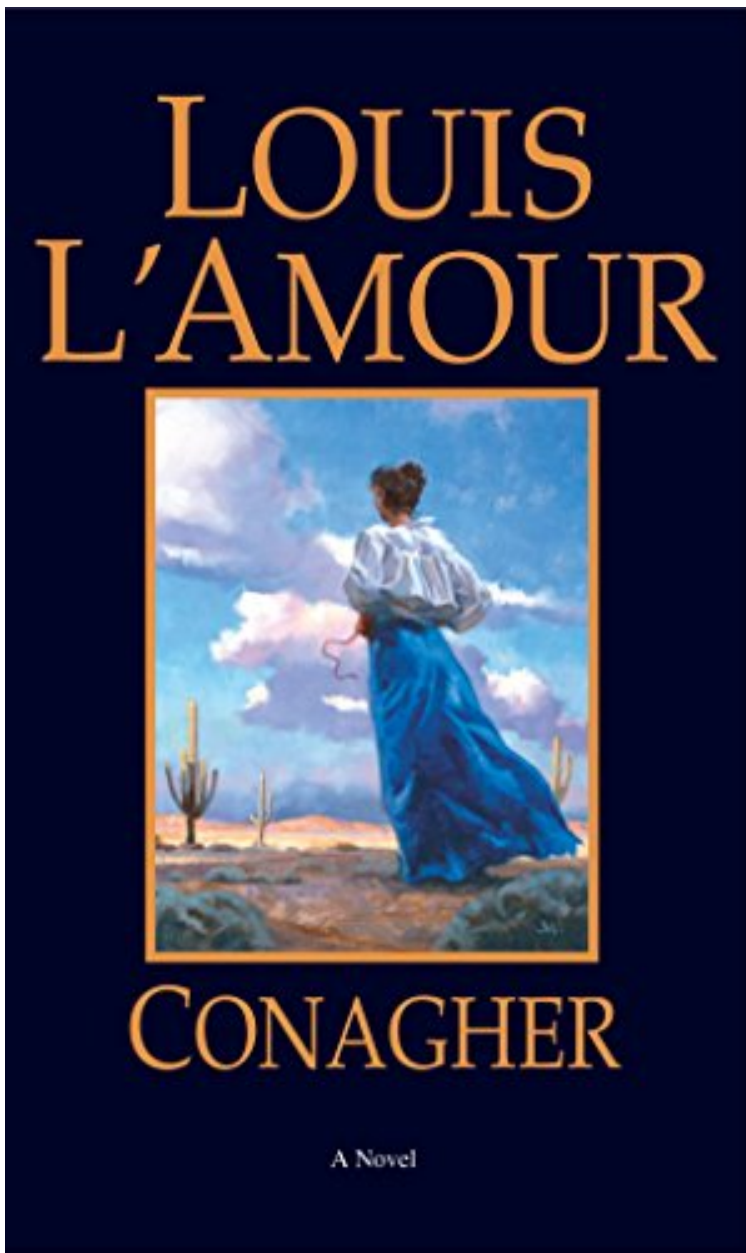


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# Conagher



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAs far as the eye could see was a vast, empty horizon. Evie Teale had finally accepted that her husband wouldnt be coming home. Now she and the children were alone in an untamed country where the elements, Indians, and thieves made it far easier to die than to live.Miles away, another solitary soul battled for survival. Conagher was a lean, dark-eyed drifter who wasnt about to let a gang of rustlers push him around. While searching the isolated canyons for missing cattle, he found notes tied to tumbleweeds rolling with the wind. The bleak, spare words echoed Conaghers own whispered prayers for

companionship. Who was this mysterious woman on the other side of the wind? For Conagher, staying alive long enough to find her wasn't going to be easy. Extrait Chapter One The land lay empty around them, lonely and still. On their right a ridge of hills with scattered cedars, on their left an open plain sweeping to a far horizon that offered a purple hint of hills. In all that vastness there was nothing but the creak and groan of the wagon, and overhead the sky, brassy with sunlight. Its only a couple of miles now, Jacob told her. Just around that point of rocks. He pointed with his whipstock. She felt her heart shriveling within her. Its awfully dry, isn't it? Its dry, Jacobs tone was abrupt. Its been a bad year. The team plodded, heads bobbing with weariness. The last town was fifty miles behind them, the last ranch almost as far. In all that distance they had seen not a ranch, a claim shack, or a fence ... not a horse, a cow, or even a track. At last he said, I did not promise you much, and it is not much, but the land is ours, and what the land becomes will be ours, too. The land is not only what it is, it is what we make it. The heavy wagon rumbled on, endlessly, monotonously. The heat was stifling, their pace so slow they could not escape the dust. It settled over their clothing, their eyebrows, in the folds of their skin. The children, weary with the heat, had fallen asleep, and for that she was thankful. The wagon reached the point of rocks, bumped over a flat rock, then rounded the point. Her heart sank. Before them, and close under the shoulder of a hill, was a cabin, a solitary building, square and bare, without shed or corral, without shrubs, without a tree. There it is! There was pride in Jacobs tone. Theres our house, Evie. She knew how he felt, for in the three years of their life together she had learned this about him: that he had never known a home, had never possessed anything of his own beyond the clothes he wore, and his tools. He had worked hard to save the money for this move. Drab it might be, barren it was, but to Jacob, a middle-aged man with years of hard work behind him, it was home. She warned herself that she must never forget that, and that she must do what she could to help him. We will plant trees, we will drill a well ... you wait and see. First, I must buy some stock. We must have cattle. The wagon rolled down a slight grade, and at long last they drew up at the door. The cabin was small, but it was well-built. The cloud of dust settled down over them, settled at last. Laban awoke and sat up groggily. Pa, are we there? Are we home? he asked. Get down, son. We are here. Jacob walked to the door, fiddled with it a moment, then swung it wide. Come, Evie, we have much to do. I must ride out when morning comes. There is no time to waste. Evie hesitated, hoping that this once he might help her down. He need not carry her across the threshold ... after all, she was no new bride. Still, it was their first home, and he had forgotten her, his mind already busy with the problems of the place. He was letting down the tail gate, while Laban and Ruth ran to the door to peek inside. Pa! Ruth called. Theres no floor! Its just dirt! It will have to do, he said testily. Evie got down and removed her hat, fluffed a little dust from her hair and went into the cabin. She knew just what to do, and knew what had to come into the house first. Hers was an orderly mind when it came to such things, and she had planned for this when they packed the wagon. There was little to move. Before nightfall a meal was on the table, beds were made, a breakfast fire was laid, and the little world that revolved around Evie was once more established and ready for the morrow. The cabin was built of native stone taken from the ridge back of the house, and it consisted of one large room. It had a peaked roof, with a loft and a ladder that reached to it. There was a large fireplace, a square table, a double bed, two chairs and a bench. The floor was of hard-packed earth. The water had to be carried from a water hole about twenty-five yards back of the house, and about twenty feet higher up the slope. The children would sit on the bench at meals, and they would sleep in the loft, on pallets. The loft would be, as she well knew, the warmest part of the cabin. The first cattle we sell, Jacob said, we will put in a board floor. The first cattle they sold ... would that be two years away? Or maybe three? Three years on a dirt floor? She had always been poor, but not that poor. But she said nothing, for she had never complained; she never would complain. Jacob had thought of this too long, and he would need help, not complaints or arguments. They were here, and he still had four hundred dollars with which to buy cattle. He had dreamed of this, as he had told her, long before they were married even before he had married the first time, before the children were born... One hundred and sixty acres and a cabin built with his own hands. He had built well, for that was his trade. He was a steady, hard-working man, skilled at both the carpenters and the masons trade, but he had managed to save little during the hard years of depression and struggle, during his first wifes long illness, and the constant loans to his brother-in-law, Tom Evers. That, at least, was one thing they had left behind. Tom Evers had been gone on one of his forays when they left Ohio, and was safely behind them. At daybreak, after a quick breakfast, Jacob stood with her a few minutes, looking toward the east. I shall be gone several weeks. You have supplies enough, and you will have no need for money, but I have put aside fifty dollars that I do not need for cattle. Use it only if there is need. It was not much, but it was the first money she had held in her hands since her father had died and left her two

hundred dollars. When only five dollars was left of that money she had married Jacob Teale, a widower with two children. He was a stern but kind man, but bad luck had dogged him as if it owned him, and after three years they had this ... no more. You will have the shotgun, he said, and Laban is a good hunter. There are quail here, and sage hens. He might get a close-up shot at a deer. And you have supplies for at least a month, if you are careful. They stood in the doorway, Evie and the children, and watched him ride away on the sorrel, a straight, stiff-backed man, filled with plans and determination, who gave no thought to the imponderables, the little things upon which fortunes are made or broken. Evie went back into the cabin and sat down at the table. Her father had been a dreamer and a drifter, filled with excellent advice which he never applied to himself. Evie, he would say, when in doubt, sit down and think. It is only the mind of man that has lifted him above the animals. She must consider now. This was a time of drouth. The heat had parched and baked the land, sucking away the moisture from the grass, leaving the trees like tinder. Jacob would be gone for weeks. There must be something to show when he returned, some things accomplished of which she could say, There ... this I have done. But there was something else to consider. For there was the sky, and there was the vast and lonely land, and there was little in either on which the mind could feed, not her eager mind, restless, probing, seeking. She must be busy, and the children must be busy. There were the three horses to be cared for. They must be fed, watered, ridden occasionally or worked. Laban was eleven, but he had worked beside his father, and for neighbors. He had milked cows, chopped wood, helped with the harvest. He was a strong, honest boy, and she thought he liked her. Ruth was quick, imaginative, outgoing. She, perhaps more than any of them, needed people. So she formed her plans. They must explore the country around. They must spade up a kitchen garden and ditch it for irrigation from the spring. They must find what grass there was, and wood must be cut for the fires now and those of the winter to come. There would be much hard work, but there must be other things, too. There must be amusement ... something to do after work, and above all she must remember that Laban must be given more freedom, more responsibility, without forgetting that he was still a boy, a very young boy. The land that lay before them was so empty. It was brown where it was not gray. Once this land had been a lake bed, but that was long ago, in some vanished time. Now there was before them just dry grass stretching away into the distance. Back of them lay the brown, cedar-clad hills. Laban, she said, we must explore. We will need more water for the stock, and there may be another water hole. We shall look for it. He looked at her. Yes, ma'am, but ... but maybe there's Indians. Her eyes searched his face. What makes you say that? I heard them talking at Socorro. There's Paches in the mountains, and sometimes there's others, wild ones who come up from the border. She did not know whether to believe him or not. Jacob had said nothing about Indians, and she had heard no such talk. But Laban was a straightforward, trustworthy boy. If he said he had heard such talk, he had heard it ... or what he thought was that. They made a slow half-circle through the hills behind the cabin. There was a good deal of wood lying around among the cedars, deadfalls, or lightning-struck or fallen limbs. For a season at least they would have no worries about fuel. She also saw several good-sized logs lying about. If we could only get them up to the cabin, she said. We could snake 'em up, Laban said. Hitch to 'em with a chain or a rope and haul them right up. We could use ol Black. He's steady. By sundown Jacob Teale was twenty miles east and turning up a draw to find a place to camp for the night. A small arroyo lay just over the crest, he recalled, and beyond it was a thick clump of cedar. There was a hollow there among the rocks where water often collected. He turned up the bank of the draw, rode over the ridge and into the arroyo. His horse slid down the steep bank, and started up the opposite side. A hoof came down on a loose slab of rock which gave way, and the horse fell, struggling for a foothold, then rolled over. Jacob's boot caught in the stirrup and when the horse rolled the pommel came down hard on his chest. Something snapped inside. He felt no pain, no shock, only a kind of surprise. Death, he had imagined, was dramatic, and filled with pain; or one died in bed with friends around, slowly, of an illness. The horse struggled, lunged, tried to rise, and fell back. And this time there was pain ... a crushing, terrible, strangling pain. But he was free of the horse's weight, even though his foot was still trapped beneath it. Somehow he rolled to an elbow and looked down at himself. His shirt and coat were red with blood. He felt faint and sick. Then he looked at the horse. One leg was broken, an ugly compound fracture with the naked bone exposed. He felt for his gun, drew it slowly and carefully. Sorry, Ben, he said, and shot the horse in the head. It stiffened sharply, then lay still. A moment longer he remained on his elbow. He looked at the evening sky, where a star had appeared; he looked at the dusty arroyo, the bloody saddle. He could not live; even had there been a doctor, he knew that nothing could be done for him. The gun stayed in his hand, but it was not in him to use it. He lay back, feeling a tearing within his chest. He looked up at the sky and said, Evie ... Evie, what have I done to you? ... Laban ... Ruthie ... Lab ... He tried to

get up then. If he could drag himself back into the trail. If he could get back where somebody could find him. If he could ...He died then, and lay still, and the light wind of evening worried his hair, sifted a little dust into the creases of his clothing. He died alone, as men in the West so often died, died trying to accomplish something, to build something, to go somewhere. Sometimes the sand buried those mens bodies, sometimes the coyotes scattered their bones, leaving a few buttons, a sun-dried boot heel, a rusted pistol. Some of them were found and buried, but some dried up and turned to dust and the wind took the dust away. One of these was Jacob Teale. Chapter 2 When Jacob Teale had been gone three weeks the stage came by the Teale cabin. Ruthie saw it first. She was up on the slope gathering chips for kindling when she saw the dust far away up the valley. For a moment she stared, then, dropping the chips, she ran for the house, calling out, Ma! Ma! Somebody's coming! Evie put down her dishcloth and, drying her hands on her apron, she went to the door. Laban came running from the corral, where he was in the process of building a crude shelter of brush for the three horses and the milk cow they had brought from Missouri, led behind the wagon. Shading their eyes, they saw the stage coming, galloping horses obscured by the accompanying cloud of dust, and then suddenly the racing teams swung from the trail and came up the road into the yard. Presentation de l'diteur As far as the eye could see was a vast, empty horizon. Evie Teale had finally accepted that her husband wouldnt be coming home. Now she and the children were alone in an untamed country where the elements, Indians, and thieves made it far easier to die than to live. Miles away, another solitary soul battled for survival. Conagher was a lean, dark-eyed drifter who wasnt about to let a gang of rustlers push him around. While searching the isolated canyons for missing cattle, he found notes tied to tumbleweeds rolling with the wind. The bleak, spare words echoed Conaghers own whispered prayers for companionship. Who was this mysterious woman on the other side of the wind? For Conagher, staying alive long enough to find her wasnt going to be easy.