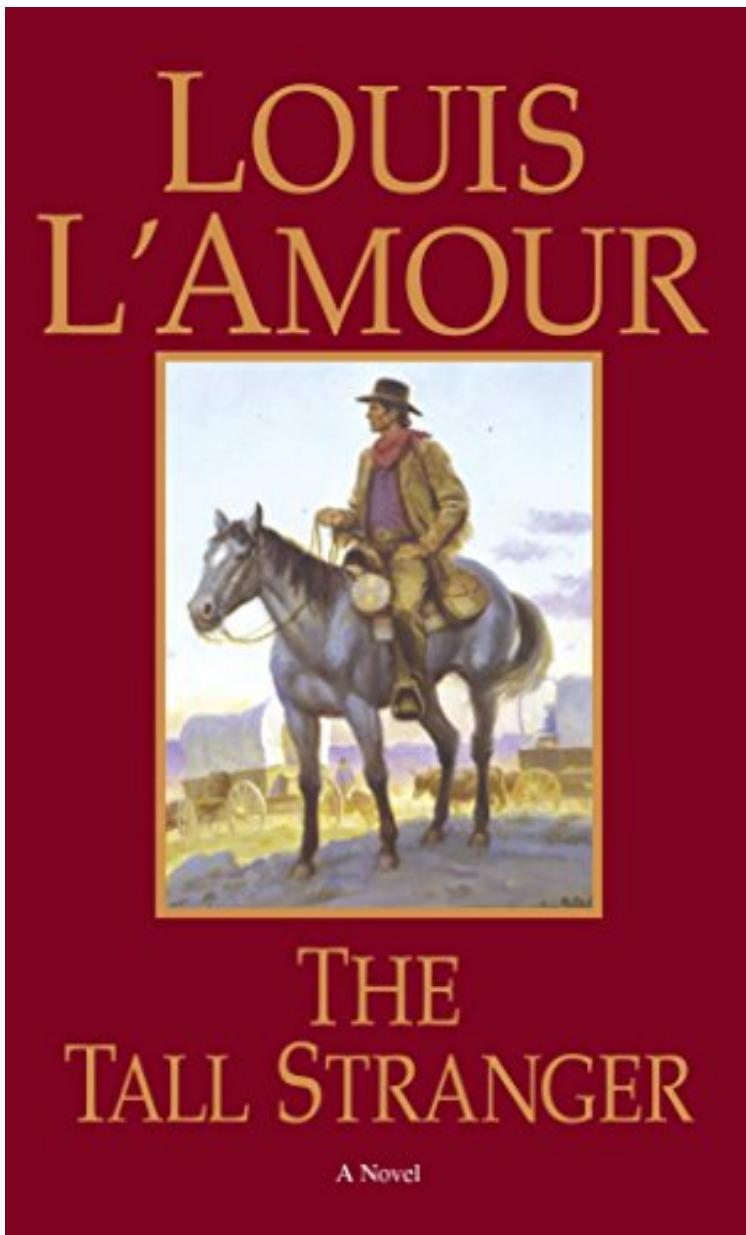


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The Tall Stranger



Par Louis L'Amour
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWagon trains heading west were forced to defend themselves against Indians, cope with injuries and illness, and struggle to find food. The group of easterners Rock Bannon was scouting for faced another problem. They were being deceived. When he warned them to remain on the Humboldt Trail, Sharon Crockett and the others refused to listen. Mort Harper, a stranger riding a beautiful black mare, had dazzled them with his charm and good looks. The southern route was the best way to go, Harper told them. But best for whom? Bannon wondered. That route led straight to the Salt Lake Desert. The conditions would

be brutal. And if Harper wasn't steering them toward those deadly alkali flats, where were they headed? And what would happen once they got there?

Chapter One With slow, ponderously rhythmical steps the oxen moved, each step a pause and an effort, each movement a deadening drag. Fine white dust hung in a sifting cloud above the wagon train, caking the nostrils of animals and men, blanketing the sides of oxen and horses, dusting a thin film over men and women. And the miles stretched on before them, endless and timeless. Red-rimmed and bloodshot eyes stared with dazed weariness into that limitless distance before them, seeing nothing to grip the eye or hold the attention. Long since all had been forgotten but the heat, the dust and the aching muscles. Each step lifted a powdery dust, stifling and irritating. It lay a foot deep on the plain, drowning the sparse grass and sage. Rock Bannon, riding away from the train alone, drew in his steel-dust stallion and turned in the saddle, glancing back at the covered wagons, sixteen of them in the long line with some led horses and a few outriders, yet none who rode so far out as himself, and none who appreciated their problems as thoroughly as he did himself. From where he sat he could not see their faces, but in the days just past he had seen them many times, and the expression of each was engraved in his mind. Haggard, worn, hungry for rest and cool water, he knew that in the heart of each there was a longing to stop. The vision was in them yet, the golden promise of the distant hills, offering a land of milk and honey, the fair and flowering land sought by all wandering peoples of whatever time or place. No hardship could seem too great, no trail too long, no mountain impassable when the vision was upon them. It was always and forever the same when men saw the future opening beyond the hills where the sun slept, yet this time the vision must hold meaning; this time the end of the trail must bring realization for they had brought their women and children along. All but Rock Bannon. He had neither woman nor child, nor anyone anywhere. He had a horse and a saddle, a ready gun and a mind filled with lore of the trail, and eyes ever fixed on something he wanted, something faint and indistinct in outline, ever distant, yet ever real. Only of late, as he rode alone on the far flank of the wagon train, had that something begun to take shape and outline, and the shape was that of Sharon Crockett. His somber green eyes slanted back now to the last wagon but one, where the red-gold hair of Sharon on the driver's seat was a flame no dust could dim. In the back of that heavily loaded wagon was Tom Crockett, her father, restless with fever and hurt, nursing a bullet wound in his thigh, a memento of the battle with Buffalo Hide's warriors. From the head of the train came a long, melodious halloo. Cap Mulholland swung his arm in a great circle, and the lead oxen turned ponderously to swing in the beginning of the circle. Rock touched the gray with his heels and rode slowly toward the wagon train. He was never sure these days as to his reception. Cap's beard was white with dust as he looked up. Weariness and worry showed in his face. "Rock," he said, "we could sure use a little fresh meat. We're all a mite short on rations, and you seem to be the best hunter among us." "All right," Rock said. "I'll see what I can do after I get Crockett's wagon in place." Mulholland's head turned sharply. "Bannon, I'd let that girl alone if I were you. No offense intended, but she ain't your kind. I ain't denyin' you've been a sight of help to us. In fact, I don't know what we'd have done without you, and we're glad you came along. But Sharon Crockett's another story. Her pa's bedded down now, and in no shape to speak." Bannon turned the steel-dust sharply. His face was grim and his jaw hard. "Did he ask you to speak to me? Or did she?" "Well, nonot exactly," Mulholland said uncomfortably. "But I'm headin' this train." "Then I'll thank you to mind your own business. Headin' this wagon train is job enough for any man. Any time the Crocketts ask me to stay away, I'll stay, but that's their affair." Mulholland's face flushed and his eyes darkened with anger. "She ain't your kind," he persisted, "you bein' a killer, and all." Rock Bannon stared at him. "You didn't seem to mind my killing Indians!" he said sarcastically. "In fact, you killed a few yourself!" "Don't get me wrong!" Cap persisted. "I ain't denyin' you helped us! Without you I don't know whether we could have beat off those Indians or not, but killin' Indians and killin' white men's a different thing!" "You're new to the West, Cap." Bannon's voice was rough. "In a short time you'll find there's white men out here that need killin' a sight worse than Indians. In fact, I'm not so sure those Indians jumped us without help!" "What do you mean?" Mulholland demanded. "I mean," Bannon said, "that Morton Harper told you there'd be no hostile Indians on this route! I warned you of Buffalo Hide then, but he told you he ranged further north. You took his advice on this trail, not mine!" Pagon and Pike Purcell were coming up to join them. Pike heard the last remark and his lean, lantern-jawed face flushed with anger. "You ridin' Harper again?" he harshly demanded of Bannon. "He said this was a better trail, and it is. We ain't had no high passes, and we had six days of the best travel we've had since we left Council Bluffs, with plenty of water and plenty of grass. Now we get a few bad days and a brush with Indians, but that ain't too much!" He glared at Rock. "I'm sick of your whinin' about this trail and Harper! I figure he's a darned good man. He was sure a help to me when I needed it. Out of supplies and no

medicine for the wife, and he staked me." "I wasn't talking to you," Rock replied shortly, "and I don't like your tone. As far as your loan from Harper, remember that you haven't heard from him on it yet. I've a hunch he'll collect, and plenty!" "I don't need no killer to tell me my business!" Pike snapped, reining his horse around to face Rock. "And I ain't afraid of a reputation for killin', neither. You don't bluff me none." "Here, here!" Cap protested. "We can't afford to have trouble in camp. You'll have to admit, Pike, that we'd have been in bad shape a couple of times in that fight, if it hadn't been for Bannon. He's been a help. I don't agree with him on Mort Harper, either, but every man to his own idea." Rock swung the gray and cantered off toward the hills. Inwardly, he was seething. He was a fool to stay on with the wagon train—he understood that perfectly well. Not a man here liked him, not a man here talked to him except on business. He was not even a member of their train, except by accident. They had found him at the crossing of the Platte. Riding, half dead, with two bullet wounds in his body, his horse ready to drop with fatigue, he had run upon the wagon train. Sharon Crockett had bedded him down in her wagon and cared for him, and he had ridden on in the same place where her father rode now. He had offered no explanation of his wounds, and had talked but little. A grim and lonely man, gentle words came hard and he could only look up into Sharon's face and wonder at her beauty, tongue-tied and helpless. Yet his hard, tough, trail-battered body was too used to pain to remain helpless for long. He recovered rapidly, and after that he had ridden along with the wagons, hunting for fresh meat and helping when he could. He was not a man who made friends easily, yet gradually the ice was melting, and the clannishness of the wagon train was breaking down. Twice he had even talked with Sharon, riding beside her wagon, speaking of the mountains and his own wild and lonely life. All that ended abruptly that night beside the campfire at the fort. They had been seated around the fire eating supper, listening to the bustle of life around the fort, when a tall, handsome man rode up on a beautiful black mare. Perfectly groomed, his wide white hat topping coal-black hair that hung to his shoulders, a drooping black mustache and a black broadcloth suit, the trousers tucked into hand-tooled boots, Morton Harper had been a picture to take any eye. Swinging down, he had walked up to the fire. "Howdy, folks!" His voice was genial, his manner warm and pleasant. In an instant his personality and voice had done what Rock Bannon's could not do in two weeks. He had broken down their reserve and become one of the group. "Headin' for California?" "Reckon we are," Mulholland had agreed. "We ain't rightly decided whether to stay on the Humboldt Trail or to swing north and go to Oregon." "Why go either way?" Harper asked. "There's a southern route I could recommend that would be much easier going for your womenfolks." His alert eyes had already found and appraised Sharon Crockett. "More water, plenty of grass, and no high mountain passes." Cap Mulholland looked up with interest. "We ain't heard of no such pass, nor no such trail," he admitted. "How does she go?" "Man named Hastings scouted some of it, and I scouted the rest myself. It is a more southerly route, and within another few months all the travel will be going that way. Right now," he winked, "the trains that go that way are going to have a mighty fine trip of it. Very little dust except in one stretch, fine grass, lots of water. Also, the hostile Indians are all raiding far north of there along the traveled routes" But," he added, "I can see you're well led, and you'll no doubt learn about this trail yourselves. From the look of your teams I'd say you were lucky in your choice of a leader." Leaning against the hub of a wagon wheel, Rock Bannon ate in silence. The even, smooth flow of the stranger's language had an enchanting quality, but his own hard-grained, cynical character was impervious to mere talk. As the hours flowed by, Harper sat among them, pleasing the men with subtle flattery, the women with smiles. The reserve of the group thawed under his easy manner, and before long they began to discuss his trail and its possibilities, considering themselves fortunate to know of it first. There was some talk of putting it to a vote, but it was morning before it came to that. Until then Rock was silent. "You'd do better," he interposed suddenly, "to stick to the regular trail." Harper's head came up sharply and his eyes leveled at Bannon. "Have you ever been over the trail I suggest, my friend?" "Part way," Rock replied. "Only part of it." "And was that part easy going for oxen and horses? Was there a good trail? Grass? Water?" "Yes, I reckon it has all that, but I still wouldn't advise it." "You say it is a better trail but you wouldn't advise it." Harper glanced around at the others, smiling tolerantly. "That doesn't make much sense, does it? I've been over the entire trail and found it very good going. Moreover, I can give you a map of the trail showing the water holes, everything. Of course, it's nothing to me what route you take, but if you want to avoid Indians—" He shrugged. "What about Buffalo Hide?" Morton Harper's face tightened and his eyes strained to pry Rock Bannon's face from the shadows in which he sat. "He's a Blackfoot. He ranges further north." Harper's eyes shifted to Mulholland. "Who is this man? I'm surprised he should ask about Buffalo Hide, as he isn't known to most white men, other than renegades. I can't understand why he should try to persuade you to neglect an easier route for a more

dangerous one. Is he one of your regular train?" Pike Purcell was abrupt. From the first day he had disliked and been suspicious of Bannon. "No, he ain't none of our crowd, just a man who tied up with us back yonder a ways. He ain't got no wagon, nothin' but the horse he's ridin'." "I see." Morton Harper's face became grave with implied doubt. "No offense, friend, but would you mind telling me your name? I know most of the men along this trail, and Colonel Warren was asking about some of them only tonight. You'll admit it is safer to be careful, for there are so many renegades who work with the Indians." "My name's Rock Bannon." Morton Harper's lips tightened and his eyes grew wary. For a moment he seemed taken aback. Then, as he perceived where his own interests lay, his eyes lighted with triumph. "Ah? Bannon, eh? I've heard of you. Killed a man in Laramie a month or so back, didn't you?" "He drew on me." Rock was acutely conscious of the sudden chill in the atmosphere, and he could see Sharon's shocked gaze directed at him. The people of the wagon train were fresh from the East. Only Cap had been as far west as the Platte before, and he only once. They were peace-loving men, quiet, and asking no trouble. Morton Harper was quick to sense his advantage. "Sorry to have brought it up, Bannon," he said smoothly, "but when a man advises a wagon train against their best interests, it is well to inquire the source of the advice." Bannon got up. He was a tall man, lean-hipped and broad-shouldered, his flat-brimmed hat shadowing his face, his eyes glowing with piercing light as he spoke. "I still say that route's a fool way to go. This ain't no country to go wanderin' around in, and that route lies through Hardy Bishop's country. You spoke of Hastings. He was the man who advised the Donner Party." As his footsteps died away in the darkness, the members of the wagon train sat very still, their enthusiasm suddenly dampened by that ill-fated name. They all knew the story. The horror of it still blanketed the trail with its bloody shadow of the party caught by snows in the high passes and starving until they resorted to cannibalism as a way out. Morton Harper shrugged. "Of course they started on Hastings's trail, but left it too soon, and the route I suggest avoids all the higher passes." His eyes swung around the group, gathering their attention like the reins of a six-horse team, and he led them on with promises and suggestions, an easy flow of calm, quiet talk, stilling their fears, quieting their doubts, offering them grass and water instead of dust and desert. Presentation de l'diteur Wagon trains heading west were forced to defend themselves against Indians, cope with injuries and illness, and struggle to find food. The group of easterners Rock Bannon was scouting for faced another problem. They were being deceived. When he warned them to remain on the Humboldt Trail, Sharon Crockett and the others refused to listen. Mort Harper, a stranger riding a beautiful black mare, had dazzled them with his charm and good looks. The southern route was the best way to go, Harper told them. But best for whom? Bannon wondered. That route led straight to the Salt Lake Desert. The conditions would be brutal. And if Harper wasn't steering them toward those deadly alkali flats, where were they headed? And what would happen once they got there?