

greatly he could make his power felt. An open conflict against odds lay in the balance. That would be fatal to him, and to avoid it he had to trust to his name and a presence he must make terrible.

He knew outlaws. He knew what qualities held them. He knew what to exaggerate.

There was not an outlaw in sight. The dusty horses had covered distance that morning. As Duane dismounted he heard loud, angry voices inside the tavern. He removed coat and vest.

He packed two guns, one belted high on the left hip, the other swinging low on the right side. He neither looked nor listened, but boldly pushed the door and stepped inside.

The big room was full of men and every face pivoted toward him. Knell's pale face flashed into Duane's swift sight—then Boldt's—then Blossom Kane's—then Pan Handle Smith's—then Fletcher's—then others that were familiar, and last, that of Poggin.

Though Duane had never seen Poggin or heard him described, he knew him. For he saw a face that was a record of great and evil deeds.

There was absolute silence. The outlaws were lined back of a long table upon which were papers, stacks of silver coin, a bundle of bills, and a huge, gold-mounted gun.

"Are you gents lookin' for me?" asked Duane.

He gave his voice all the ringing force and power of which he was capable. And he stepped back, free of anything, with the outlaws all before him.

Knell stood quivering, but his face might have been a mask. The other outlaws looked from him to Duane. Jim Fletcher flung up his hands.

"My Gawd, Dodge, what'd you bust in here fer?" he said plaintively, and slowly stepped forward.

His action was that of a man true to himself. He meant he had been sponsor for Duane and now he would stand by him.

"Back, Fletcher!" called Duane, and his voice made the outlaw jump.

"Hold on, Dodge, an' you-all, everybody," said Fletcher. "Let me talk, seein' I'm in wrong here."

His persuasion did not ease the strain.

"Go ahead. Talk," said Poggin.

Fletcher turned to Duane.

"Pard, I'm takin' it on myself that you meet enemies here when I swore you'd meet friends. It's my fault. I'll stand by you if you let me."

"No, Jim," replied Duane.

"But what'd you come fer without the signal?" burst out Fletcher in distress. He saw nothing but catastrophe in this meeting.

"Jim, I ain't pressin' my company none. But when I'm wanted bad—"

Fletcher stopped him with a raised hand. Then he turned to Poggin with a rude dignity.

"Poggy, he's my pard an' he's riled. I never told him a word thet'd make him sore. I only said Knell hadn't no more use fer him than fer me. Now what you say goes in this gang. I never failed you in my life. Here's my pard. I vouch fer him. Will you stand fer me? There's goin' to be the deuce if you don't. An' us with a big job on hand!"

While Fletcher toiled over his slow, earnest persuasion Duane had his gaze riveted upon Poggin.

There was something leonine about Poggin. He was tawny. He blazed. He seemed beautiful as fire was beautiful.

But looked at closer, with glance seeing the physical man, instead of that thing which shone from him, he was of perfect build, with muscles that swelled and rippled, bulging his clothes, with the magnificent head and face of the cruel, fierce, tawny-eyed jaguar.

Looking at this strange Poggin, instinctively divining his abnormal and hideous power, Duane had, for the first time in his life, the inward quaking fear of a man. It was like a

cold-tongued bell ringing within him and numbing his heart. The old instinctive firing of blood followed, but did not drive away that fear. He knew. He felt something here deeper than thought could go. And he hated Poggin.

That individual had been considering Fletcher's appeal.

"Jim, I ante-up," he said, "an' if Phil doesn't raise us out with a big hand—why he'll get called, an' your pard can set in the game."

Every eye shifted to Knell. He was dead white. He laughed, and any one hearing that laugh would have realized his intense anger equally with an assurance which made him master of the situation.

"Poggin', you're a gambler, you are, the ace-high straight-flush hand of the Big Bend," he said with stinging scorn. "I'll bet you my roll to a greaser *peso* that I can deal you a hand you'll be afraid to play."

"Phil, you're talkin' wild," growled Poggin with both advice and menace in his tone.

"If there's anythin' you hate it's a man who pretends to be somebody else when he's not. Thet so?"

Poggin nodded in slow-gathering wrath.

"Well, Jim's new pard—this man Dodge—he's not who he seems. Oh, ho! he's a deuce of a lot different. But I know him. An' when I spring his name on you, Poggin, you'll freeze to your gizzard.

"Do you get me? You'll freeze an' your hand'll be stiff when it ought to be lightnin'—all because you'll realize you've been standin' there five minutes—five minutes alive before him."

If not hate, then assuredly great passion toward Poggin manifested itself in Knell's scornful, fiery address, in the shaking hand he thrust before Poggin's face. In the ensuing silent pause Knell's panting could be plainly heard. The other men were pale, watchful, cautiously edging either way

to the wall, leaving the principals and Duane in the center of the room.

"Spring his name, then, you—" said Poggin violently, with a curse.

Strangely Knell did not even look at the man he was about to denounce. He leaned toward Poggin, his hands, his body, his long head all somewhat expressive of what his face disguised.

"Buck Duane!" he yelled suddenly.

The name did not make any apparent difference in Poggin. But Knell's passionate, swift utterance carried the suggestion that the name ought to bring Poggin to quick action.

It was possible, too, that Knell's manner, the import of his denunciation, the meaning back of all his passion, held Poggin bound more than the surprise. For the outlaw certainly was surprised, perhaps staggered at the idea that he—Poggin—had been about to stand sponsor with Fletcher for a famous outlaw hated and feared by all outlaws.

Knell waited a long moment, and then his face broke its cold immobility in an extraordinary expression of devilish glee. He had hounded the great Poggin into something that gave him vicious, monstrous joy.

"Buck Duane! Yes," he broke out hotly. "The Nueces gunman! That two-shot ace-of-spades lone-wolf! You an' I—we've heard a thousand times of him—talked about him often. An' here he is in front of you! Poggin, you are backin' Fletcher's new pard, Buck Duane. An' he'd fooled you both but for me.

"But I know him. An' I know why he drifted in here. To flash a gun on Cheseldine—on you—on me! Bah! don't tell me he wanted to join the gang. You know a gunman, for you're one yourself. Don't you always want to kill another man? An' don't you always want to meet a real man, not a four-flush? It's the madness of the gunman, an' I know it.

"Well, Duane faced you—called you! An' when I sprung his name,

what ought you have done? What would the boss—anybody—have expected of Poggin? Did you throw your gun, swift, like you have so often? Naw, you froze.

"An' why? Because here's a man with the kind of nerve you'd love to have. Because he's great—meetin' us here alone. Because you know he's a wonder with a gun, an' you love life. Because you an' I an' every man here had to take his front, each to himself.

"If we all drew we'd kill him. Sure! But who's goin' to lead? Who was goin' to be first? Who was goin' to make him draw? Not you, Poggin! You leave that for a lesser man—me—who've lived to see you a coward.

"It comes once to every gunman. You've met your match in Buck Duane. An' by God! I'm glad. Here's once I show you up!"

The hoarse, taunting voice failed. Knell stepped back from the comrade he hated. He was wet, shaking, haggard, but magnificent.

"Buck Duane, do you remember Hardin?" he asked in scarcely audible voice.

"Yes," replied Duane, and a flash of insight made clear Knell's attitude.

"You met him—forced him to draw—killed him?"

"Yes."

"Hardin was the best pard I ever had."

His teeth clicked together tight and his lips set in a thin line.

The room grew still. Even breathing ceased. The time for words had passed. In that long moment of suspense Knell's body gradually stiffened and at last the quivering ceased. He crouched. His eyes had a soul-piercing fire.

Duane watched them. He waited. He caught the thought—the breaking of Knell's muscle-bound rigidity. Then he drew.

Through the smoke of his gun he saw two red spurts of flame. Knell's bullets thudded into the ceiling. He

fell with a scream like a wild thing in agony.

Duane did not see Knell die. He watched Poggin. And Poggin, like a stricken and astounded man, looked down upon his prostrate comrade.

Fletcher ran at Duane with hands aloft.

"Hit the trail, you liar, or you'll hev to kill me!" he yelled.

With hands still up he shouldered and bodied Duane out of the room.

Duane leaped on his horse, spurred, and plunged away.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DARK TIDE.

FOR Duane the twenty-fifth of October seemed a whole lifetime in coming. When that day dawned he left a lonely camp in the brush and rode into Bradford.

He went to the old inn-keeper, with whom he had made acquaintance, and leaving his horse in the stable set off in search of Buell.

Inquiry discovered the night operator at his boarding-house asleep. Duane had him awakened. Buell came in heavy-eyed, but curious, half-expectant.

"Buell, I'm sorry to disturb you," said Duane, "but my business is urgent. You can aid me. I'm going to arrest a man here to-day, a prominent citizen. Now it's likely some of his friends—somebody, at any rate—will shove a gun in your face, or the day operator's, and make you send telegrams east along the line.

"This will probably happen after I take the train with my man. What I want you to do is to post the other operator. Then in case this does happen to either of you be cool and pretend to send the message given you. But send the wrong message—anything at random. Bluff the thing so these allies of my man will think they can stall operations east."

Buell promised with a heightened

color and considerable show of pleasure to go at once and relieve the day operator, who, he said, wanted some time off duty, and to stay by his instrument as long as needed.

"Who're you after?" he asked excitedly.

"You'll know presently. Another thing—my horse is over at the inn. I'll have to leave him and I'd like you to take care of him till you hear from me. If you don't hear—he's yours."

Then Duane kept out of sight. He learned from the inn-keeper that Levitt was not in Bradford, but was expected some time that day. The property had changed hands and final settlement was to be made upon his arrival.

Duane had waited hours and weeks and months, so a little additional time, more or less, ought to have been borne in patience. Outwardly he was calm; inwardly he was in a tumult. He wanted to get to Val Verde; he wanted the twenty-sixth to come; he wanted the last scene at the bank.

That tawny Poggin had never left his mind. Was MacNelly ready? Would his rangers hide and wait as Duane had planned? Duane seemed to put no value on the arrest or death of Cheseldine. He had scarcely given that a thought.

When he met the outlaw leader he meant to give him one chance—a chance for his life, and no more. Duane went to the station, sat in a secluded corner, and waited.

The hours wore so slowly. West-bound train—east-bound train—and no Levitt! There was only one more train from the West and that was Number Six. It was due at nine o'clock at night.

Would Levitt come on that and transact his business so late? The afternoon was endless. Twilight—dusk—darkness—a pin point of light far out in the black West—at last the whistle of an engine. Number Six came thundering in, a long gray-dusted train.

The first passenger to alight was

Levitt, who gaily called to waiting friends. From the obscure background Duane watched, felt all his fears vanish at sight of this man's dark powerful face, and let him go with his friends.

Duane thought that he might have spared himself such suspense. This man executed as he planned. He had said he would be in Bradford on that day and here he was. Likewise he might be expected to keep to all his decisions. He would come down to take the east-bound train in the morning for Val Verde.

Duane went to the room he had engaged, lay down dressed as he was, slept a few hours, then awoke, and lay there, wide-eyed, waiting, thinking, as he had so many lonely nights of his life. Day dawned—the twenty-sixth of October!

With it came a serenity that quivered to one mortal stab—a thought of Jennie Lee—and then he was cold, unhurried, ready. To-day he would pay—buy back his honor and good name.

He did not think of eating. He waited. At eight he went to the station. Buell was pale from loss of sleep.

"On time!" he said, to Duane's questioning look. "She's due at ten minutes to nine."

Duane repaired to his old seat. He meant to remain there until the last quarter of an hour, then go up-street to get his man.

The time passed. When he went out he saw several Mexicans, a cowboy, and two men, and they all watched him curiously. Next he ran into Sheriff Bridger.

He laid a heavy hand on Bridger.

"I want Cheseldine. Is he coming?"

The sheriff gasped, and his swarthy face turned green. He looked sick. He could not speak.

Over his shoulder Duane saw Cheseldine coming with a group of men, all intent upon themselves.

"I'm Buck Duane, Texas Ranger," he said, close to Bridger's ear. And he

drew his gun and pressed it against the sheriff. "Look down!" he added.

Bridger saw the gun and almost collapsed.

"Give me your hand-cuffs," went on Duane.

Bridger produced them and held them out with shaking fingers. Duane snatched them, and, with a look at Bridger that meant death, he shoved him back.

Then Duane with gun high leaped in front of the approaching men.

"Cheseldine!" he yelled piercingly.

All of them halted as if the word had petrified. One of them turned a ghastly stricken white.

"Hands out! Not up! In front of you! Quick!"

As Duane's look had meant death so here did his voice. The manacles clicked. Cheseldine was a prisoner.

Duane turned to the paralyzed men.

"Gentlemen, you look honest," he said. "But I can take no chances. You must be judged by your company. I'm Duane, Texas Ranger. I arrest this man Cheseldine. I advise you all to be careful with your hands."

He grasped Cheseldine and backing away led him up to the station, pushed him against the wall. Duane's eyes covered every point before him. Bridger had disappeared.

Cheseldine's friends, recovering from their stupefaction, broke into a frenzy of excitement. But they did not approach any closer. One by one the little crowd of astounded men was enlarged by others. Sight of Duane and his gun was enough, both to make them gape and hold them back.

Cheseldine remained white but calm. He had nerve. He seemed to want to hide his manacled hands.

"Duane, why did you make an exception of me?" he asked.

Duane did not reply. At the moment he heard the train whistle. Probably Cheseldine was wondering why he had not met the same fate as Bland, Alloway, Hardin. Duane wondered grimly the same thing.

The east-bound rolled into the station. Duane, waving the crowd back with his gun, made Cheseldine walk ahead of him, climb the steps of a car.

"Hurry this train!" called Duane, to the amazed conductor.

Then he got on, entered the car, put Cheseldine in a seat and sat facing him and all the passengers.

The train started up almost immediately, and left behind on the platform a yelling, gesticulating crowd. Duane had a glimpse of Buell waving his hand from the station window.

It was a fast train, yet the ride seemed slow. Duane, disliking to face Cheseldine and the watching conjecturing passengers in the car, changed his seat to one behind his prisoner. They had not spoken.

Cheseldine sat with bowed head, deep in thought. Occasionally the train halted briefly at a station.

The latter half of the ride Duane had observed a wagon-road running parallel with the railroad, sometimes right alongside, at others near or far away. When the train was about twenty miles from Val Verde Duane espied a dark group of horsemen trotting eastward. His blood beat like a hammer at his temples.

The gang! He thought he recognized the tawny Poggins, and felt a strange inward contraction and a significant jerk of his right arm. He thought he recognized the clean-cut Blossom Kane, the black-bearded giant Boldt, the red-faced Pan Handle Smith, and Fletcher. There was another man strange to him. Was that Knell? No! it could not have been Knell.

Duane leaned over the seat and touched Cheseldine on the shoulder.

"Look!" he whispered.

Cheseldine was stiff. He had seen.

The train flashed by; the outlaw gang receded out of range of sight.

"Cheseldine. Did you notice Knell wasn't with them?" whispered Duane.

The outlaw bent a malignant glance upon the ranger.

"By Jove, it took one of our kind—and a traitor—to turn the trick!" he said with terrible fierceness.

Duane did not speak to Cheseldine again till the train stopped at Val Verde. Then he felt for a weapon upon the outlaw, took charge of a pearl-handled gun, removed the handcuffs and said: "Cheseldine, I want things to look natural. Use your head now. No hunches to anybody!"

They got off the car. The station was a good deal larger than that at Bradford, and there was considerable action and bustle incident to the arrival of the train.

Duane's sweeping gaze searched faces, rested upon a man who seemed familiar. This fellow's look, too, was that of one who knew Duane, but was waiting for a sign, a cue. Then Duane recognized him—MacNelly, clean-shaven, without mustache he appeared different—younger.

When MacNelly saw that Duane intended to greet him, to meet him, he hurried forward. A keen light flashed from his eyes. He was glad, eager, yet suppressing himself, and the glances he sent back and forth from Duane to Cheseldine were questioning, doubtful. Certainly Cheseldine did not look the part of an outlaw.

"Duane! Lord, I'm glad to see you," was the captain's greeting.

Then at closer look into Duane's face his warmth fled—something he saw there checked his enthusiasm, or at least its utterance.

"MacNelly, shake hands with Cheseldine," said Duane, low-voiced.

The ranger captain stood dumb, motionless. But he saw Cheseldine's instant action and awkwardly he reached for the outstretched hand.

"Any of your men down here?" queried Duane sharply.

"No. They're up town."

"Come. Cheseldine, walk between us, and look straight ahead. Don't see anybody."

They set off up town. Cheseldine walked as if he were with friends on

the way to dinner, except that his lips were mute. MacNelly walked like a man in a trance. There was not a word spoken in four blocks.

Presently Duane espied a stone building on a corner of the broad street. There was a big sign: Ranchers' Bank. Duane touched Cheseldine's elbow, pointed to the bank.

The outlaw looked, but made no sign. He was imperturbable. Somehow Duane resented Cheseldine's silence, his nerve. It seemed that the outlaw had not given up.

"Cheseldine, do you want to go in the bank and see if the shipment of gold has come—the big haul?" asked Duane sarcastically. He hated to taunt the man, but could not resist that much.

Cheseldine gave a violent start. Perhaps in that moment he understood. He made no reply.

"There's the hotel," said MacNelly. "Some of my men are there. We're scattered round."

They crossed the street, went in through lobby, office, saloon, to a large room, like a hall, and here were men reading and smoking. Duane knew them—rangers!

When he snapped the handcuffs back on Cheseldine it was with a strange air of finality. It was as if he renounced. MacNelly, the rangers, and certainly Cheseldine, all noted Duane's strange action and look.

"There, Cheseldine!"

And with a something almost of passion and violence he pushed the outlaw toward MacNelly. He was done with him. Did that action mean that, as ranger, he was turning Cheseldine over to the law, when as Buck Duane he wanted to meet him, to face him, to make him draw, to kill him?

MacNelly beckoned to his men.

"Boys, here he is. Cheseldine! Russell, you and Mills take him in the small room and guard him. Don't take your eyes off him till we decide what to do."

The rangers led Cheseldine away.

"Duane, what had we better do

with him for the present?" queried MacNelly. "There's a jail here. We can put him away till we're through. But would that be best? We've been lying low."

"No. How many men have you?"

"Fifteen."

"Keep two men here guarding Cheseldine."

MacNelly left to go into the other room, and returned closing the door. Then he almost embraced Duane, would probably have done so but for the dark grimness that seemed to be coming over the man.

Instead he glowed, he sputtered, he tried to talk, to wave his hands. He was beside himself. And his rangers crowded closer, eager, like hounds ready to run. They all talked at once, and the word most significant and frequent in their speech was Cheseldine.

MacNelly clapped his fist in his hand.

"This'll make the adjutant sick with joy. Maybe we won't have it on the Governor? We'll show them about the ranger service. Cheseldine! how'd you ever do it? Oh, I knew you were a wonder. But I was sure you'd kill him."

"He didn't give me a chance," replied Duane. "Now captain, not the half, nor the quarter of this job's done. The gang's coming down the road. I saw them from the train. They'll ride into town on the dot—two-thirty."

"How many?" asked MacNelly.

"Poggin, Blossom Kane, Pan Handle Smith, Boldt, Jim Fletcher, and another man I don't know. These are the picked men of Cheseldine's gang. I'll bet they'll be the fastest, hardest bunch you rangers ever faced."

"Poggin! that's the hard nut to crack! I've heard their records since I've been in Val Verde. Where's Knell? They say he's a boy, but hell and blazes."

"Knell's dead."

"Ah!" exclaimed MacNelly softly. Then he grew businesslike, cool, and of harder aspect. "Duane, it's your game to-day. I'm only a ranger under

orders. We're all under your orders. We've absolute faith in you. Make your plan, quick, so I can go around and post the boys who're not here."

"You understand there's no sense in trying to arrest Poggin, Kane, and that lot?" queried Duane.

"No, I don't understand that," replied MacNelly bluntly.

"It can't be done. The drop can't be got on such men. If you meet them they shoot and mighty quick and straight. Poggin! That outlaw has no equal with a gun—unless— He's got to be killed quick. They'll all have to be killed. They're all bad—desperate—know no fear—are lightning in action."

"Very well, Duane, then it's a fight. That'll be easier, perhaps. The boys are spoiling for a fight. Out with your plan now."

"Put one man at each end of this street just at the edge of town. Let him hide there with a rifle to block the escape of any outlaw that we might fail to get. I had a good look at the bank building. It's well situated for our purpose."

"Put four men up in that room over the bank—four men, two at each open window. Let them hide till the game begins. They want to be there so in case these foxy outlaws get wise before they're down on the ground, or inside the bank. The rest of your men put inside behind the counters where they'll hide."

"Now go over to the bank, spring the thing on the bank officials and don't let them shut up the bank. You want their aid. Let them make sure of their gold. But the clerks and cashier ought to be at their desks or window when Poggin rides up."

"He'll glance in before he gets down. They make no mistakes, these fellows. We must be slicker than they are, or lose. When you get the bank people wise, send your men over one by one. No hurry—no excitement—no unusual thing to attract notice in the bank."

"All right. That's great. Tell me, where do you intend to wait?"

Duane heard MacNelly's question, and it struck him peculiarly. He had seemed to be planning and speaking mechanically. As he was confronted by the fact it nonplused him somewhat, and he became thoughtful, with lowered head.

"Where'll you wait, Duane?" insisted MacNelly, with keen eyes speculating.

"I'll wait in front—just inside the door," replied Duane with an effort.

"Why?" demanded the captain.

"Well," began Duane slowly. "Poggin will get down first and start in. But the others won't be far behind. They'll not get swift till inside. The thing is—they mustn't get clear inside, because the instant they do they'll pull guns. That means death to somebody. If we can we want to stop them just at the door."

"But will you hide?" asked MacNelly.

"Hide!" The idea had not occurred to Duane.

"There's a wide-open doorway. A sort of round hall, a vestibule, with steps leading up to the bank. There's a door in the vestibule, too. It leads somewhere. We can put men in there. You can be there."

Duane was silent.

"See here, Duane," began MacNelly nervously. "You sha'n't take any undue risk here. You'll hide with the rest of us?"

"No!" The word was wrenched from Duane.

MacNelly stared, and then a strange, comprehending light seemed to flit over his face.

"Duane, I can give you no orders to-day," he said distinctly. "I'm only offering advice. Need you take any more risks? You've done a grand job for the service—already. You've paid me a thousand times for that pardon. You've redeemed yourself."

"The Governor, the adjutant-general—the whole State will rise up and

honor you. The game's almost up. We'll kill these outlaws or enough of them to break forever their power. I say, as a ranger, need you take more risk than your captain?"

Still Duane remained silent. He was locked between two forces. And one, a tide that was bursting at its bounds, seemed about to overwhelm him. Finally that side of him, the retreating self, the weaker, found a voice.

"Captain, you want this job to be sure?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"I've told you the way. I alone know the kind of men to be met. Just what I'll do or where I'll be I can't say yet. In meetings like this the moment decides. But I'll be there!"

MacNelly spread wide his hands, looked helplessly at his curious and sympathetic rangers, and shook his head.

"Now you've done your work—laid the trap—is this strange move of yours going to be fair to Jennie Lee?" asked MacNelly in deliberate, low voice.

Like a great tree chopped at the roots Duane vibrated to that. He looked up as if he had seen a ghost.

Mercilessly the ranger captain went on:

"Jennie Lee came to me in Austin. She was heartbroken. She reproached me. She begged me. She told me of your mother. She did all she could to get me to fetch you back, and if I hadn't been powerless I would have done so.

"You can go back to her, Duane! It never seemed possible, but now it's true. Fight with us from cover—then go back to her. You will have served the Texas Rangers as no other man has. I'll accept your resignation. You'll be free, honored, happy—and rich. Jennie's rich, Duane. And she loves you! My God! how that girl loves you! She's—"

But Duane cut him short with a fierce gesture. He lunged up to his

feet and the rangers fell back. Dark, silent, grim as he had been, still there was a transformation singularly more sinister, stranger.

"Enough. I'm done," he said somberly. "I've planned. Do we agree—or shall I meet Poggin and his gang alone?"

MacNelly cursed and again threw up his hands; this time in baffled chagrin. There was deep regret in his dark eyes as they rested upon Duane.

"I accept, Duane," he rejoined quietly. "I'll go about the arrangements at once."

Duane was left alone.

Never had his mind been so quick, so clear, so wonderful in its understanding of what had heretofore been intricate and elusive impulses of his strange nature. His determination was to meet Poggin. Meet him before any one else had a chance—Poggin first—and then the others! He was as unalterable in that decision as if, on the instant of its acceptance, he had become stone.

Why? Then came realization. He was not a ranger now. He cared nothing for the State. He had no thought of freeing the community of a dangerous outlaw—of ridding the country of an obstacle to its progress and prosperity. He wanted to kill Poggin.

It was significant now that he forgot the other outlaws. He was the gunman, the gun-thrower, the gun-fighter—passionate and terrible. His father's blood, that dark and fierce strain; his mother's spirit, that strong and unquenchable spirit of the surviving pioneer—these had been in him; and the killings, one after another, the wild and haunted years, had made him, absolutely in spite of his will, the gunman.

He realized it now, bitterly, hopelessly. The thing he had intelligence enough to hate he had become.

Then came agony. He would never go back to Jennie Lee. She had said

it. She had divined. As he could not govern all the chances of this fatal meeting—as all his swift and deadly genius must be occupied with Poggin, perhaps in vain—as hard-shooting men whom he could not watch would be close behind, this, almost certainly must be the end of Buck Duane.

That did not matter. But he loved the girl. He wanted her. She needed him. All her sweetness, her fire, and pleading, her abandonment returned to torture him.

If she had been there to put her arms round him, to press him close, to lay her wet cheeks on his, her fragrant hair in his eyes, to kiss him with those tremulous drawing lips—to love him as she had that last hour, then he might be, could be saved. But she was not there, and all her remembered charm and appeal availed nothing but to add to his agony.

To forget her, to get back his nerve he forced into mind the image of Poggin—Poggin, the tawny-haired, the yellow-eyed, like a jaguar, with his rippling muscles. He brought back his sense of the outlaw's wonderful presence—his own unaccountable fear and hate.

Yes, Poggin had sent the cold sickness of fear to his marrow. Why, since he hated life so?

Poggin was his supreme test. And this abnormal and stupendous instinct, now deep as the very foundation of his life, demanded its wild and fatal issue. There was a horrible thrill in his sudden remembrance that Poggin, likewise, had been taunted into fear of him.

So the dark tide overwhelmed Duane, and when he left the room he was fierce, implacable, steeled to any outcome, quick like a panther, somber as death, in the thrall of his passion.

There was no excitement in the street. He crossed to the bank corner. A clock inside pointed the hour of two. He went through the door, into the vestibule, looked round, passed up the steps into the bank.

The clerks were at their desks, apparently busy. But they showed nervousness. The cashier paled at sight of Duane. There were men—the rangers—crouching down behind the low partition. All the windows had been removed from the iron grating before the desks.

The safe was closed. There was no money in sight. A customer came in, spoke to the cashier, and was told to come to-morrow.

Duane returned to the door. He could see far down the street, out into the country. There he waited, and minutes were eternities. He saw no person near him; he heard no sound. He was insulated in his unnatural strain.

At a few minutes before half past two a dark compact body of horsemen appeared far down, turning into the road. They came at a sharp trot—a group that would have attracted attention anywhere at any time.

They came a little faster as they entered town—then faster still—now they were four blocks away—now three—now two. Duane backed down the middle of the vestibule, up the steps, and halted in the center of the wide doorway.

There seemed to be a rushing in his ears through which pierced sharp ringing *clip-clop* of iron hoofs. He could see only the corner of the street. But suddenly into that shot lean-limbed dusty bay horses. There was a clattering of nervous hoofs pulled to a halt.

Duane saw the tawny Poggin speak to his companions. He dismounted quickly. They followed suit. They had the manner of ranchers about to conduct some business. No guns showed.

Poggin started leisurely for the bank-door, quickening step a little. The others close together came behind him. Blossom Kane had a bag in his left hand. Jim Fletcher was left behind, and he had already gathered up the bridles.

Poggin entered the vestibule first,

with Kane on one side, Boldt on the other, a little behind him.

As he strode in he saw Duane.

"Great Scott!" he cried.

Something inside Duane burst, piercing all of him with cold. Was it that fear?

"Buck Duane!" echoed Kane.

One instant Poggin looked up, and Duane looked down.

Like a striking jaguar Poggin moved. Almost as quick, Duane threw his arm.

The guns boomed almost together.

Duane felt a blow just before he pulled trigger. His thoughts came swift, like the strange dots before his eyes.

His rising gun had loosened in his hand. Poggin had drawn quicker!

A tearing agony encompassed his breast. He pulled—pulled—at random.

Thunder of booming shots all about him!

Red flashes—jets of smoke—shrill yells!

The end—yes—the end!

With fading sight he saw Kane go down, then Boldt. But supreme torture—bitterer than death—Poggin stood, mane like a lion's, back to the wall, bloody-faced, grand, with his guns spouting red!

All faded—darkened. The thunder deadened. Duane fell, seemed floating.

There it drifted—Jennie Lee's sweet face, white, sad, with dark tragic eyes—fading—fading—fading—

CHAPTER XXIII.

"TO FORGET."

LIGHT shone before Duane's eyes—thick, strange light that came and went. He seemed a long time with dull and booming sounds rushing by, filling all. It was a dream in which there was nothing. Drifting under a burden—darkness—light—sound—movement. Obscure struggling thought—vague sense of time—long time.

There was blackness and fire, creeping consuming fire. He was rolled and wrapped in it—and a dark cloud carried him away, enveloped him.

He saw then, dimly, a room that was strange, strange people moving about, over him, with faint voices, far away, things in a dream.

He saw again, clearly, and consciousness returned, still strange, still unreal, full of those vague and far-away things. He was not dead, then. He lay stiff, like a stone, with a weight ponderous as a mountain upon him. And slow dull beating burning agony racked all his bound body.

A man bent over him, looked deep into his eyes, and seemed to whisper from a distance: "Duane—Duane—Ah, he knew me!"

After that another long time of darkness; when the light came again, clearer, this same dark-eyed earnest man bent over him. It was MacNelly—and with recognition the past flooded back.

Duane tried to speak. His lips were weak and limp. Their movement was barely perceptible.

"Poggin!" he whispered, in the ear close to his face. The first real conscious thought—Poggin—Ruling passion—eternal instinct!

"Dead. Poggin's dead, Duane—shot to pieces," replied MacNelly solemnly. "But what a fight he made! I lost three men—others badly wounded."

"Who—got—away?"

"Fletcher, the man with the horses. We got the others. Duane, it's done—done! And you—you—"

"Have—you—sent—for her?"

"No, oh no. It's not that bad. You've a chance. Why, man you'll get well. You'll pack a sight of lead all your life, Duane. The whole Southwest knows your story. You need never be ashamed again of the name Buck Duane. It'll live in Texas with that of Davy Crockett. Think of Jennie—home—mother!"

The rangers took Duane home to Wellston.

A railroad had been built since Duane had entered upon his exile. Wellston had grown, it appeared.

A great crowd surrounded the station—a noisy cheering mob that suddenly stilled as Duane was carried from the train to a gaily decorated vehicle. Kind strong arms lifted him—made him comfortable.

A sea of faces pressed close—some were faces he remembered. Schoolmates—friends—old neighbors. There was an upflinging of many hands. Duane was being welcomed home to the town from which he had fled.

That deadness in him broke. This welcome hurt him somehow, yet through his cold being, his weary mind, passed a change. His sight dimmed, and did not clear during the ride.

Then there was a white house—home—and his heart beat thick.

How familiar it all was—how strange, too! And all seemed magnified.

They carried him in, these ranger comrades, and laid him down, and lifted his head upon pillows. The house was still, though full of people. Duane's eyes sought the open door. Some one was coming—some one in white, leading an old lady, gray-haired, with strong bitter face—his mother.

She was feeble, but she walked erect. She was pale, shaking, yet wore an austere dignity.

The some one in white cried low and knelt by his bed.

His mother flung wide her arms with strange gesture.

"That man—that's his father! Where is my boy? My son, oh, my son!"

It was sheer pleasure to lie by the west window and watch Uncle Jim whittle his stick and listen to him talk. He was old now and broken.

He told so many interesting things about people Duane had known, peo-

ple who had grown up and married, failed, succeeded, gone away, died. But it was hard to keep Uncle Jim off the subject of guns, fights, outlaws. He could not seem to divine how mention of these things made Duane shrink.

Uncle Jim, old, childish now, and he had a pride in Duane. He wanted to hear it all—all of Duane's exile. And if there was one thing more than another that pleased him it was to speak of the bullets Duane carried in his body.

"Nine bullets, wasn't it? Nine in that last scrap. By gum! A man's a man to carry them. And you had three before?"

"Yes, uncle," replied Duane.

"Nine and three—that makes twelve. An even dozen. You could pack more than that, my boy, and get away with them. There's Cole Younger—I've seen him. He's got twenty-three. But he's a bigger man than you—more flesh.

"Funny, wasn't it, about the doctors only cuttin' one bullet out of you—that one in your breast bone? It was a forty-one caliber, an unusual cartridge. I had it, but Jennie took it from me.

"There was one bullet left in Poggin's gun, and it was the same kind as the one cut out. By gum! boy, that bullet would have killed you if it'd stayed there."

"It would indeed, uncle," said Duane, and the old, haunting, somber mood returned.

But Jennie was with him most of the time, and when she was by there was a deep, quiet joy such as had never been his.

She knelt by him at the window, her sweet face still white, but with warm life beneath the marble, her dark eyes still intent, haunted by shadows, but no longer tragic.

"The pain, Duane—is it any worse to-day, dear?" she asked.

"No, it's the same. It will always be the same, Jennie. I'm full of lead, you know. But I don't mind that."

"It's the old mood—the fear?"

"Yes. It haunts me. I'll be able to go out soon. Then it'll come back."

"No—no, Duane," she said.

"Some drunken cowboy—some fool with a gun will hunt me out," he said miserably. "Buck Duane! To kill Buck Duane!"

"Hush! Listen to me," she whispered, with tender arms round him. "I understand. But you will never have to draw again, Duane. You'll never kill another man, thank God! For you will have me with you always. Soon you'll be well. Then, Duane, we'll—we'll be married.

"We'll take Uncle Jim and mother and go far from Texas, north somewhere—to Indiana, Michigan, anywhere that we want. I have money, Duane! Isn't it wonderful? The little, ragged girl you met out in Bl—out in the Rio Grande!

"Do you remember my greaser sandals—no stockings! And I was lame then. Oh, it all comes back! But that's past. We'll buy a farm, and you will be busy with horses and cattle and sheep.

"You'll forget. I'll love you so. Maybe—I—I hope—oh, I pray—there'll be children. We'll be happy, Duane."

They watched the sun set golden over the line of low hills in the West, down over the Nueces, far beyond the wild country of the Rio Grande which they were never to see again.

It was then that Duane faced life, accepted happiness, trusted in this brave and tender woman to be stronger than the dark and fateful passion that had ruined him.

It would come back—that instinct of fire—that madness to forget—and those drifting, haunting faces with the fading eyes, but Jennie need never know.