads of sweat. The whole front of his shirt was soaked with blood.

"You're shot!" cried Duane.

"Wal, who'n hell said I wasn't? Would you mind givin' me a lift—on this here pack?"

Duane lifted the heavy pack down and then helped Stevens to dismount. The outlaw had a bloody foam on his lips and he was spitting blood.

"Oh! why didn't you say so?" cried Duane. "I never thought. You seemed all right."

"Wal, Luke Stevens may be as gabby as an old woman—but sometimes—he doesn't say anythin'. It wouldn't have done no good."

Duane bade him sit down, removed his shirt, and washed the blood from his breast and back. Stevens had been shot in the breast, fairly low down, and the bullet had gone clear through him. His ride, holding himself and that heavy pack in the saddle, had been a feat a little short of marvelous. Duane did not see how it had been possible, and he felt no hope for the outlaw. But he plugged the wounds and bound them tightly.

"Feller's name was Brown," Stevens said. "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 there 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 some bad wounds I lived over. Guess meb-be 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 the saddle, turned into the brakes, being careful to pick out hard or grassy ground that left little signs of tracks.

Just about dark he ran across a trail that Stevens said was a good one to take into the wild country.

"Reckon we'd better keep right on in the dark—till I drop," concluded Stevens with a laugh.

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, though he was still spirited and cheerful. Duane made camp. The outlaw refused food, but asked for both whisky 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. Stevens seemed to read his mind.

"Buck, my old daddy used to say thet I was born to be hanged. But I wasn't—an' dyin' with your boots on is the next wust way to croak."

"You've a chance to—get over this," said Duane.

"Shore. But I want to be correct about the boots—an' say, pard, if I do go over, jest you remember thet I was appreciatin' of your kindness."

Then he closed his eyes and seemed to sleep.

Duane could not find water for the horses, but there was an abundance of dew—wet grass upon which he hobbled them. After that was done he prepared himself a much-needed meal. The sun was getting warm when he lay down to sleep, and when he awoke it was sinking in the west.

Stevens was still alive, for he breathed heavily. The horses were in sight. All was quiet except the hum of insects in the brush.

Duane listened a while, then rose and went for the horses.

When he returned with them he found Stevens awake, bright-eyed, cheerful as usual, and apparently stronger.

"Wal, Buck, I'm still with you, an' good fer another night's ride," he said. "Guess about all I need now is a big pull on thet bottle. Help me, will you? There! thet was bully. I ain't swallowin' my blood this evenin'. Mebbe I've bled all there was in me."

While Duane got a hurried meal for

himself, packed up the little outfit, and saddled the horses, Stevens kept on talking. He seemed to be in a hurry to tell Duane all about the country. Another night ride would put them beyond fear of pursuit, within striking distance of the Rio Grande, and the hiding places of the outlaws.

When it came time for mounting the horses, Stevens said: "Reckon you can pull on my boots once more."

In spite of the laugh accompanying the words, Duane detected a subtle change in the outlaw's spirit.

On this night travel was facilitated by the fact that the trail was broad enough for two horses abreast, enabling Duane to ride while he upheld Stevens in the saddle.

The difficulty most persistent was in keeping the horses in a walk. They were used to a trot, and this kind of gait would not do for Stevens.

The red died out of the west; a pale afterglow prevailed for a while; darkness set in; then the broad expanse of blue darkened and the stars brightened. After a while Stevens ceased talking and drooped in his saddle.

Duane kept the horses going, however, and the slow hours wore away. Duane thought the quiet night would never break to dawn, that there was no end to the melancholy brooding plain. But at length a grayness blotted out the stars and mantled the level of mesquit and cactus.

Dawn caught the fugitives at a green camping-site on the bank of a rocky little stream.

Stevens fell a dead weight into Duane's arms, and one look at the haggard face showed Duane that the outlaw had taken his last ride. He knew it, too. Yet that cheerfulness prevailed.

"Buck, my feet are orful tired packin' them heavy boots," he said, and seemed immensely relieved when Duane had removed them.

This matter of the outlaw's boots was strange, Duane thought. He made Stevens as comfortable as possible,

then attended to his own needs. And the outlaw took up the thread of his conversation where he had left off the night before.

"This trail splits up a ways from here, an' every branch of it leads to a hole where you'll find men—a few, mebbe, like yourself—some like me—an' gangs of no-good hoss thieves, rustlers an' such. It's easy livin', Buck.

"I reckon, though, thet you'll not find it easy. You'll never mix in. You'll be a lone wolf. I seen thet right off. Wal, if a man can stand the loneliness, an' if he's quick on the draw—mebbe lone wolfin' it is the best. Shore I don't know. But these fellers in here will be suspicious of a man who goes it alone. If they get a chance they'll kill you."

Stevens asked for water several times. He had forgotten or he did not want the whisky. His voice grew perceptibly weaker.

"Be quiet," said Duane. "Talking uses up your strength."

"Aw, I'll talk till—I'm done," he replied doggedly. "See here, pard, you can gamble on what I'm tellin' you. An' it'll be useful. From this camp we'll—you'll meet men right along. An' none of them will be honest men. All the same some are better'n others. I've lived along the river fer twelve years.

"There's three big gangs of outlaws. King Fisher, you know him, I reckon, fer he's half the time livin' among respectable folks. King is a pretty good feller. It'll do to tie up with him an' his gang.

"Now there's Cheseldine, who hangs out in the Rim-Rock way up the river. He's an outlaw chief. I never seen him, though I stayed once right in his camp. Late years he's got rich an' keeps back pretty well hid.

"But Bland, I knowed Bland fer years. An' I haven't any use for him. Bland has the biggest gang. You ain't likely to miss strikin' his place sometime or other. He's got a regular town, I might say. Shore there's some