

Off the railroad some, ain't it? Darn funny trails hereabouts!"

"How fur was you goin'?"

"I reckon I was goin' as fur as I could," replied the stranger, with a hard laugh.

His reply had subtle reaction on that listening circle. Some of the men exchanged glances.

Fletcher stroked his drooping mustache, seemed thoughtful, but lost something of that piercing scrutiny.

"Wal, Ord's the jumpin'-off place," he said presently. "Sure you've heerd of the Big Bend country?"

"I sure have, an' was makin' tracks fer it," replied the stranger.

Fletcher turned toward a man in the outer edge of the group. "Knell, come in heah."

This individual elbowed his way in and was seen to be scarcely more than a boy, almost pale beside those bronzed men, with a long, expressionless face, thin and sharp.

"Knell, this heah's—" Fletcher wheeled to the stranger. "What'd you call yourself?"

"I'd hate to mention what I've been callin' myself lately."

This sally fetched another laugh. The stranger appeared cool, careless, indifferent. Perhaps he knew, as the others present knew, that this show of Fletcher's—this pretense of introduction, was merely talk while he was looked over.

Knell stepped up, and it was easy to see, from the way Fletcher relinquished his part in the situation, that a man greater than he had appeared upon the scene.

"Any business here?" he queried curtly. When he spoke his expressionless face was in strange contrast with the ring, the quality, the cruelty of his voice.

This voice betrayed an absence of humor, of friendliness, of heart.

"Nope," replied the stranger.

"Know anybody hereabouts?"

"Nary one."

"Jest ridin' through?"

"Yep."

"Slopin' fer back country, eh?"

There came a pause.

The stranger appeared to grow a little resentful, drew himself up disdainfully.

"Wal, considerin' you-all seem so friendly an' on-curious down here in this Big Bend country, I don't mind sayin', Yes—I am in on the dodge," he replied with deliberate sarcasm.

"From west of Ord—out El Paso way—mebbe?"

"Sure."

"A-huh! Thet so?" Knell's words cut the air, stilled the room. "You're from way down the river. Thet's what they say down there—'on the dodge.' Stranger, you're a liar!"

With swift clink of spur and thump of boot the crowd split, leaving Knell and the stranger in the center.

Wild breed of that ilk never made a mistake in judging a man's nerve. Knell had cut out with the trenchant call and stood ready.

The stranger suddenly lost his every semblance to the rough and easy character before manifest in him. He became bronze. That situation seemed familiar to him. His eyes held a singular, piercing light that danced like a compass-needle.

"Sure I lied," he said. "So I ain't takin' no offense at the way you called me. I'm lookin' to make friends, not enemies. You don't strike me as one of them four-flushes, achin' to kill somebody. But if you are—go ahead an' open the ball. You see, I never throw a gun on them fellers till they go for theirs."

Knell coolly eyed his antagonist, his strange face not changing in the least. Yet somehow it was evident in his look that here was metal which rang differently from what he had expected. Invited to start a fight or withdraw, as he chose, Knell proved himself big in the manner characteristic only of the genuine gunman.

"Stranger, I pass," he said, and turning to the bar he ordered liquor.

The tension relaxed; the silence broke; the men filled up the gap; the incident seemed closed. Jim Fletcher attached himself to the stranger, and now both respect and friendliness tempered his asperity.

"Wal, fer want of a better handle I'll call you Dodge," he said.

"Dodge's as good as any. Gents, line up again—an' if you can't be friendly be careful!"

Such was Buck Duane's début in the little outlaw hamlet of Ord.

Duane had been three months out of the Nueces country. At El Paso he bought the finest horse he could find, and, armed and otherwise outfitted to suit him, he had taken to unknown trails.

Leisurely he rode from town to town, village to village, ranch to ranch, fitting his talk and his occupation to the impression he wanted to make upon different people whom he met.

He was in turn a cowboy, a rancher, a cattleman, a stock-buyer, a boomer, a land-hunter; and long before he reached the wild and inhospitable Ord he had acted the part of an outlaw drifting into new territory.

He passed on slowly because he wanted to learn the lay of the country, the location of villages and ranches, the work, habit, gossip, pleasures, and fears of the people with whom he came in contact. The one subject most impelling to him—outlaws—he never mentioned; but, by talking all round it, sifting the old ranch and cattle story, he acquired a knowledge calculated to aid him much in his deep-laid plot. In this game time was of no moment; if necessary he would take years to accomplish his task.

The stupendous and perilous nature of it showed in the slow, wary preparation. When he heard Fletcher's name and faced Knell he knew he had reached the place he sought—Ord was a hamlet on the fringe of the grazing country, of doubtful honesty, from which surely winding trails led down

into that free and never disturbed paradise of outlaws—the Big Bend.

Duane made himself agreeable, yet not too much so, to Fletcher and several other men disposed to talk and drink and eat; and then, after having a care for his horse, he rode out of town a couple of miles to a grove he had marked, and there, well hidden, he prepared to spend the night.

This proceeding served a double purpose—he was safer and the habit would look well in the eyes of outlaws who would be more inclined to see in him the lone-wolf fugitive.

Next morning he did not return to Ord. He struck off to the north, riding down a rough, slow-descending road that appeared to have been used occasionally for cattle-driving.

As he had ridden in from the west this northern direction led him into totally unfamiliar country. While he passed on, however, he exercised such keen observation that in the future he would know whatever might be of service to him if he chanced that way again.

The rough, wild, brush-covered slope down from the foot-hills gradually leveled out into plain, a magnificent grazing country, upon which till noon of that day Duane did not see a herd of cattle or a ranch.

About that time he made out smoke from the railroad, and after a couple of hours' riding he entered a town which inquiry discovered to be Bradford. It was the largest town he had visited since Marfa, and he calculated must have a thousand or fifteen hundred inhabitants, not including Mexicans.

He decided this would be a good place for him to hold up for a while, being the nearest town to Ord, only forty miles away.

So he hitched his horse in front of a store and leisurely set about studying Bradford.

After he had made a number of small purchases in different stores

Duane came to the conclusion that total strangers were not rare in Bradford, but were evidently waited upon without curiosity or interest. Duane found the proprietors and habitués of the saloons different in this regard.

He visited the depot, the stock-yards—in fact, looked Bradford over thoroughly; and his verdict was that the town was a trading-point for a large grazing country northward, and as such had its honest and prosperous citizens, but was full of places and people about which he had his doubts.

He found an innkeeper whom he believed trustworthy, an old fellow from eastern Texas who had drifted west and was now eking out a poor existence, and he was glad indeed to take charge of Duane and his horse. This innkeeper talked a great deal—a trait which Duane encouraged.

It was after dark, however, that Duane verified his suspicions concerning Bradford. The town was awake after dark, and there was one long row of saloons, dance-halls, gambling resorts in full blast.

Duane visited them all and was surprised to see wildness and license equal to that of the old river camp of Bland's in its palmiest days. Here it was forced upon him that the farther west one traveled along the river the sparser the respectable settlements, the more numerous the hard characters, and, in consequence, the greater the element of lawlessness.

Duane returned to his lodging-house with the conviction that Mac-Nelly's task of cleaning up the Big Bend country was stupendous. Yet, he reflected, a company of intrepid and quick-shooting rangers could have soon cleaned up this Bradford.

The innkeeper had one other guest that night—a long, black-coated and wide-sombreroed Texan who reminded Duane of his grandfather. This man had penetrating eyes, a courtly manner, and an unmistakable leaning toward companionship and mint juleps. The gentleman introduced himself as

Colonel Webb, of Marfa, and took it as a matter of course that Duane made no comment about himself.

"Sir, it's all one to me," he said blandly, waving his hand. "I have traveled. Texas is free, and this frontier is one where it's healthier and just as friendly for a man to have no curiosity about his companion. You might be Cheseldine of the Big Bend or you might be Judge Little of El Paso; it's all one to me. I enjoy drinking with you, anyway."

Duane thanked him, conscious of a reserve and dignity that he could not have felt or pretended three months before. And then as always he was a good listener. Colonel Webb told, among other things, that he had come out to the Big Bend to look over the affairs of a deceased brother who had been a rancher and a sheriff of one of the larger towns, Sheridan by name.

"Found no affairs, no ranch, not even his grave," said Colonel Webb. "And I tell you, sir, if hell's any tougher than this Big Bend country I don't want to expiate my sins there."

"From what I see I imagine sheriffs have a hard row to hoe out here," replied Duane.

The colonel swore lustily.

"My brother was the only honest sheriff between Del Rio and El Paso. It was wonderful how long he lasted. But he had nerve—he could throw a gun—and he was on the square. Then he was wise enough to confine his work to offenders of his own town and neighborhood. He let the riding outlaws alone, else he wouldn't have lasted at all. What this frontier needs, sir, is about six companies of Texas rangers."

Duane was aware of the colonel's close scrutiny.

"Do you know anything about the service?" he asked.

"I used to. Ten years ago when I lived in San Antonio. A fine body of men, sir, and the salvation of Texas."

"Governor Stone doesn't entertain that opinion," said Duane.

Here Colonel Webb exploded. Manifestly the Governor was not his choice for a chief executive of the great State. He talked politics for a while, and of the vast territory west of the Pecos that seemed never to get a benefit from Austin.

He talked enough for Duane to realize that here was just the kind of intelligent, well-informed honest citizen that he had been trying to meet. He exerted himself thereafter to be agreeable and interesting, and he saw presently that here was an opportunity to make a valuable acquaintance, if not a friend.

"I'm a stranger in these parts," said Duane finally. "What is this outlaw situation you speak of?"

"It's damnable, sir, and unbelievable. Not rustling any more, but just wholesale herd-stealing, in which some big cattlemen supposed to be honest are equally guilty with the outlaws. On this border, you know, the rustler has always been able to steal cattle in any numbers.

"But to get rid of big bunches—that's the hard job. The gang operating between here and Valentine evidently have not this trouble. Nobody knows where the stolen stock goes. But I'm not alone in my opinion that most of it goes to several big stockmen. They ship to San Antonio, Austin, New Orleans, also to El Paso.

"If you travel the stock road between here and Marfa and Valentine you'll see dead cattle all along the line and stray cattle out in the scrub. The herds have been driven fast and far, and stragglers are not rounded up."

"Wholesale business, eh?" remarked Duane. "Who are these—er—big stock buyers?"

Colonel Webb seemed a little startled at the abrupt query. He bent his penetrating gaze upon Duane and thoughtfully stroked his pointed beard.

"Names, of course, I'll not mention. Opinions are one thing. Direct accusation another. This is not a healthy country for the informer.

There are a thousand men between here and Marfa who could tell things. But what's the use to risk so much? Whom could they tell?

"There's not even a pretense of law out here. There never has been an honestly elected sheriff in this country. Every sheriff I know is richer than I am. No, stranger, I won't mention any names.

"But I gather that you're peculiarly interested, and I merely suggest that you go out in this town of Bradford and use your eyes. You look able to take care of yourself, which is important, if you want to be curious yet still breathe this fine Texas air."

When it came to the outlaws themselves Colonel Webb was disposed to talk freely. Duane could not judge whether the colonel had a hobby of that subject or the outlaws were so striking in personality and deed that any man would know all about them.

The great name along the river was Cheseldine, but it seemed to be a name detached from an individual. No person of veracity known to Colonel Webb had ever seen Cheseldine, and those who claimed that doubtful honor varied so diversely in descriptions of the chief that they confused the reality and lent to the outlaw only further mystery.

Strange to say of an outlaw leader, as there was no one who could identify him, so there was no one who could prove he had actually killed a man. Blood flowed like water over the Big Bend country, and it was Cheseldine who spilled it. Yet the fact remained there were no eye-witnesses to connect any individual called Cheseldine with these deeds of violence.

But in striking contrast to this mystery was the person, character, and cold-blooded action of Poggin and Knell, the chief's lieutenants. They were familiar figures in all the towns within two hundred miles of Bradford.

Knell had a record, but as gunman

with an incredible list of victims Poggin was supreme. If Poggin had a friend no one ever heard of him. There were a hundred stories of his nerve, his wonderful speed with a gun, his passion for gambling, his love of a horse, his cold, implacable, inhuman wiping out of his path any man that crossed it.

"Cheseldine is a name, a terrible name," said Colonel Webb. "Sometimes I wonder if he's not only a name. In that case where does the brains of this gang come from? No, there must be a master craftsman behind this border pillage—a master capable of handling those terrors, Poggin and Knell.

"Of all the thousands of outlaws developed by western Texas in the last twenty years these three are the greatest. In southern Texas, down between the Pecos and the Nueces, there have been and are still many bad men. But I doubt if any outlaw there, possibly excepting Buck Duane, ever equaled Poggin. You've heard of this Duane?"

"Yes, a little," replied Duane quietly. "I'm from southern Texas. Buck Duane, then, is known out here?"

"Why, man, where isn't his name known?" returned Colonel Webb. "I've kept track of his record as I have all the others. Of course Duane, being a lone outlaw, is somewhat of a mystery also, but not like Cheseldine.

"Out here there have drifted many stories of Duane—horrible some of them. But despite them a sort of romance clings to that Nueces outlaw. He's killed three great outlaw leaders, I believe—Bland, Hardin, and the other I forget. Hardin was known in the Big Bend, had friends there. Bland had a hard name at Del Rio."

"Then this man Duane enjoys rather an unusual reputation west of the Pecos?" inquired Duane with interest.

"He's considered more of an enemy to his kind than to honest men. I un-

derstand Duane had many friends—that whole country swear by him, secretly of course, for he's a hunted outlaw with rewards on his head.

"His fame in this country appears to hang on his matchless gun-play and his enmity toward outlaw chiefs. I've heard many a rancher say: 'I wish to Heaven that Buck Duane would drift out here! I'd give a hundred pesos to see him and Poggin meet.' It's a singular thing, stranger, how jealous these great outlaws are of each other."

"Yes, indeed, all about them is singular," replied Duane. "Has Cheseldine's gang been busy lately?"

"No. This section has been free of rustling for months, though there's unexplained movements of stock. Probably all the stock that's being shipped now was rustled long ago. Cheseldine works over a wide section, too wide for news to travel inside of weeks. Then sometimes he's not heard of at all for a spell.

"These lulls are pretty surely indicative of a big storm, sooner or later. And Cheseldine's deals, as they grow fewer and farther between, certainly get bigger, more daring. There are some people who think Cheseldine had nothing to do with the bank-robberies and train holdups during the last few years in this country. But that's poor reasoning. The jobs have been too well done, too surely covered to be the work of greasers or ordinary outlaws."

"What's your view of the outlook? How's all this going to wind up? Will the outlaw ever be driven out?" asked Duane.

"Never. There will always be outlaws along the Rio Grande. All the armies in the world couldn't comb the wild brakes of that fifteen hundred miles of river. But the sway of the outlaw, such as is enjoyed by these great leaders, will sooner or later be past.

"The criminal element flock to the Southwest. But not so thick and fast as the pioneers. Besides, the outlaws

kill themselves, and the ranchers are slowly rising in wrath if not in action. That will come soon.

"If they only had a leader to start the fight! But that will come. There's talk of vigilantes, the same that were organized in California and are now in force in Idaho. So far it's only talk. But the time will come, and the days of Cheseldine and Poggin are numbered."

Duane went to bed that night exceedingly thoughtful. The long trail was growing hot.

This voluble colonel had given him new ideas. It came to Duane in surprise that he was famous along the upper Rio Grande. Assuredly he would not long be able to conceal his identity. He had no doubt that he would soon meet the chiefs of this clever and bold rustling gang.

He could not decide whether he would be safer unknown or known. In the latter case his one chance lay in the fatality connected with his name, in his power to look it and act it. Duane never gave any thought that he had a sleuth-hound tendency in his nature, but now he felt something like one.

Above all others, his mind fixed on Poggin—Poggin, the brute, the executor of Cheseldine's will, but mostly upon Poggin the gunman. This in itself was a warning to Duane. He felt terrible forces at work within him. There was the stern and indomitable resolve to make MacNelly's boast good to the Governor of the State—to break up Cheseldine's gang.

Yet this was not in Duane's mind before a strange, grim, and deadly instinct—which he had to drive away for fear he would find it in a passion to kill Poggin, not for the State, nor for his word to MacNelly, but for himself.

His father's blood and the hard years had made Duane the kind of man who instinctively wanted to meet Poggin. He was sworn to MacNelly's

service, and he fought himself to keep that and that only in his mind.

CHAPTER XX.

CHESELDINE.

THE following day Duane did indeed use his eyes, and that which interested him drew him by successive details to the stockyards.

The corrals were full of dusty, bellowing cattle. There were trample and roar, the shouts of cowboys, the crack of ropes as the herds of steers were driven into the cattle-train.

Fenced runways led up to ten cars and every narrow passage was jammed with wild cattle. Ten cars loaded at once! This was big business. Certainly there was no time lost in loading.

Duane sauntered closer to have a look at the brands. It was hard to make out anything clear in the dust and jumble of the runways or box cars, so he directed his attention to the corrals.

This big herd of steers had been driven in overnight. Never in such close space had Duane seen such a diversity of brands. But the blotched and acid-burned brands so common to the cheating stockman and sometimes to the rustler were not in evidence.

Duane then sauntered over to the platform of the freight-house. Both busy and idle men were there. It did not escape Duane that, as he lounged over toward them, there was a sharp glance directed toward him, and it came from one of the busy men.

"Big shipment," said Duane to one of the idlers.

"Shore is. Nigh on five hundred head in them corrals," replied the fellow.

"Who's the shipper?"

The idler made a wry face and cast a sly eye on Duane.

"Reckon you air shore new hereabouts. Who else but Levitt? He's standin' over there."

Duane saw a tall man whose back was turned. He wore a black sombrero, a vest and scarf and gun and boots like any cowboy, only they were of richer material than cowboys could afford. This man's spurs were gold.

"Wealthy feller?" went on Duane as he watched Levitt.

"Shore aboot owns Bradford. The big saloon up-town is his'n. Then he has stores. An' everybody owes him. A free an' easy man with hosses, jobs, money, anythin' you want. He's only been heah about three years."

"Where'd he come from?" asked Duane.

"Some says Val Verde an' some says El Paso."

"Who buys all this stock for him?"

"Shore he goes all over hisself an' buys. Stands in with the rustlers, they say. It ain't no secret that Levitt buys some stock from rustlers. But anybody'd do that in this country if a chanst was offered."

Duane sauntered away from his informant and carelessly approached Levitt. His keen eye caught a cowboy in the act of speaking to Levitt, manifestly about him, for Levitt instantly wheeled. He had very light skin for so dark-eyed and dark-haired a person. He wore a long mustache and pointed beard. He was talking suavely as he turned, a cool, affable, handsome man with a look of concentrated power.

Duane's keen glance met Levitt's and held it. The old, subtle, instinctive thrill ran through Duane, only here it might have been that of a tiger.

Duane had looked into the eyes of thousands of crooked men—outlaws and fugitives and criminals who had something to hide, whose nerve might have been magnificent, but whose soul was bare to him by reason of his strange instinct. To criminals there was always in the encounter with a stranger that eternal question in the eyes—the searching human curiosity—the inquisitive, unconquerable habit of looking to quell an ever present fear.

Guilt! For Duane it was blazoned in the eyes of this stock-buyer Levitt. Then he returned his gaze to the dusty mêlée below.

He was trying to account for this strange gift that had betrayed Levitt to him. The thing was baffling. Perhaps out of his years of agony and the endless flights, when his cunning and his sight and his hearing had been magnified, when all his life centered round that one hated fear of capture—out of all this there had grown a superhuman power to recognize the dread of his soul in another guilty man's eyes.

The guilt Duane divined, and this huge, hurried shipment of cattle gave him a stir of pulse and tingle of nerve rare indeed.

When he had shifted his gaze again Levitt had taken a stride toward him and on the instant was in the act of waving back the cowboy who evidently wanted to join him.

"Hello, stranger," said Levitt. "Looking for anything—to sell a bunch of steers, get a job, or what?"

"Yes, I'm looking—for—"

"For what?" cut in Levitt sharply.

His tone bore more than command. The power in it, the dominance of men that breathed there drew from Duane an irresistible impulse. He leaned toward Levitt.

"I'm looking for Cheseldine!" he said clearly and low.

Levitt stiffened ever so slightly. Otherwise the only change in him was a lightning-swift dilation and darkening of his eyes.

"Not so loud!" he hissed. "I'll kill somebody for this. What's Poggin mean—or Knell? What's up? Who sent you?"

"Came of my own accord," replied Duane.

A slow shade of white, barely perceptible, stole into Levitt's face.

"Well, I don't know you, man," he said, with narrowing eyelids. "I—I mistook you for a cowboy with—I've a cattle deal on—"

"Save your breath," interrupted Duane in cool sarcasm. "You're Cheseldine!"

At that the soul of this man lay bare—a dark and terrible thing—the mind of a great criminal caught off guard—a vortex of passions chained by a will like steel.

Duane read the man clearly. To any but close observers Levitt might have been holding a few casual words with a chance visitor. His right hand twitched on the paper he held, made it ring; and that little action meant the controlling of a dive for his gun.

Duane actually admired him in that predicament, even though he stood ready to kill him. Seldom had Duane seen in the eyes of any man more passion to kill; never had he seen it so controlled by intellect. The great outlaw manifestly saw two meanings in this encounter; and he could not so quickly choose between what might be sheer mindless effrontery or unparalleled assurance.

"Who are you?" he asked hoarsely.

"I'm a stranger to the Big Bend," replied Duane. "I come in to join your gang. See you later."

Levitt stared, then recovered himself, and with a dark and sinister glance of eye he turned away. Again he waved aside the eager cowboy. This fellow turned to look at Duane, and Duane saw in him an ally of the chief's. The others present appeared to be utterly deceived by the nature of that little by-play.

As Duane expected, Levitt hurriedly left the platform, made his way to a saddled horse, unhitched him, but did not mount. He was followed by the earnest cowboy, who likewise led a horse. Their heads were bent together, and Levitt was vehemently waving a hand when they passed out of sight round the corner of the freight-house.

"I've located my man!" muttered Duane, and the words were like a deep thrumming in his ears.

Duane went to the station and, en-

tering, seated himself in a quiet corner and composed himself for some hard thinking. He could not decide upon a line of procedure until he knew how Levitt would react to that meeting.

Duane believed that nothing but an unheard-of and amazing bluff would serve to carry his point with Levitt. The stock-man could be easily killed or else, though not so easily, made prisoner. But that, when more offered, was not the game.

Duane wondered if Levitt's craftiness was equal to his domineering egotism. Which would govern him in a case like this? The chances were that the man was so subtle and keen that he would sense some vague danger to himself in Duane's cool, blunt recognition. Also he might have the failing common to so many of these violent, powerful leaders—a passionate refusal to brook even the slightest opposition to their wills.

Duane concluded that in a town so dominated as Bradford was he would not have to wait very long if Levitt were at all like Bland or King Fisher.

Presently Duane sauntered up the main street, as keen strung as on any walk he had ever made, but nothing happened. He passed Levitt's place, in front of which were dusty, booted men, all packing guns. None of them took any particular notice of Duane.

The day passed without further incident. That night, however, as Duane was walking through a dark stretch of street some one took a shot at him from an obscure corner.

Duane caught the whistle of a bullet and then the swift shuffle of retreating footsteps. These did not sound as if they were made by boots, but by moccasins or sandals. Probably a greaser had taken a snap-shot at him.

At the moment the only other person near was a man across the street, and from his cry and action it was evident the bullet had come nearer to hitting him than Duane. Certainly this other man believed he had been the one at whom the attack had been directed.

Duane crossed to him and found him to be a young man badly frightened. Duane reassured him and walked on toward the station with him.

"It's happened before," said the young man. "I'm the night operator. Was going on duty. If it happens again, and I don't get plugged, I'll throw up the job."

Duane made friendly advances toward the young operator, who said his name was Buell, and gave him some advice about how to avoid risks in the future.

"I'm scared to death of the town," declared Buell. "El Paso was tough enough. But this place's got El Paso skinned to death. Thanks for your advice, mister. I won't forget it in a hurry."

They parted at the station, and Duane went back up-town more pleased at the meeting than angry over being shot at; and he considered it would be a clever move on his part, every time he visited Bradford in the future, to look up the young operator. There might come a time when he would be useful.

Returning to his lodgings, he found that the genial Colonel Webb had departed. He had supper, and then, as always, a victim to suspense, unable to remain inactive, he went out again.

He walked up and down the street, and the more he pondered the matter the more he became sure that delay would only make his task harder. A slow and cautious and observant approach to the scene of his operations had been wise, but now that he was on the ground the quicker he worked the more chance he had of success.

He believed he gaged the hazard, and to him it did not seem as great as MacNelly had intimated. Swift action, keen judgment, then a monstrous show of nerve—these it would take to make him a picked member of this outlaw band.

But luck was a great factor—perhaps the greatest. If he would only have some flash of insight—if only

some incalculable stroke of fortune would favor him!

Duane passed Levitt's place once, walking slowly; he passed again, still slower, and the third time he halted. Then, with a stride like a leap, that marked his decision to force this game, he reached the door and entered.

His seeing, hearing, feeling faculties were at their old, strung tension; but he had outlined no order or plan of action. This must develop from the sequence of events succeeding his bearding the lion in his den.

The big gambling-room was well lighted. There were a number of occupants, some at *monte* and *faro* tables, others at the bar. Among the latter Duane saw the cowboy who had been with Levitt at the stock-yards.

As Duane walked up this man eyed him closely, yet without hostility or impudence. Used to simple, elemental, direct natures such as characterized these outdoor men, Duane sensed only curiosity in Levitt's companion. Duane spoke amiably and brought up against the corner of the bar.

The fellow answered the greeting shortly, however, without rudeness.

"Drink with me?" asked Duane.

"Never turned down a drink in my life, 'ceptin' water," was the reply.

Both ordered and drank, with eyes steady and level over the rim of glasses. This apparent drinking good-fellowship did not count for much with Duane. He had seen men meet, speak, laugh, raise their glasses to each other, then throw them down and go for guns. Nevertheless, he gathered one favorable point from this cowboy's acquiescence.

"Did the boss mention me?" asked Duane easily in low tone.

The cowboy grinned.

"Reckon he did."

"Hope I didn't give offense. I'm strange here, but I never was backward nowhere."

"My boss said you just paid him a doubtful compliment. But he wasn't the gent you took him for."

"That all?" queried Duane.

"About all, I reckon, 'cept he guessed you wasn't lackin' in nerve if you really believed you was bracin' the gent mentioned."

Here Duane was confronted with the singular impression that this cowboy, evidently in Levitt's employ and a picked hand, treated the matter as a joke and had no inkling of the real character of his employer. Duane trusted these strange impressions. He had seldom found them false.

Duane made no further effort toward becoming acquainted, and as the cowboy maintained his disinterested manner they naturally separated.

Duane lounged round the room, watched the gamblers, even sat at a cheap *monte* game for an hour, and stayed there till midnight, hoping Levitt might come in. But, as he did not, Duane left and went back to his lodgings.

Next morning he learned from his loquacious landlord that Levitt had left Bradford on the night train. He was in the habit of going away often, having big interests in other towns.

If Duane had considered it a wise move he would have tried to trace Levitt. But that, probably, would be futile; the stockman might return to Bradford the next day; besides, there was Duane's horse to be taken care of, and that horse might any time become indispensable to the success of this venture.

Duane waited a couple of days, visiting Buell several times, curbing his impatience, and then he thought of communicating with MacNelly. That matter appeared to be a vastly easier one than either MacNelly or he had anticipated.

What would the ranger captain think when he learned that Duane had located the great outlaw in a good-sized town, where there were honest people, post-office, railroad, and telegraph? MacNelly had no intimation of what a deep and powerful rascal this Cheseldine was.

After thinking over the several opportunities available, Duane decided to write a letter. This he did, using the cipher code MacNelly had given him, and he stated he had located his man and might be ready any day for help. He had yet to plan the trap, but in case that plan could not be materialized in reasonable time he wanted the rangers to join him at Bradford.

For the present MacNelly was to assemble all his available rangers at San Antonio and there await further advice, which would no doubt be a summons, addressed to Nelson C. Mack. Duane set about the mailing of it.

A little before the time the night mail going east was due Duane went to the station. Buell, the young operator, was glad to see Duane.

"Say, son, I want you to do a favor for me," said Duane.

"Sure. Only too glad," replied Buell.

"Usually you have a lot of letters to go east on No. 6, don't you? Think I saw you with some the other night."

"Not usually. Sometimes I have a good many. To-night it happens I've got a bunch."

"Do you know the mail clerk on No. 6?"

"Sure do. He's from my town; a fine chap. What's up? You're going to send money by letter? Better send it by Wells Fargo. Safer."

"Not money, but an important letter. Now I want to know if this letter will go through any other hands besides the clerk's on No. 6?"

"Not till it reaches its destination. You can be sure of that, unless, of course, No. 6 is held up by train-robbers and the mail-sacks taken. It's a safe bet that No. 6 will get that some day."

"I'll risk that. It's only the address that matters with my letter. The contents are unreadable."

Duane glanced casually round the little office and at the windows, then laid the letter on Buell's desk. The

move seemed another direct one in line with the forcing of this game.

Buell read the address, and his sudden start showed he was familiar with the Texas Rangers, if not with MacNelly's name. Likewise he showed an adroitness and presence of mind by slipping the letter into a packet as footsteps sounded without and dark faces passed the windows.

Presently he turned with bright eyes toward Duane.

"I savvy," he said. "By George! I wondered about you. Say, tell me—"

"Son, I can't tell you anything now," replied Duane, "except you see I'm trusting you. Later perhaps you can help me. I want to know this. Suppose you wired San Antonio now—an important message to the address on that letter—would the message be read by any one during transmission, particularly by any operator west of the Pecos."

"The chances are the message might be heard, but not read except by the operator called. The instrument grows monotonous. An operator hears only his call, you might say."

"Still, we can't be absolutely sure?"

"No. But it's a thousand-to-one chance."

"All right. Thanks. Keep this under your hat and look for me any night."

After that night Duane found waiting harder than ever. The temptation to ride to Ord was well-nigh overpowering. But he conquered it by the process of reasoning out his ever growing desire to meet Knell and Poggin. These men haunted him as no dead men ever had.

At the end of two weeks Bradford was amazed and Duane startled by unauthenticated news of Levitt's having made deals to dispose of his Bradford property.

Duane pondered over this rumor. If it were true, what did it mean? Levitt, if he were really Cheseldine, had shown himself a criminal of higher

rank, of different caliber, than any outlaw leaders Duane had ever studied. It was possible, of course, for Cheseldine to be as great as that colossal monster of evil, Plummer of Idaho, who became mayor and honored citizen while secretly he was the head of the most terrible and perfectly organized band of robbers and murderers ever known in the West.

If Levitt were Cheseldine, then his possibilities must not be gaged and judged by those of lesser outlaws. The thing that blinded most leaders in crime was power.

They rested upon violent deeds and felt safe by reason of the fear of them. They retrograded and became merely elemental. But one now and then, and perhaps Cheseldine, showed brains.

The night of the day that this news came to Bradford, No. 6, the mail and express train going east, was held up by train-robbers, the Wells-Fargo messenger killed over his safe, the mail clerk wounded, the bags carried away. The engine of No. 6 came into town minus even a tender, and engineer and fireman told conflicting stories.

A posse of railroad men and citizens, led by the sheriff Duane knew was crooked, was made up before the engine steamed back to pick up the rest of the train. Duane had the sudden inspiration that he had been cudgeling his mind to find, and, acting upon it, he got his horse and left Bradford unobserved.

As he rode out into the night, over a dark trail in the direction of Ord, he uttered a short, grim, sardonic laugh at the hope that he might be taken for a train-robber.

He rode at an easy trot most of the night, and when the black peak of Ord mountain loomed up against the stars he halted, tied his horse, and slept until dawn. Then he took his time cooking breakfast.

When the sun was well up he saddled Bullet, and leaving the trail where his tracks showed plain in the ground he put his horse to the rocks and brush.

He selected an exceedingly rough, roundabout, and difficult course to Ord, hid his tracks with the skill of a long-hunted fugitive, and arrived there with his horse winded and covered with lather. It added considerable to his arrival that Fletcher and several others saw him come in the back way, through the lots, and jump a fence into the road.

Duane led Bullet up to the porch where Fletcher stood wiping his beard. He was hatless, vestless, and evidently had just enjoyed a morning drink.

"Howdy, Dodge," said Fletcher laconically.

Duane replied, and the other men returned the greeting with interest.

"Jim, my hoss's done up. I want to hide him from any chance tourists as might happen to ride up curious-like."

"Haw! Haw! Haw!"

Duane gathered encouragement from that chorus of coarse laughter.

"Wal, if them tourists ain't too durned snooky the hoss'll be safe in the 'dobe shack back of Bill's here. Feed thar, too, but you'll hev to rustle water."

Duane led Bullet to the place indicated, had care of his welfare, and left him there. Upon returning to the tavern porch Duane saw the group of men had been added to by others, some of whom he had seen before. Without comment Duane walked along the edge of the road, and wherever one of the tracks of his horse showed he carefully obliterated it. This procedure was attentively watched by Fletcher and his companions.

"Wal, Dodge," remarked Fletcher as Duane returned, "thet's safer'n prayin' fer rain."

Duane's reply was a remark, as loquacious as Fletcher's, to the effect that a long, slow, monotonous ride was conducive to thirst. They all joined him, unmistakably friendly. But Knell was not there, and most assuredly not Poggin.

Fletcher was no common outlaw,

but whatever his ability, it probably lay in execution of orders. Apparently at that time these men had nothing to do but drink and lounge round the tavern. Evidently they were poorly supplied with money, though Duane observed they could borrow a peso occasionally from the bartender.

Duane set out to make himself agreeable, and succeeded. There was card-playing for small stakes, idle jest of coarse nature, much bantering among the younger fellows, and occasionally a mild quarrel. All morning men came and went until, all told, Duane calculated he had seen at least fifty. Toward the middle of the afternoon a young fellow burst into the saloon and yelled one word:

"Posse!"

From the scramble to get outdoors Duane judged that word and the ensuing action was rare in Ord.

"What the deuce!" muttered Fletcher as he gazed down the road at a dark, compact bunch of horses and riders. "Fust time I ever seen thet in Ord! We're gettin' popular, like them camps out of Valentine. Wish Phil was here, or Poggy. Now all you gents keep quiet. I'll do the talkin'."

The posse entered the town, trotted up on dusty horses, and halted in a bunch before the tavern. The party consisted of about twenty men, all heavily armed, and evidently in charge of a clean-cut, lean-limbed cowboy.

Duane experienced considerable satisfaction at the absence of the sheriff, who, he had understood, was to lead the posse. Perhaps he was out in another direction with a different force.

"Hello, Jim Fletcher," called the cowboy.

"Howdy," replied Fletcher.

At this short, dry response and the way he strode leisurely out before the posse Duane found himself modifying his contempt for Fletcher. The outlaw was different now.

"Fletcher, we've tracked a man to all but three miles of this place. Tracks