

THE LONE STAR RANGER

A ROMANCE OF THE BORDER

BY ZANE GREY

Author of "The Light of Western Stars," "Riders of the Purple Sage," etc.

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CHAPTER XXI (Continued).

The two men spent much time together. Duane made up a short fictitious history about himself that satisfied the outlaw, only it drew forth a laughing jest upon Duane's modesty. For Fletcher did not hide his belief that this new partner was a man of achievements. Knell and Poggin, and then Cheseldine himself, would be persuaded of this fact, so Fletcher boasted. He had influence. He would use it. He thought he pulled a stroke with Knell. But nobody on earth, not even the boss, had any influence on Poggin. Poggin was concentrated on the part of the time, all the rest he was bustling hell. But Poggin loved a horse. He never loved anything else. He would be won with that black horse Bullet, Cheseldine was already won by Duane's monumental nerve, otherwise he would have killed Duane.

Little by little the next few days Duane learned the points he longed to know; and how indelibly they etched themselves in his memory! Cheseldine's hiding place was on the far slope of Mount Ord, in a deep, high walled valley. He always went there first before a contemplated job, where he met and planned with his lieutenants. Then while they executed he basked in the sunshine before one or another of the public places he owned. He was there in the Ord den now, getting ready to plan the biggest job yet. It was a bank robbery; but where, Fletcher had not as yet been advised.

Then when Duane had pumped the now amenable outlaw of all details pertaining to the present he gathered data and facts and places covering a period of 10 years Fletcher had been with Cheseldine. And herewith was unfolded a history so dark in its bloody regime, so incredible in its brazen daring, so appalling in its proof of the outlaw's snoop and grasp of the country from Pecos to Rio Grande, that Duane was stunned. Compared to this Cheseldine of the Big Bend, to this rancher, stock buyer, cattle speculator, property holder, all the outlaws Duane had ever known sank into insignificance. The power of the man stunned Duane; the strange fidelity given him stunned Duane; the intricate inside working of his great system was equally stunning. But when Duane recovered from that old, terrible passion to kill consumed him, and it itself fiercely and it could not be checked. If that red-headed Poggin, if that cold-eyed, dead-faced Knell had only been at Ord! But they were not, and Duane with help of time got what he hoped was the upper hand of himself.

CHAPTER XXII.

Again inaction and suspense dragged at Duane's spirit. Like a leashed hound with a keen scent in his face Duane wanted to leap forth when he was bound. He almost fretted. Something called to him over the bold, wild brow of Mount Ord. But while Fletcher stayed in Ord waiting for Knell and Poggin, or for orders, Duane knew his game was again a waiting one.

But one day there were signs of the long quiet of Ord being broken. A messenger strange to Duane rode in on a secret mission that had to do with Fletcher. When he went away Fletcher became addicted to thoughtful moods and lonely walks. He seldom drank, and this in itself was a striking contrast to former behavior. The messenger came again. Whatever communication he brought, it had a remarkable effect upon the outlaw. Duane was present in the tavern when the fellow arrived, saw the few words whispered, but did not hear them. Fletcher turned white with anger or fear, perhaps both, and he cursed like a madman. The messenger, a lone, dark-headed, hard riding fellow reminding Duane of the cowboy Guthrie, left the tavern without even a drink and rode away off to the west. This west mystified and fascinated Duane as much as the south beyond Mount Ord. Where were Knell and Poggin? Apparently they were not at present with the leader on the mountain. After the messenger left Fletcher grew silent and surly. He had presented a variety of moods to Duane's observation, and this latest one was provocative of thought. Fletcher was dangerous. It became clear now that the other outlaws of the camp feared him, kept out of his way. Duane let him alone, yet closely watched him.

Perhaps an hour after the messenger had left, not longer, Fletcher manifestly arrived at some decision, and he called for his horse. Then he went to his shack and returned. To Duane the outlaw looked in shape both to ride and to fight. He gave orders for the men in camp to keep close until he returned. Then he mounted.

"Come here, Dodge," he called. Duane went up and laid a hand on the pommel of the saddle. Fletcher walked his horse, with Duane beside him, till they reached the log bridge, where he halted.

"Dodge, I'm in bad with Knell," he said. "An' it 'pears I'm the cause of friction between Knell an' Poggy. Knell never had any use for me, but Poggy's been square, if not friendly. The boss has a big deal on an' here it's been held up because of this scrap. He's waitin' over there in the mountain to give orders to Knell or Poggy, an' neither one's showin' up. I've got to stand in the branch, an' I ain't enjoyin' the prospects."

"What's the trouble about, Jim?" asked Duane.

"Reckon it's a little about you, Dodge," said Fletcher, dryly. "Knell hadn't any use for you that day. He ain't got no use for a man unless he can rule him. Some of the boys here he pulled before he paid Knell. Knell claims to know some 'thin' about you that 'll make some boss an' Poggy sick when he hears it. But he's keepin' quiet. Hard on to figger, that Knell. Reckon you'd

better go back to Bradford for a day or so, then camp out near here till I come back."

"Why?"

"Wal, because there ain't any use for you to git in bad, too. The gang will ride over here any day. If they're friendly I'll light a fire on the hill here, say three nights from tonight. If you don't see it, that night you hit the trail. I'll do what I can, Jim. Fletcher sticks to his pals. So long, Dodge."

Then he rode away.

He left Duane in a quandry. This news was black. Things had been working out so well. Here was a setback. At the moment Duane did not know which way to turn, but certainly he had no idea of going back to Bradford. Friction between the two great lieutenants of Cheseldine! Open hostility between one of them and another of the chiefs! Right-hand men! Among outlaws that sort of thing was deadly serious. Generally such matters were settled with guns. Duane gathered encouragement even from disaster. Perhaps the disintegration of Cheseldine's great band had already begun. But what did Knell know? Duane did not circle around the idea with doubts and hopes; if Knell knew anything it was that this stranger in Ord, this new partner of Fletcher's, was no less than Buck Duane.

Well, it was about time thought Duane, that he made use of his name if it were to help him at all. That name had been MacNally's hope. He had anchored all his scheme to Duane's fame. Duane was tempted to ride off after Fletcher and stay with him. This, however, would hardly be fair to an outlaw who had been fair to him. Duane concluded to await developments and when the gang rode in to Ord, probably from their various hiding places, he would be there ready to be denounced by Knell. Duane could not see any other culmination of this series of events than a meeting between Knell and himself. If that terminated fatally for Knell there was all probability of Duane's being in no worse situation than he was now. If Poggin took up the quarrel! Here Duane accused himself again—tried in vain to revolt from a judgment that he was only reasoning out excuses to meet these outlaws.

Meanwhile, instead of waiting, why not hunt up Cheseldine in his mountain retreat? The thought no sooner struck Duane than he was hurrying for his horse.

He left Ord ostensibly toward Bradford, but, once out of sight, he turned off the road, circled through the brush, and several miles south of town he struck a narrow grass-grown trail that Fletcher had told him led to Cheseldine's camp. The horse tracks along this trail were not less than a week old, and very likely much more. It wound between low, brush-covered foothills, through arroyos and gullies lined with mesquite, cottonwood, and scrub-oak.

In an hour Duane struck the slope of Mount Ord, and as he climbed he got a view of the rolling, black spotted country, partly desert, partly fertile, with long, bright lines of dry streambeds winding away to grow dim in the distance. He got among broken rocks and cliffs and here the open, downward-sloping land disappeared, and he was hard put to it to find the trail. He lost it repeatedly and made slow progress. Finally he climbed into a region of all rock benches, rough here, smooth there, with only an occasional scratch of iron horseshoe to guide him. Many times he had to go ahead and then work to right or left till he found his way again. It was slow work; it took all day; and night found him half-way up the mountain. He halted at a little side-canon with grass and water, and here he made camp. The night was clear and cool at that height, with a dark blue sky and a streak of stars blinking across. With this day of action behind him he felt better satisfied than he had been for some time. Here, on this venture, he was answering to a call that had so often directed his movements, perhaps his life, and it was on that logic or intelligence could take little stock of. And on this night, lonely like the ones he used to spend in the desert, and memorable of them because of a likeness to that old hiding-place, he felt the pressing return of old haunting things—the past so long ago, wild flights, dead faces—and the places of these were taken by one quivering alive, white, tragic, with its dark, intent, speaking eyes—Ray Longstreth.

That last memory he yielded to until he slept.

In the morning, satisfied that he had left still fewer tracks than he had followed up this trail, he led his horse up to the head of the canon, there a narrow crack in low cliffs, and with branches of cedar fenced him in. Then he went back and took up the trail on foot.

Without the horse he made better time and climbed through deep clefts, wide canons, over ridges, up shelving slopes, along precipices—a long, hard climb—till he reached what he concluded was a divide. Going down was easier, though the farther he followed this dim and winding trail the wider the broken battlements of rock. Above him he saw the black fringe of pinon and pine, and above that the bold peak, bare, yellow, like a desert butte. Once, through a wide gateway between great escarpments, he saw the lower country beyond the range, and beyond this, vast and clear at it lay in his sight, was the great river that made the Big Bend.

He went down and down, wondering how a horse could follow that broken trail, believing there must be another better one somewhere into Cheseldine's hiding place.

He rounded a jutting corner, where view had been shut off, and presently came out upon the rim of a high wall. Beneath, like a green gulf seen through blue haze, lay an amphitheater walled in on the two sides he could see. It lay perhaps 1,000 feet below him; and, plain as at the other features of that wild environment, there shone out a big red

stone or adobe cabin, white water shining away between great borders, and horses and cattle dotting the levels. It was a peaceful, beautiful scene. Duane could not help grinding his teeth at the thought of rustlers living there in quiet and ease.

Duane worked half way down to the level, and, well hidden in a niche, he settled himself to watch both trail and valley. He made note of the position of the sun and saw that if anything developed or if he decided to descend any farther there was small likelihood of his getting back to his camp before dark. To try that after nightfall he imagined would be vain effort.

Then he bent his keen eyes downward. The cabin appeared to be a crude structure. Though large in size, it had, of course, been built by outlaws.

There was no garden, no cultivated field, no corral. Excepting for the rude pile of stones and logs plastered together with mud, the valley was as wild, probably, as on the day of discovery. Duane seemed to have been watching for a long time before he saw any sign of man, and this one apparently went to the stream for water and returned to the cabin.

The sun went down behind the wall, and shadows were born in the darker places of the valley. Duane began to want to get closer to that cabin. What had he taken this arduous climb for? He held back, however, trying to evolve further plans.

While he was pondering the shadows quickly gathered and darkened. If he was to go back to camp he must set out at once. Still he lingered. And suddenly his wide roving eye caught sight of two horsemen riding up the valley. They must have entered at a point below, round the huge abutment of rock, beyond Duane's range of sight. Their horses were tired and stopped at the stream for a long drink.

Duane left his perch, took to the steep trail, and descended as fast as he could without making noise.

It did not take him long to reach the valley floor. It was almost level, with deep grass, and here and there clumps of bushes. Twilight was already thick down there. Duane marked the location of the trail, and then began, to slip like a shadow through the grass and from bush to bush. He saw a bright light before he made out the dark outline of the cabin. Then he heard voices, a merry whistle, a coarse song, and the clink of iron cooking utensils. He smelled fragrant wood smoke. He saw moving dark figures cross the light. Evidently there was a wide door, or else the fire was out in the open.

Duane swerved to the left, out of direct line with the light, and thus was able to see better. Then he advanced noiselessly but swiftly toward the back of the house. There were trees close to the wall. He would make no noise, and he would be there ready to be denounced by Knell. Duane could not see any other culmination of this series of events than a meeting between Knell and himself. If that terminated fatally for Knell there was all probability of Duane's being in no worse situation than he was now. If Poggin took up the quarrel! Here Duane accused himself again—tried in vain to revolt from a judgment that he was only reasoning out excuses to meet these outlaws.

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great bustle and clatter as they sat to their meal. Like hungry men, they talked little.

Duane waited there awhile, then guardedly got up and crept round to the other side of the cabin. After he became used to the dark again he ventured to steal along the wall to the window and peeped in. The outlaws were in the first room and could not be seen.

Duane waited. The moments dragged endlessly. His heart pounded. Longstreth entered, turned up the light, and, taking a box of cigars from the table, he carried it out.

"Here, you fellows, go outside and smoke," he said. "Knell, come on in now. Let's get it over."

He returned, sat down, and lighted a cigar for himself. He put his booted feet on the table.

Duane saw that the room was comfortably, even luxuriously furnished. There must have been a good trail, he thought, else how could all that stuff have been packed in there. Most assuredly it could not have come over the trail he had traveled. Presently he heard the men go outside and their voices became indistinct. Then Knell came in and seated himself without any of his chief's ease. He seemed preoccupied and, as always, cold.

"What's wrong, Knell? Why didn't you get here sooner?" queried Longstreth.

"Poggin, damn him! We're on the outs again."

"What for?"

"Aw, he needn't have got sore. He's breakin' a new hoss over here at Faraway, an' you know him where a hoss's concerned. That kept him, I reckon, more than anythin'."

"What else? Get it out of your system so we can go on to the new job."

"Well, it begins back a ways. I don't know how long ago—weeks—a stranger rode into Ord an' got down easy like as if he owned the place. He seemed familiar to me. But I wasn't sure. We looked him over, an' I left, tryin' to place him in my mind."

"What'd he look like?"

"Rangy, powerful man, white hair over his temples, still, hard face, eyes like knives. The way he packed his guns, the way he walked an' stood an' swung his right hand showed me what he was. You can't fool me on the gun sharp. An' he had a grand horse, a big black."

"I've met your man," said Longstreth.

"No!" exclaimed Knell. It was wonderful to hear surprise expressed by this man that did not in the least show it in his strange physiognomy. Knell laughed a short, grim, hollow laugh.

"Boss, this here big gent drifts into Ord again an' makes up to Jim Fletcher. Jim, you know, is easy led. He likes men. An', when a posse come along trailin' a blind lead, huntin' the wrong way for the man who held up No. 6, why Jim—he up an' takes this stranger to be the fly road agent an' contraband to him. Got money out of him sure. An' that's what stumps me more. What's this man's game? I happen to know, boss, that he couldn't have held up No. 6."

"How do you know?" demanded Longstreth.

"Because I did the job myself."

A dark and stormy passion clouded the chief's face. Knell!

"Damn you, Knell! You're incorrigible. You're unreliable. Another break like that queers you with me. Did you tell Poggin?"

"Yes. That's one reason we fell out. He raved. I thought he was goin' to kill me."

"Why did you tackle such a risky job without help or plan?"

"It offered, that's all. An' it was easy. But it was a mistake. I go the country an' the railroad hollerin' for nothin'. I just couldn't help it. You know what idleness means to one of us. You know also that this very life breeds fatality. It's wrong—that's why. I was born of good parents, an' I know what's right. We're wrong, an' we can't beat the end, that's all. An', for my part, I don't care a damn when that comes."

"Fine, wise talk from you, Knell," said Longstreth, scornfully. "Go on with your story."

"As I said, Jim cottons to the pretender, an' they get chummy. They're together all the time. You can gamble Jim told all he knew an' then some. A little liquor loosens his tongue. Several of the boys rode over from Ord, an' one of them went to Poggin an' says Jim Fletcher has a new man for the gang."

Poggin, you know, is always ready for a new man. He says if one doesn't turn out Ord, he can be shut off easy. He rather liked the way this new pard of Jim's was boosted. Jim an' Poggin always hit it up together. So, until I got on the deal, Jim's pard was already in the gang, without Poggin or you ever seein' him. Then I got to figurin' hard. Just where had I ever seen that chap? As it turned out, I never had seen him, which accounts for my bein' doubtful. I never forget any man I'd seen. I dug up a lot of old papers from my kit an' went over them. Letters, pictures, clippin's, an' all that. I guess I had a pretty good notion what I was lookin' for an' who I wanted to make sure of. At last I found it. An' I knew my man. But I didn't spring it on Poggin. Oh, no! I want to have some fun with him when the time comes.

He'll be wilder than a trapped wolf. I sent Blossom over to Ord to get word from Jim an', when I was satisfied with all this talk, I sent Blossom again with a message calculated to make Jim hump. Poggin got sore, said he'd wait for Jim, an' I could come over to see you about the new job. He'd meet me in Ord."

Knell had spoken hurriedly and low, now and then with passion. His pale eyes glinted like fire in ice, and now his voice fell to a whisper.

"Who do you think Fletcher's new man is?"

"Who?" demanded Longstreth.

"Buck Duane!"

Down came Longstreth's boots with a crash, then his body grew rigid.

"That Nueces outlaw? That two-shot ace of spades gun thrower who killed Bland, Alloway—?"

"An' Hardin." Knell whispered this last name with more feeling than the apparent circumstance verified at all.

"Yes; and Hardin, the best one of the Rim Rock fellows—Buck Duane!"

Longstreth was so ghastly white now that his black mustache seemed outlined against chalk. He eyed his grim lieutenant. They understood each other without more words. It was enough that Buck Duane was there in the Big Bend. Longstreth rose presently and reached for a flask, from which he drank. He then offered it to Knell. He waved it aside.

"Knell," began the chief, slowly, as he wiped his lips, "I gathered you have some grudge against this Buck Duane."

"Yes."

"Well, don't be a fool now and do what Poggin or almost any of you men would—don't meet this Buck Duane. I've reason to believe he's a Texas Ranger now."

"The hell you say!" exclaimed Knell.

"Yes. Go to Ord and give Jim Fletcher a hunch. He'll get Poggin, and they will fix even Buck Duane."

"All right. I'll do my best. But if I run into Duane—"

"Don't run into him!" Longstreth's voice fairly rang with the force of its passion and command. He wiped his face, drank again from the flask, sat down, resumed his smoking, and, drawing a paper from his vest pocket, he began to study it.

"Well, I'm glad that's settled," he said, evidently referring to the Duane matter. "Now for the new job. This is October 18. On or before the 25th, there will be a shipment of gold reach the Ranchers' bank of Val Verde. After you return to Ord, give Poggin these orders. Keep the game quiet. You, Poggin, Kane, Fletcher, Panhandle Smith, and Boldt to be in on the secret and the job. Nobody else. You'll leave Ord on the 23rd, ride across country by the trail till you get within sight of Mercer. It's 100 miles from Bradford to Val Verde—about the same from Ord. Time you travel to get you near Val Verde on the morning of the 26th. You won't have to more than trot your horses. At 2 o'clock in the afternoon, start ride into town and up to the Ranchers' bank. Val Verde's a pretty big town. Never been any holdups there. Town feels safe. Make it a clean, fast, daylight job. That's all. Have you got the details?"

Knell did not even ask for the dates again.

"Suppose Poggin or me might be detained?" he asked.

Longstreth bent a dark glance upon his lieutenant.

"You never can tell what 'll come off," continued Knell. "I'll do my best."

"The minute you see Poggin tell him. A job on hand steadies him. And I say again—look to it that nothing happens. Either you or Poggin carry the job through. But I want both of you in it. Break for the hills, and when you get up in the rocks where you can hide your tracks head for Mount Ord. When all's quiet again I'll join you here. That's all. Call in the boys."

(Continued Next Week.)

Increasing the Choir Visible.

From the Philadelphia Public Ledger.

One of the treaties whose instant ratification will rejoice all lovers of the countryside, even if it discomfits the sportsman who views nature in the open as a place where he may be permitted to slay without hindrance, is the new convention just arranged between Canada and the United States which protects all migratory birds. This is the final legislation, in addition to the other federal and state bird statutes, which it is hoped will give all bird life on this continent a new lease of life and the full protection the serious situation calls for. Naturally, the millennium will not arrive at once, and the game birds that are already near extinction may not be saved to the degree expected; but the treaty makes a brave start and marks a new epoch, and given a few years of rigid enforcement it should work wonders. The convention, too, has a practical application everywhere, since it not only aims at saving the game birds, but all those insect eating birds whose freedom from molestation is of the greatest value to the farmer. If any one has any doubt on this subject all he has to do is to let the department of agriculture in Washington unload its sad story of the annual losses, amounting to most of a billion, caused by the prevalence of insect pests free to do their devastating work because their natural enemies, the insectivorous birds, have been killed off.

In other words, it is an important biological fact that you cannot disturb the natural balance of animal life, with its checks and counterchecks, without disaster. Everywhere, as we know, the struggle goes on, little fleas, as the poet gaily said, having smaller fleas to bite them, and so ad infinitum. The strange tale of how the mongoose imported into Jamaica to rid the island of snakes killed the birds that had kept the insects down and so brought on disease and death for the higher animal life is a classic case in point. But, aside from this purely useful view of the case, the fact is that there is the greatest pleasure in knowing that our trees will no longer be "barren" and that where late the sweet birds sang. Existing protective laws have already made a notable increase in the number of species and the aggregate of birds hereabouts, adding to the delights of country life and the picturesqueness of the woods. With the new law in working order all bird life should increase to a notable and noticeable extent. And this will be no small achievement.

Religion on the Battlefield.

From Collier's Weekly.

Religion has been bankrupt by the war in Europe, according to some pessimists; others say that the war has meant a great wave of mysticism, and at times seems mere superstition. The best religious war news we have seen is summed up in two sentences found in the Rev. W. W. Holdsworth's "Impressions of a Hospital Chaplain," in the Contemporary Review:

"A rabbi serving as a chaplain in France was one day asked by a dying French soldier to unbutton his tunic and to hold the crucifix he was wearing so that in his last moments his eyes might rest upon that symbol of love unto death. With a fine humanity the Jew held up for the comfort of the dying man that which stood for the condemnation of his own people."

Ridiculous But Nice.

From the Yonkers Statesman.

Patience—Have you seen Peggy's new suit?

Patience—Yes; isn't it too ridiculous for anything?

Patience—Yes, I like it, too.

A Fine Point.

From Judge.

"There's one good thing about golf."

"What is that?"

"It's seldom that your wife insists on you taking her to see it played."

A Consolation.

From the Boston Transcript.

Miss Green—Of course, you can't believe everything you hear.

Miss Gadleigh—Oh, no; but you can repeat it.

That Accounted For It.

From Judge.

"I only got half way through my speech when my voice went back on me."

"That so? I heard them say your speech was about twice as good as usual."

How He Looked.

From the Boston Transcript.

"Who is this Gargantua just coming in?"

"That's Fattleigh, who is always bragging about being a self-made man."

"Gee whiz! He looks more like he was built by a construction company."

Too Polite.

Little Boy—That lady that talked to me in the park gave me some candy.

Mother—I hope you were polite.

Little Boy—Yes, ma, I was.

Mother—What did you say?

Little Boy—I said I wished pa had met her before he got acquainted with you.