

PART 6

302

THE ARGOSY.

a skill that might have been envied by an Indian.

The depths of the brake were silent, dreamy, and strange. In the middle of the day the light was weird and dim. When a breeze fluttered the foliage slender shafts and spears of sunshine pierced the green mantle and danced like gold on the ground.

Duane had always felt the strangeness of this kind of place, and likewise he had felt a protecting, harboring something which always seemed to him to be sympathy of the brake for a hunted creature. Any unwounded creature, strong and resourceful, was safe when he had glided under the low, rustling, green roof of this wild covert.

It was not hard to conceal tracks; the springy soil gave forth no sound; and men could hunt each other for weeks, pass within a few yards of each other, and never know it. The problem of sustaining life was difficult; but then hunted men and animals survived on very little.

Duane wanted to cross the river if that was possible, and, keeping in the brake, work his way up-stream till he had reached country more hospitable. Remembering what the man had said in regard to the river, Duane had his doubts about crossing. But he would take any chance to put the river between him and his hunters.

He pushed on. His left arm had to be favored, as he could scarcely move it. Using his right hand to spread the willows, he slipped sideways between them and made fast time. There were narrow aisles and washes and holes, low down, and paths brushed by animals, all of which he took advantage of, running, walking, crawling, stooping any way to get along. To keep in a straight line was not easy; he did it by marking some bright sunlit stem or tree ahead, and when he reached it looked straight on to another mark. His progress necessarily grew slower, for as he advanced the brake became wilder, denser, darker. Mosquitoes began to whine, but he kept on.

Deepening shadows under the willows told him that the afternoon was far advanced. He began to fear he had wandered in a wrong direction. Finally a strip of light ahead relieved his anxiety, and, after a toilsome penetration of still denser brush, he broke through to the bank of the river.

He faced a wide, shallow, muddy stream, with brakes on the opposite bank extending like a green and yellow wall along the high bank. Duane perceived at a glance the futility of his trying to cross at this point.

Everywhere the sluggish water laved quicksand bars. In fact, the bed of the river was all quicksand, and very likely there was not a foot of water anywhere. He could not swim; he could not crawl; he could not push a log across.

Any solid thing touching that smooth, yellow sand would be grasped and sucked down. To prove this he seized a long pole and, reaching down from the high bank, thrust it into the stream. Right there near shore there apparently was no bottom.

He abandoned any hope of crossing the river. Probably for miles up and down it was the same. Before leaving the bank he tied his hat upon the pole and lifted enough water to quench his thirst.

Then he worked his way back to where thinner growth made advancement easier and kept on up-stream till the shadows were so deep he could not see. Feeling round for a place big enough to stretch out on, he lay down.

For the time being he was as safe there as he would have been beyond the Rim-Rock.

He was tired, though not exhausted, and in spite of the throbbing pain in his arm he dropped at once into sleep.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE WILLOW BRAKE.

SOME time during the night Duane awoke.

A stillness seemingly so thick and heavy as to have substance blanketed the black willow brake. He could not see a star or a branch or tree-trunk or even his hand before his eyes. He lay there waiting, listening, sure that he had been awakened by an unusual sound.

Ordinary noises of the night in the wilderness never disturbed his rest. His faculties, like those of old fugitives and hunted creatures, had become trained to a marvelous keenness.

A long, low breath of slow wind moaned through the willows, passed away; some stealthy, soft-footed beast trotted by him in the darkness; there was a rustling among dry leaves; a fox barked lonesomely in the distance. But none of these sounds had broken his slumber.

Suddenly, piercing the stillness, came a bay of a bloodhound. Quickly Duane sat up, chilled to his marrow. The action made him aware of his crippled arm. Then came other bays, lower, more distant.

Silence enfolded him again, all the more oppressive and menacing in his suspense. Bloodhounds had been put on his trail, and the leader was not far away.

All his life Duane had been familiar with bloodhounds; and he knew that if the pack surrounded him in this impenetrable darkness he would be held at bay or dragged down as wolves dragged a stag. Rising to his feet, prepared to flee as best he could, he waited to be sure of the direction he should take.

The leader of the hounds broke into cry again, a deep, full-toned, ringing bay, strange, ominous, terribly significant in its power. It caused a cold sweat to ooze out all over Duane's body. He turned from it and, with his uninjured arm outstretched to feel for the willows, he groped his way along.

As it was impossible to pick out the narrow passages he had to slip and squeeze and plunge between the yield-

ing stems. He made such a crashing that he no longer heard the baying of the hounds. He had no hope to elude them.

He meant to climb the first cottonwood that he stumbled upon in his blind flight. But it appeared he never was going to be lucky enough to run against one.

Often he fell, sometimes flat, at others upheld by the willows. What made the work so hard was the fact that he had only one arm to open a clump of close-growing stems, and his feet would catch or tangle in the narrow crotches, holding him fast. He had to struggle desperately.

It was as if the willows were clutching hands, his enemies, fiendishly impeding his progress. He tore his clothes on sharp branches, and his flesh suffered many a prick. But he kept on until he brought up hard against a cottonwood tree.

There he leaned and rested. He found himself as nearly exhausted as he had ever been, wet with sweat, his hands torn and burning, his breast laboring, his legs stinging from innumerable bruises. While he leaned there to catch his breath he listened for the pursuing hounds.

For a long time there was no sound from them. This, however, did not deceive him into any hopefulness. There were bloodhounds that bayed often on a trail and others that ran generally silent. The former were more valuable to their owner, and the latter more dangerous to the fugitive. Presently Duane's ears were filled by a chorus of short, ringing yelps. The pack had found where he had slept and now the trail was hot. Satisfied that they would soon overtake him, Duane set about climbing the cottonwood, which, in his condition, was difficult of ascent.

It happened to be a fairly large tree, with a fork about fifteen feet up and branches thereafter in succession. Duane climbed until he got above the enshrouding belt of blackness.

A pale-gray mist hung above the brake and through it shone a line of dim lights. Duane decided these were bonfires made along the bluff to render his escape more difficult on that side. Away round in the direction he thought was north he imagined he saw more fires, but as the mist was thick he could not be sure.

While he sat there pondering the matter, listening for the hounds; the mist and the gloom on one side lightened; and this side he concluded was east and meant that dawn was near. Satisfying himself on this score, he descended to the first branch of the tree.

His situation now, though still critical, did not appear to be so hopeless as it had been. The hounds would soon close in on him, and he would kill them or drive them away.

It was beyond the bounds of any possibility that any men could have followed running hounds through that brake in the night. The thing that worried Duane was the fact of the bonfires.

He had gathered from the words of one of his pursuers that the brake was a kind of trap; and he began to believe there was only one way out of it, and that was along the bank where he had entered, and where obviously all night long his pursuers had kept fires burning.

Further conjecture on this point, however, was interrupted by a crashing in the willows and the rapid patter of feet.

Underneath Duane lay a gray, foggy obscurity. He could not see the ground nor any object but the black trunk of the tree. Sight would not be needed to tell him when the pack arrived. With a pattering rush through the willows the hounds reached the tree; and then, high above crash of brush and thud of heavy paws, rose a hideous clamor.

Duane's pursuers far off to the south would hear that and know what it meant. And at daybreak, perhaps be-

fore, they would take a short cut across the brake, guided by the baying of the hounds that had treed their quarry.

It wanted only a few moments, however, till Duane could distinguish the vague forms of the hounds in the gray shadow below. Still he waited. He had no shots to spare. And he knew how to treat bloodhounds.

Gradually the obscurity lightened, and at length Duane had good enough sight of the hounds for his purpose. His first shot killed the huge brute leader of the pack; then, with unerring shots, he crippled several others. That stopped the baying. Piercing howls rose.

The pack took fright and fled, its course easily marked by the howls of the crippled members. Duane reloaded his gun and, making certain all the hounds had gone, descended to the ground and set off at a rapid pace to the northward.

The mist had dissolved under a rising sun when Duane made his first halt some miles north of the scene where he had waited for the hounds. A barrier to further progress, in shape of a precipitous, rocky bluff, rose sheer from the willow brake. He skirted the base of the cliff, where walking was comparatively easy, round in the direction of the river.

He reached the end finally to see there was absolutely no chance to escape from the brake at that corner. It took extreme labor, attended by some hazard and considerable pain to his arm, to get down where he could fill his sombrero with water. After quenching his thirst he had a look at his wound. It was caked over with blood and dirt.

When washed the arm was seen to be inflamed and swollen around the bullet-hole. He bathed it, experiencing a soothing relief in the cool water.

Then he bandaged it as best he could and arranged a sling around his neck. This mitigated the pain of the injured member and held it in a quiet and rest-

ful position where it had a chance to begin mending.

As Duane turned away from the river he felt refreshed. His great strength and endurance had always made fatigue something almost unknown to him. However, tramping on foot day and night was as unusual to him as to any other riders of the Southwest, and it had begun to tell on him.

Retracing his steps, he reached the point where he had abruptly come upon the bluff, and here he determined to follow along its base in the other direction until he had found a way out or discovered the futility of such effort.

Duane covered ground rapidly. From time to time he paused to listen. But he was always listening, and his eyes were ever roving. This alertness had become second nature with him, so that except in extreme cases of caution he performed it while he pondered his gloomy and fateful situation. Such habit of alertness and thought made time fly swiftly.

By noon he had rounded the wide curve of the brake and was facing south. The bluff had petered out from a high, mountainous wall to a low abutment of rock; but it still held to its steep, rough nature and afforded no crack or slipe where quick ascent could have been possible.

He pushed on, growing warier as he approached the danger zone, finding that as he neared the river on this side it was imperative to go deeper into the willows. In the afternoon he reached a point where he could see men pacing to and fro on the bluff. This assured him that whatever place was guarded was one by which he might escape.

He headed toward these men and approached to within a hundred paces of the bluff where they were. There were several men and several boys, all armed, and, after the manner of Texans, taking their task leisurely.

Farther down Duane made out black dots on the horizon of the bluff line,

and these he concluded were more guards stationed at another outlet.

Probably all the available men in the district were on duty. Texans took a grim pleasure in such work. Duane remembered that upon several occasions he had served such duty himself.

Duane peered through the branches and studied the lay of the land. For several hundred yards the bluff could be climbed. He took stock of those careless guards. They had rifles, and that made vain any attempt to pass them in daylight.

He believed an attempt by night might be successful, and he was swiftly coming to a determination to hide there till dark and then try, when the sudden yelping of a dog betrayed him to the guards on the bluff.

The dog had likely been placed there to give an alarm, and he was lustily true to his trust. Duane saw the men run together and begin to talk excitedly and peer into the brake, which was a signal for him to slip away under the willows.

He made no noise, and he assured himself he must be invisible. Nevertheless he heard shouts, then the crackling of rifles, and bullets began to zip and swish through the leafy covert.

The day was hot and windless, and Duane concluded that whenever he touched a willow stem, even ever so slightly, it vibrated to the top and sent a quiver among the leaves.

Through this the guards had located his position. Once a bullet hissed by him; another thudded into the ground before him.

The shooting loosed a rage in Duane. He had to fly from these men, and he hated them and himself because of it. Always in the fury of such moments he wanted to give back shot for shot. But he slipped through the willows, and at length the rifles ceased to crack.

He sheered to the left again, in line with the rocky barrier, and kept on, wondering what the next mile would bring.

It brought worse; for he was seen by sharp-eyed scouts, and a hot fusilade drove him to run for his life, luckily to escape with no more than a bullet-creased shoulder.

Later that day, still undaunted, he sheered again toward the trap-wall, and found that the nearer he approached to the place where he had come down into the brake the greater his danger. To attempt to run the blockade of that trail by day would be fatal.

He waited for night, and after the brightness of the fires had somewhat lessened he essayed to creep out of the brake. He succeeded in reaching the foot of the bluff, here only a bank, and had begun to crawl stealthily up under cover of a shadow when a hound again betrayed his position. Retreating to the willows was as perilous a task as had ever confronted Duane; and when he had accomplished it, right under what seemed a hundred blazing rifles, he felt that he had indeed been favored by Providence.

This time men followed him a goodly ways into the brake, and the ripping of lead through the willows sounded on all sides of him.

When the noise of pursuit ceased Duane sat down in the darkness, his mind clamped between two things—whether to try again to escape or wait for a possible opportunity. He seemed incapable of decision.

His intelligence told him that every hour lessened his chances for escape. He had little enough chance in any case, and that was what made another attempt so desperately hard. Still it was not love of life that bound him.

There would come an hour, sooner or later, when he would wrench decision out of this chaos of emotion and thought. But that time was not yet.

When he had remained quiet long enough to cool off and recover from his run he found that he was tired. He stretched out to rest; but the swarms of vicious mosquitoes prevented sleep. This corner of the brake was low and

near the river, a breeding-ground for the blood-suckers.

They sang and hummed and whined round him in an ever-increasing horde. He covered his head and hands with his coat and lay there patiently. That was a long and wretched night. Morning found him still strong physically, but in a dreadful state of mind.

First he hurried for the river. He could withstand the pangs of hunger, but it was imperative to quench his thirst. His wound made him feverish, and therefore more than usually hot and thirsty. Again he was refreshed.

That morning he was hard put to it to hold himself back from attempting to cross the river. If he could find a light log it was within the bounds of possibility that he might ford the shallow water and bars of quicksand. But not yet! Wearily, doggedly, he faced about toward the bluff.

All that day and all that night—all the next day and all the next night—he stole like a hunted savage from river to bluff, and every hour forced upon him the bitter certainty that he was trapped.

Duane lost track of days, of events. He had come to an evil pass. There arrived an hour, when closely pressed by pursuers at the extreme southern corner of the brake, he took to a dense thicket of willows, driven to what he believed was his last stand.

If only these human bloodhounds would swiftly close in on him! Let him fight to the last bitter gasp and have it over! But these hunters, eager as they were to get him, had care of their own skins. They took few risks. They had him cornered.

It was the middle of the day, hot, dusty, oppressive, threatening storm. Like a snake Duane crawled into a little space in the darkest part of the thicket and lay still. Men had cut him off from the bluff, from the river, seemingly from all sides.

But he heard voices only from in

front and toward his left. Even if his passage to the river had not been blocked, it might just as well have been.

"Come on fellers—down hyar," called one man from the bluff.

"Got him corraled at last," shouted another.

"Reckon ye needn't be too shore. We thought thet more'n once," taunted another.

"I seen him, I tell you."

"Aw, thet was a deer."

"But Bill found fresh tracks an' blood on the willows."

"If he's winged we needn't hurry."

"Hold on thar, you boys," came a shout in authoritative tones from farther up the bluff. "Go slow. You-all air gittin' foolish at the end of a long chase."

"Thet's right, colonel. Hold 'em back. There's nothin' shorer than somebody 'll be stoppin' lead pretty quick. He'll be huntin' us soon!"

"Let's surround this corner and starve him out."

"Fire the brake!"

How clearly all this talk pierced Duane's ears! In it he seemed to hear his doom. This, then, was the end he had always expected, which had been close to him before, yet never like now.

"By God!" whispered Duane, "the thing for me to do now—is go out—meet them!"

That was prompted by the fighting, the killing instinct in him. In that moment it had almost superhuman power. If he must die, that was the way for him to die. What else could be expected of Buck Duane?

He got to his knees and drew his gun. With his swollen and almost useless hand he held what spare ammunition he had left. He ought to creep out noiselessly to the edge of the willows, suddenly face his pursuers, then, while there was a beat left in his heart, kill, kill, kill.

These men all had rifles. The fight would be short. But the marksmen did not live on earth who could make

such a fight go wholly against him. Confronting them suddenly, he could kill a man for every shot in his gun.

Thus Duane reasoned. So he hoped to accept his fate—to meet this end. But when he tried to step forward something checked him. He forced himself; yet he could not go. The obstruction that opposed his will was as insurmountable as it had been physically impossible for him to climb the bluff.

Slowly he fell back, crouched low, and then lay flat. The grim and ghastly dignity that had been his a moment before fell away from him. He lay there stripped of his last shred of self-respect.

He wondered was he afraid? Had he—the last of the Duanes—had he come to feel fear? No! Never in all his wild life had he so longed to go out and meet men face to face. It was not fear that held him back. He hated this hiding, this eternal vigilance, this hopeless life. The damnable paradox of the situation was that if he went out to meet these men there was absolutely no doubt of his doom; if he clung to this covert there was a chance—a merest chance for his life.

Waiting then became a physical and mental agony. He lay under the burning sun, parched by thirst, laboring to breathe, sweating and bleeding. His uncared-for wound was like a red-hot prong in his flesh. Blotched and swollen from the never-ending attack of flies and mosquitoes, his face seemed twice its natural size and it ached and stung.

The straining of Duane's faculties brought on a reaction which in itself was a respite. He saw the sun darkened by thick, slow-spreading clouds. A storm appeared to be coming. How slowly it moved!

The air was like steam. If there broke one of those dark, violent storms common though rare to the country, Duane believed he might slip away in the fury of wind and rain. Hope, that seemed unquenchable in him, resurged

again. He hailed it with a bitterness that was sickening.

Then at a rustling step he froze into the old strained attention. He heard a slow patter of soft feet. A tawny shape crossed a little opening in the thicket. It was that of a dog. The moment while that beast came into full view was an age. The dog was not a bloodhound, and if he had a trail or a scent he seemed to be at fault on it. Duane waited for the inevitable discovery.

Any kind of a hunting-dog could have found him in that thicket. Voices from outside could be heard urging on the dog. Rover they called him. Duane sat up at the moment the dog entered the little shaded covert.

Duane expected a yelping, a baying, or at least a bark that would tell of his hiding-place. A strange relief swiftly swayed over Duane. The end was near now. He had no further choice.

Let them come—a quick, fierce exchange of shots, and then this torture past. He waited for the dog to give the alarm.

But the dog looked at him and trotted by into the thicket without a yelp. Duane could not believe the evidence of his senses. He thought he had suddenly gone deaf.

He saw the dog disappear, heard him running to and fro among the willows, getting farther and farther away till all sound from him ceased.

"Thar's Rover," called a voice from the bluffside. "He's been through thet black patch."

"Nary a rabbit in there," replied another.

"Bah! Thet pup's no good," scornfully growled another man. "Put a hound at thet clump of willows."

"Fire's the game. Burn the brake before the rain comes."

The voices droned off as their owners evidently walked up the ridge.

Then upon Duane fell the crushing burden of the old waiting, watching,

listening spell. After all, it was not to end just now. His chance still persisted—looked a little brighter—led him on, perhaps, to forlorn hope.

All at once twilight settled quickly down upon the willow brake, or else Duane noted it suddenly. He imagined it to be caused by the approaching storm. But there was a little movement of air or cloud, and thunder still muttered and rumbled at a distance. The fact was, the sun had set, and at this time of overcast sky night was at hand.

Duane realized it with the awakening of all his old force. He would yet elude these pursuers. That was the moment when he seized the significance of all these fortunate circumstances which had aided him.

Without haste and without sound he began to crawl in the direction of the river. It was not far, and he reached the bank before darkness set in. There were men up on the bluff carrying wood to build a bonfire. For a moment he half yielded to a temptation to try to slip along the river-shore close in under the willows. But when he raised himself to peer out he saw that an attempt of this kind would be liable to failure.

At the same moment he saw a rough-hewn plank lying beneath him, lodged against some willows. The end of the plank extended in almost to a point beneath him. Quick as a flash he saw where a desperate chance invited him. Then he tied his gun in an oilskin bag and put it in his pocket.

The bank was steep and crumbly. He must not break off any earth to splash into the water. There was a willow growing back some few feet from the edge of the bank.

Cautiously he pulled it down, bent it over the water so that when he released it there would be no springing back; then he trusted his weight to it with his feet sliding carefully down the bank.

He went into the water almost up to his knees, felt the quicksand grip

his feet, then, leaning forward till he reached the plank, he pulled it toward him and lay upon it.

Without a sound one end went slowly under water and the farther end appeared lightly braced against the overhanging willows.

Very carefully then Duane began to extricate his right foot from the sucking sand. It seemed as if his foot was incased in solid rock. But there was a movement upward, and he pulled with all the power he dared use. It came slowly and at length was free.

The left one he released with less difficulty. The next few moments he put all his attention on the plank to ascertain if his weight would sink it into the sand. The far end slipped off the willows with a little splash and gradually settled to rest upon the bottom. But it sunk no farther, and Duane's greatest concern was relieved.

However, as it was manifestly impossible for him to keep his head up for long, he carefully crawled out upon the plank until he could rest an arm and shoulder upon the willows.

When he looked up it was to find the night strangely luminous with fires. There was a bonfire on the extreme end of the bluff, another a hundred paces beyond.

A great flare extended over the brake in that direction. Duane heard a roaring on the wind, and he knew his pursuers had fired the willows. He did not believe that would help them much. The brake was dry enough, but too green to burn readily. And as for the bonfires, he discovered that the men, probably having run out of wood, were keeping up the light with oil and stuff from the village.

A dozen men kept watch on the bluff scarcely fifty paces from where Duane lay concealed by the willows. They talked, cracked jokes, sang songs, and manifestly considered this outlaw-hunting a great lark.

So long as the bright light lasted Duane dared not move. He had the patience and the endurance to wait for

the breaking of the storm, and if that did not come, then the early hour before dawn when the gray fog and gloom were over the river.

Escape was now in his grasp. He felt it. And with that in his mind he waited, strong as steel in his conviction, capable of withstanding any strain endurable by the human frame.

The wind blew in puffs, grew wilder, and roared through the willows, carrying bright sparks upward. Thunder rolled down over the river and lightning began to flash. Then the rain fell in heavy sheets, but not steadily. The flashes of lightning and the broad flares played so incessantly that Duane could not trust himself out on the open river.

Certainly the storm rather increased the watchfulness of the men on the bluff. He knew how to wait, and he waited, grimly standing pain and cramp and chill. The storm wore away as desultorily as it had come, and the long night set in.

There were times when Duane thought he was paralyzed, others when he grew sick, giddy, weak from the strained posture. The first paling of the stars quickened him with a kind of wild joy. He watched them grow paler, dimmer, disappear one by one. A shadow hovered down, rested upon the river, and gradually thickened. The bonfire on the bluff showed as through a foggy veil. The watchers were mere groping, dark figures.

Duane, aware of how cramped he had become from long inaction, began to move his legs and uninjured arm and body, and at length overcame a paralyzing stiffness. Then digging his hand in the sand, and holding the plank with his knees, he edged it out into the river.

Inch by inch he advanced until clear of the willows. Looking upward, he saw the shadowy figures of the men on the bluff. He realized they ought to see him—feared that they would. But he kept on cautiously, noiselessly, with a heart-numbing slowness. From

time to time his elbow made a little gurgle and splash in the water.

Try as he might he could not prevent this. It got to be like the hollow roar of a rapid, filling his ears with mocking sound. There was a perceptible current out in the river, and it hindered straight advancement. Inch by inch he crept on, expecting to hear the bang of rifles, the spattering of bullets. He tried not to look backward, but failed. The fire appeared a little dimmer, the moving shadows a little darker.

Once the plank stuck in the sand and felt as if it were settling. Bringing feet to aid his hand, he shoved it over the treacherous place. This way he made faster progress. The obscurity of the river seemed to be enveloping him.

When he looked back again the figures of the men were coalescing with the surrounding gloom, the fires were streaky, blurred patches of light. But the sky above was brighter; dawn was not far off.

To the west all was dark. With infinite care and implacable spirit and waning strength, Duane shoved the plank along, and when at last he discerned the black border of bank it came in time, he thought, to save him.

He crawled out, rested till the gray dawn broke, and then headed north through the willows.

CHAPTER XV.

ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD.

How long Duane was in traveling out of that region he never knew. But he reached familiar country and found a rancher who had before befriended him. Here his arm was attended to; he had food and sleep; and in a couple of weeks he was himself again.

When the time came for Duane to ride away on his endless trail his friend reluctantly imparted the information that some thirty miles south, near the

village of Shirley, there was posted at a certain cross-road a reward for Buck Duane dead or alive.

Duane had heard of such notices, but he had never seen one. His friend's reluctance, and refusal to state for what particular deed this reward was offered, roused Duane's curiosity.

He had never been any closer to Shirley than this rancher's home. Doubtless some post-office burglary, some gun-shooting scrape, had been attributed to him. And he had been accused of worse deeds. Abruptly Duane decided to ride over there and find out who wanted him dead or alive, and why.

Toward afternoon, from the top of a long hill, Duane saw the green fields and trees, and shining roofs of a town he considered must be Shirley; and at the bottom of the hill he came upon an intersecting road. There was a placard nailed on the cross-road sign-post. Duane drew rein near it and leaned close to read the faded print:

**\$1,000 REWARD FOR BUCK DUANE
DEAD OR ALIVE.**

Peering closer to read the finer, more faded print, Duane learned that he was wanted for the murder of Mrs. Jeff Aiken at her ranch near Shirley. The month of September was named, but the date was illegible. The reward was offered by the woman's husband, whose name appeared, with that of a sheriff's, at the bottom of the placard.

Duane read the thing twice. When he straightened he was sick with the horror of his fate, wild with passion at those misguided fools who could believe that he had harmed a woman.

A dark, passionate fury possessed him. It shook him like a storm shakes the oak. When it passed, leaving it cold, with clouded brow and piercing eye, his mind was set. Spurring his

horse, he rode straight toward the village.

Shirley appeared to be a large, pretentious country town. A branch of some railroad terminated there. The main street was wide, bordered by trees and commodious houses, and many of the stores were of brick. A large plaza, shaded by giant cottonwood-trees, occupied a central location.

Duane pulled his running horse and halted him, plunging and snorting, before a group of idle men who lounged on benches in the shade of a spreading cottonwood. How many times had Duane seen just that kind of a lazy, shirt-sleeved Texas group!

Not often, however, had he seen such placid, lolling, good-natured men change their expression, their attitude, so swiftly. His advent apparently was momentous. They evidently took him for an unusual visitor. So far as Duane could tell, not one of them recognized him, had a hint of his identity.

He slid off his horse and threw the bridle.

"I'm Buck Duane," he said. "I saw that placard—out there on a signpost. It's a lie! Somebody find this man Jeff Aiken. I want to see him."

His announcement was taken in absolute silence. That was the only effect he noted, for he avoided looking at these villagers. The reason was simple enough; Duane felt himself overcome with emotion. There were tears in his eyes. He sat down on a bench, put his elbows on his knees and his hands to his face. For once he had absolutely no concern for his fate. This ignominy was the last straw.

Presently, however, he became aware of some kind of commotion among these villagers. He heard whisperings, low, hoarse voices, then the shuffle of rapid feet moving away. All at once a violent hand jerked his gun from its holster. When Duane rose a gaunt man, livid of face, shaking like a leaf, confronted him with his own gun.

"Hands up, thar, you Buck Duane!" he roared, waving the gun.

That appeared to be the cue for pandemonium to break loose. Duane opened his lips to speak, but if he had yelled at the top of his lungs he could not have made himself heard. In weary disgust he looked at the gaunt man and then at the others who were working themselves into a frenzy.

He made no move, however, to hold up his hands. The villagers surrounded him, emboldened by finding him now unarmed. Then several men lay hold of his arms and pinioned them behind his back.

Resistance was useless even if Duane had had the spirit. Some one of them fetched his halter from his saddle, and with this they bound him helpless.

People were running now from the street, the stores, the houses. Old men, cowboys, clerks, boys, ranchers came on the trot. The crowd grew. The increasing clamor began to attract women as well as men. A group of girls ran up, then hung back in fright and pity.

The presence of cowboys made a difference. They split up the crowd, got to Duane, and laid hold of him with rough, businesslike hands. One of them lifted his fists and roared at the frenzied mob to fall back, to stop the racket. He beat them back into a circle; but it was some little time before the hubbub quieted down so a voice could be heard.

"Shut up, will you - all!" he was yelling. "Give us a chance to hear somethin'. Easy now—soho! There ain't nobody goin' to be hurt. That's right, everybody quiet now. Let's see what's come off."

This cowboy, evidently one of authority, or at least one of strong personality, turned to the gaunt man who still waved Duane's gun.

"Abe, put the gun down," he said. "It might go off. Here, give it to me. Now, what's wrong? Who's this roped gent, an' what's he done?"

The gaunt fellow, who appeared now about to collapse, lifted a shaking hand and pointed.

"Thet thar feller—he's Buck Duane!" he panted.

An angry murmur ran through the surrounding crowd.

"The rope! The rope! Throw it over a branch! String him up!" cried an excited villager.

"Buck Duane! Buck Duane!"

"Hang him!"

The cowboy silenced these cries.

"Abe, how do you know this feller is Buck Duane?" he asked sharply.

"Why—he said so," replied the man called Abe.

"What!" came the exclamation incredulously.

"It's a tarnal fact," panted Abe, waving his hands importantly. He was an old man and appeared to be carried away with the significance of his deed. "He like to rid his hoss right over us all. Then he jumped off, says he was Buck Duane, an' he wanted to see Jeff Aiken bad."

This speech caused a second commotion as noisy, though not so enduring, as the first. When the cowboy, assisted by a couple of his mates, had restored order again, some one had slipped the noose-end of Duane's rope over his head.

"Up with him!" screeched a wild-eyed youth.

The mob surged closer, but was shoved back by the cowboys.

"Abe, if you ain't drunk or crazy, tell thet over," ordered Abe's interlocutor.

With some show of resentment and more of dignity Abe reiterated his former statement.

"If he's Buck Duane, how did you get hold of his gun?" bluntly queried the cowboy.

"Why—he set down there—an' he kind of hid his face on his hands; and I grabbed his gun an' got the drop on him."

What the cowboy thought of this was expressed in a laugh. His mates

likewise grinned broadly. Then the leader turned to Duane.

"Stranger, I reckon you'd better speak up for yourself," he said.

That stilled the crowd as no command had done.

"I'm Buck Duane, all right," said Duane quietly. "It was this way—"

The big cowboy seemed to vibrate with a shock. All the ruddy warmth left his face; his jaw began to bulge; the corded veins in his neck stood out in knots. In an instant he had a hard, stern, strange look. He shot out a powerful hand that fastened in the front of Duane's blouse.

"Somethin' queer here. But if you're Duane you're sure in bad. Any fool ought to know that. You mean it, then?"

"Yes."

"Rode in to shoot up the town, eh? Same old stunt of you gun-fighters? Meant to kill the man who offered a reward? Wanted to see Jeff Aiken bad—huh?"

"No," replied Duane. "Your citizen here misrepresented things. He seems a little off his head."

"Reckon he is. Somebody is, that's sure. You claim Buck Duane, then, an' all his doin's?"

"I'm Duane, yes; but I won't stand for the blame of things I never did. That's why I'm here. I saw that placard out there offering the reward. Until now I never was within half a day's ride of this town. I'm blamed for what I never did. I rode in here, told who I was, asked somebody to send for Jeff Aiken."

"An' then you set down an' let this old guy throw your gun on you?" queried the cowboy in amazement.

"I guess that's it," replied Duane.

"Well, it's powerful strange, if you're really Buck Duane."

A man elbowed his way into the circle.

"It's Duane. I recognize him. I seen him in more'n one place," he said. "Sibert, you can rely on what I tell you. I don't know if he's locoed or

what; but I do know he's the genuine Buck Duane. Any one who'd ever seen him onct would never forget him."

"What'd you want to see Aiken for?" asked the cowboy Sibert.

"I want to face him, to tell him I never harmed his wife?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm innocent, that's all."

"Suppose we send for Aiken an' he hears you an' doesn't believe you, what then?"

"If he won't believe me—why, then my case's so bad—I'd be better off dead."

A momentary silence was broken by Sibert: "If this ain't a queer deal! Boys reckon we'd better send for Jeff."

"Somebody went fer him. He'll be comin' soon," replied a man.

Duane stood a head taller than that circle of curious faces. He gazed out above and beyond them. It was in this way that he chanced to see a number of women on the outskirts of the crowd. Some were old, with hard faces, like the men; some were young and comely, and most of these seemed agitated by excitement or distress.

They cast fearful, pitying glances upon Duane as he stood there with that noose round his neck. Women were more human than men, Duane thought.

He met eyes that dilated, seemed fascinated at his gaze, but were not averted. It was the old women who were voluble, loud in expression of their feelings.

Near the trunk of the cottonwood stood a pretty, slender woman in white. Duane's wandering glance rested upon her, was held by something. She had a white, still face and dark, strained eyes that were riveted upon him.

Somehow, some way, she reminded him of a girl he had known. The evidences of her agitation were not so manifest as in the other young women, yet as Duane gazed it struck him she was strangely still. A soft-hearted

woman, probably, who did not want to see him hanged!

"Thar comes Jeff Aiken now," called a man loudly.

The crowd shifted and trampled in eagerness.

Duane saw two men coming fast, one of whom, in the lead, was of stalwart build. He had a gun in his hand and his manner was that of fierce energy.

The cowboy Sibert thrust open the jostling circle of men, and as he went toward this approaching figure he was joined by the young woman in white, who flashed like light across the narrowing space in the crowd.

"Hold on, Jeff," called Sibert, and he blocked the man with the gun. He spoke so low Duane could not hear what he said, and his form hid Aiken's face.

The woman then halted them both. As other women were screaming, the action of this particular one did not seem so very strange; yet she appeared forceful rather than hysterical. She spoke swiftly, but the noise drowned her voice.

At that juncture the crowd spread out, closed in, and Aiken, Sibert, and this woman in white were caught in the circle. There was a pushing forward, a pressing of many bodies, hoarse cries, and flinging hands—again the insane tumult was about to break out—the demand for an outlaw's blood—the call for a wild justice executed a thousand times before on Texas's bloody soil.

Sibert bellowed at the dark, encroaching mass. The cowboys with him beat and cuffed in vain.

Suddenly the woman, with upflung arms and piercing cry and blanched face, checked and held and silenced that angry mob.

"Wait! Wait!" she cried.

Then she wheeled to the grim giant beside Sibert.

"Mr. Aiken, wait! wait! Don't kill him! He must be innocent. He is innocent! Protect him from these