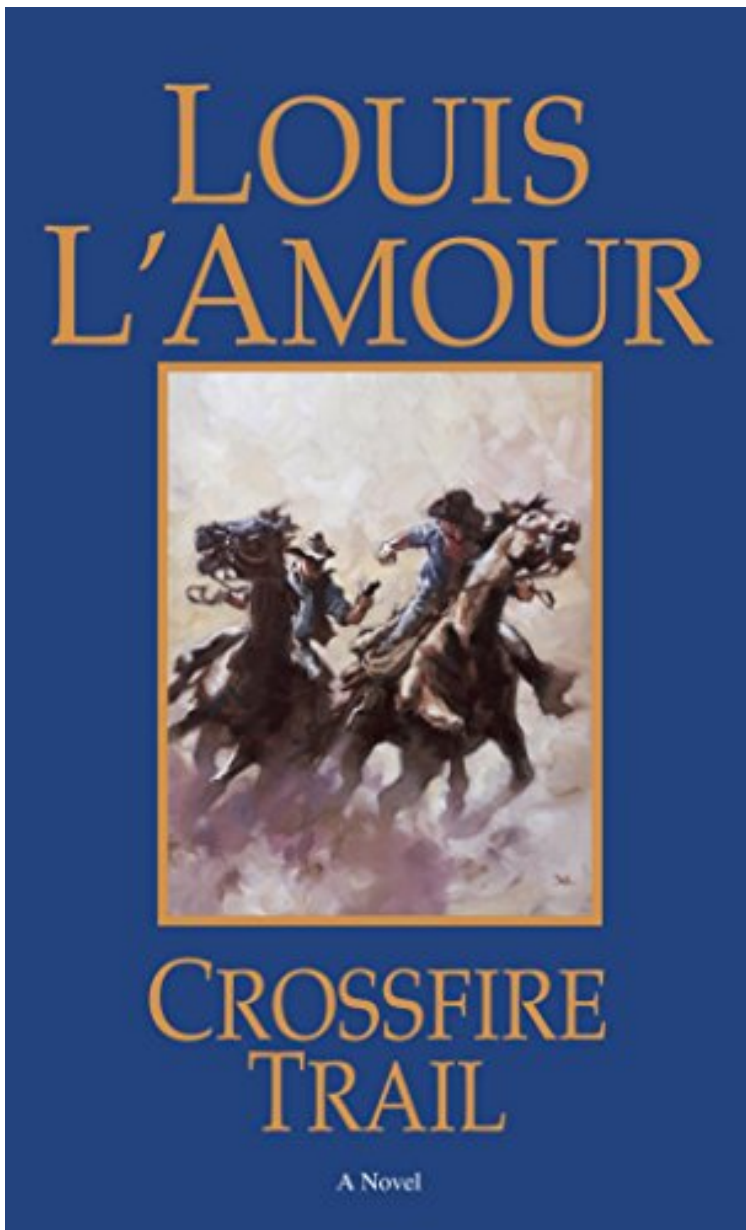


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Crossfire Trail



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurRafe Caradecgambler, wanderer, soldier of fortunewas as hard a man as the battlefields and waterfronts of Latin America could fashion, but he was as good as his word. As Charles Rodney lay dying in a dank ships focsle, Rafe swore to make sure that Rodney's Wyoming ranch went to his daughter, Ann. In Painted Rock, Wyoming, Caradec found land for a man to love, miles of rolling grasslands and towering mountains. He also found that one of the most ruthless men in the territory had set his sights on both Rodney's ranch and his daughter. But Rafe Caradec had given his word, and once hed looked deep into

Ann Rodney's eyes, nothing short of death would stop him from keeping the promise he had made. Chapter One In the dank, odorous fo'c'sle a big man with wide shoulders sat at a scarred mess table, his feet spread to brace himself against the roll of the ship. A brass hurricane lantern, its light turned low, swung from a beam overhead, and in the vague light the big man studied a worn and sweat-stained chart. There was no sound in the fo'c'sle but the distant rustle of the bow wash about the hull, the lazy creak of the square rigger's timbers, a few snores from sleeping men, and the hoarse, rasping breath of a man who was dying in the lower bunk. The big man who bent over the chart wore a slipover jersey with alternate red and white stripes, a broad leather belt with a brass buckle, and coarse jeans. On his feet were woven leather sandals of soft, much-oiled leather. His hair was shaggy and uncut, but he was clean shaven except for a mustache and burn-sides. The chart he studied showed the coast of northern California. He marked a point on it with the tip of his knife, then checked the time with a heavy gold watch. After a swift calculation, he folded the chart and replaced it in an oilskin packet with other papers and tucked the packet under his jersey, above his belt. Rising, he stood for an instant, canting to the roll of the ship, staring down at the white-haired man in the lower bunk. There was something about the big man that would make him stand out in any crowd. He was a man born to command, not only because of his splendid physique and the strength of his character, but because of his personality. He knelt beside the bunk and touched the dying man's wrist. The pulse was feeble. Rafe Caradec crouched there, waiting, watching, thinking. In a few hours at most, possibly even in a few minutes, this man would die. In the long year at sea his health had broken down under forced labor and constant beatings, and this last one had broken him up internally. When Charles Rodney was dead he, Rafe Caradec, would do what he must. The ship rolled slightly, and the older man sighed and his lids opened suddenly. For a moment he stared upward into the ill-smelling darkness, then his head turned. He saw the big man crouched beside him and he smiled. His hand fumbled for Rafe's. "You've got the papers? You won't forget?" "I won't forget." "You must be careful." "I know." "See my wife, Carol. Explain to her that I didn't run away, that I wasn't afraid. Tell her I had the money, and was comin' back. I'm worried about the mortgage I paid. I don't trust Barkow." The man lay silent, breathing deeply, hoarsely. For the first time in three days he was conscious and aware. "Take care of 'em, Rafe," he said. "I've got to trust you! You're the only chance I have! Dyin' ain't bad except for them. And to think a whole year has gone by. Anything may have happened!" "You'd better rest," Rafe said gently. "It's late for that. He's done me in this time. Why did this happen to me, Rafe? To us?" Caradec shrugged his powerful shoulders. "I don't know. No reason, I guess. We were just there at the wrong time. We took a drink we shouldn't have taken." The old man's voice lowered. "You're goin' to try tonight?" Rafe smiled then. "Try? Tonight we're goin' ashore, Rodney. This is our only chance. I'm goin' to see the captain first." Rodney smiled and lay back, his face a shade whiter, his breathing more gentle. A year they had been together, a brutal, ugly, awful year of labor, blood, and bitterness. It had begun, that year, one night in San Francisco in Hongkong Bohl's place on the Barbary Coast. Rafe Caradec was just back from Central America with a pocket full of money, his latest revolution cleaned up, the proceeds in his pocket, and some of it in the bank. The months just past had been jungle months, dripping jungle, fever-ridden and stifling with heat and humidity. It had been a period of raids and battles, but finally it was over, and Rafe had taken his payment in cash and moved on. He had been on the town, making up for lost time. Rafe Caradec, gambler, soldier of fortune, wanderer of the far places. Somewhere along the route that night he had met Charles Rodney, a sun-browned cattleman who had come to Frisco to raise money for his ranch in Wyoming. They had had a couple of drinks and dropped in at Hongkong Bohl's dive. They'd had a drink there, too, and when they awakened it had been to the slow, long roll of the sea, and the brutal voice of Bully Borger, skipper of the Mary S. Rafe had cursed himself for a tenderfoot and a fool. To have been shanghaied like any drunken farmer! He had shrugged it off, knowing the uselessness of resistance. After all, it was not his first trip to sea. Rodney had been wild. He had rushed to the captain and demanded to be put ashore, and Bully Borger had knocked him down and booted him senseless while the mate stood by with a pistol. That had happened twice more until Rodney returned to work almost a cripple, and frantic with worry over his wife and daughter. As always, the crew had split into cliques. One of these consisted of Rafe, Rodney, Roy Penn, "Rock" Mullaney and "Tex" Brisco. Penn had been a law student and occasional prospector. Mullaney was an able-bodied seaman, hardrock miner, and cowhand. They had been shanghaied in Frisco in the same lot with Rafe and Rodney. Tex Brisco was a Texas cowhand who had been shanghaied from a waterfront dive in Galveston where he had gone to look at the sea. Finding a friend in Rafe, Rodney had told him the whole story of his coming to Wyoming with his wife and daughter. Of what drought and Indians had done to his herd, and how finally he had mortgaged his

ranch to a man named Barkow. Rustlers had invaded the country and he had lost cattle. Finally reaching the end of his rope, he had gone to San Francisco. Surprisingly, he had met Barkow and some others and paid off the mortgage. A few hours later, wandering into Hongkong Bohl's place which had been recommended to him by Barkow's friends, he had been doped, robbed, and shanghaied. When the ship returned to Frisco after a year Rodney had demanded to be put ashore, and Borger had laughed at him. Then Charles Rodney had tackled the big man again, and that time the beating had been final. With Rodney dying, the Mary S had finished her loading and slipped out of port so he could be conveniently "lost at sea." The cattleman's breathing had grown gentler, and Rafe leaned his head on the edge of the bunk, dozing. Rodney had given him a deed to the ranch, a deed that gave him a half share, the other half belonging to Rodney's wife and daughter. Caradec had promised to save the ranch if he possibly could. Rodney had also given him Barkow's signed receipt for the money. Rafe's head came up with a jerk. How long he had slept he did not know, yet he stiffened as he glanced at Charles Rodney. The hoarse, rasping breath was gone, the even, gentle breath was no more. Rodney was dead. For an instant, Rafe held the old man's wrist, then drew the blanket over Rodney's face. Abruptly then, he got up. A quick glance at his watch told him they had only a few minutes until they would sight Cape Mendocino. Grabbing a small bag of things off the upper bunk, he turned quickly to the companionway. Two big feet and two hairy ankles were visible on the top step. They moved, and step by step a man came down the ladder. He was a big man, bigger than Rafe, and his small, cruel eyes stared at him, then at Rodney's bunk. "Dead?" "Yes." The big man rubbed a fist along his unshaven jaw. He grinned at Rafe. "I heard him speak about the ranch. It could be a nice thing, that. I heard about them ranches. Money in 'em." His eyes brightened with cupidity and cunning. "We share an' share alike, eh?" "No." Caradec's voice was flat. "The deed is made out to his daughter and me. His wife is to share, also. I aim to keep nothin' for myself." The big man chuckled hoarsely. "I can see that!" he said. "Josh Briggs is no fool, Caradec! You're intendin' to get it all for yourself. I want mine!" He leaned on the handrail of the ladder. "We can have a nice thing, Caradec. They said there was trouble over there? Huh! I guess we can handle any trouble, an' make some ourselves." "The Rodneys get it all," Rafe said. "Stand aside. I'm in a hurry." Briggs' face was ugly. "Don't get high an' mighty with me!" he said roughly. "Unless you split even with me, you don't get away. I know about the boat you've got ready. I can stop you there, or here." Rafe Caradec knew the futility of words. There are some natures to whom only violence is an argument. His left hand shot up suddenly, his stiffened fingers and thumb making a V that caught Briggs where his jawbone joined his throat. The blow was short, vicious, unexpected. Briggs' head jerked back and Rafe hooked short and hard with his right, then followed through with a smashing elbow that flattened Briggs' nose and showered him with blood. Rafe dropped his bag, then struck left and right to the body, then left and right to the chin. The last two blows cracked like pistol shots. Josh Briggs hit the foot of the ladder in a heap, rolled over and lay still, his head partly under the table. Rafe picked up his bag and went up the ladder without so much as a backward glance. On the dark deck Rafe Caradec moved aft along the starboard side. A shadow moved out from the mainmast. "You ready?" "Ready, Rock." Two more men got up from the darkness near the foot of the mast and all four hauled the boat from its place and got it to the side. "This is the right place?" Penn asked. "Almost." Caradec straightened. "Get her ready. I'm going to call on the Old Man." In the darkness he could feel their eyes on him. "You think that's wise?" "No, but he killed Rodney. I've got to see him." "You goin' to kill Borger?" It was like them that they did not doubt he could if he wished. Somehow he had always impressed men so, that what he wanted to accomplish, he would accomplish. "No, just a good beatin'. He's had it comin' for a long time." Mullaney spat. He was a stocky, muscular man. "You cussed right he has! I'd like to help." "No, there'll be no help for either of us. Stand by and watch for the mate." Penn chuckled. "He's tied up aft, by the wheel." Rafe Caradec turned and walked forward. His soft leather sandals made no noise on the hardwood deck, nor on the companionway as he descended. He moved like a shadow along the bulkhead, and saw the door of the captain's cabin standing open. He was inside and had taken two steps before the captain looked up. Bully Borger was big, almost a giant. He had a red beard around his jawbone under his chin. He squinted from cold, gray eyes at Rafe. "What's wrong?" he demanded. "Trouble on deck?" "No, Captain," Rafe said shortly, "there's trouble here. I've come to beat you within an inch of your life, Captain. Charles Rodney is dead. You ruined his life, Captain, and then you killed him." Borger was on his feet, catlike. Somehow he had always known this moment would come. A dozen times he had told himself he should kill Caradec, but the man was a seaman, a first-class, able-bodied seaman, and in the lot of shanghaied crews there were few. So he had delayed. He lunged at the drawer for his brass knuckles. Rafe had been waiting for that, poised on the balls of his feet. His left hand dropped to the captain's wrist and his

right hand sank to the wrist in the captain's middle. It stopped Borger, that punch did. Stopped him flat-footed for only an instant, but that instant was enough. Rafe's head darted forward, butting the bigger man in the face, and Rafe felt the bones crunch under his hard skull. Yet the agony gave Borger a burst of strength, and he tore the hand with the knuckles loose and got his fingers through their holes. He lunged, swinging a roundhouse blow that would have dropped a bull elephant. Rafe went under the swing, his movements timed perfectly, his actions almost negligent. He smashed left and right to the middle, and the punches drove wind from Borger's stomach and he doubled up, gasping. Rafe dropped a palm to the back of the man's head and shoved down, hard. At the same instant, his knee came up, smashing Borger's face into a gory pulp. Bully

Borger, the dirtiest fighter on many a waterfront, staggered back, moaning with pain. His face expressionless, Rafe Caradec stepped in and threw punches with both hands, driving, wicked punches that had the power of those broad shoulders behind them, and timed with the rolling of the ship. Left, right, left, right, blows that cut and chopped like meat cleavers. Borger tottered and fell back across the settee. Rafe wheeled to see Penn's blond head in the doorway. Roy Penn stared at the bloody hulk, then at Rafe. "Better come on. The Cape's showing off the starb'rd bow." When they had the boat in the water they slid down the rope one after the other, then Rafe slashed it with his belt knife, and the boat dropped back. The black bulk of the ship swept by them. Her stern lifted, then sank and Rafe, at the tiller, turned the bow of the boat toward the monstrous blackness of the Cape. Mullaney and Penn got the sail up when the mast was stepped, then Penn looked around at Rafe. "That was mutiny, you know." "It was," Rafe said calmly. "I didn't ask to go aboard, and knockout drops in a Barbary Coast dive ain't my way of askin' for a year's job!" "A year?" Penn swore. "Two years and more, for me. For Tex, too." "You know this coast?" Mullaney asked. Rafe nodded. "Not well, but there's a place just north of the Cape where we can run in. To the south the sunken ledges and rocks might tear our bottom out, but I think we can make this other place." The mountainous headland loomed black against the gray-turning sky of the hours before daybreak. The seaward face of the Cape was rocky and waterworn along the shoreline. Rafe, studying the currents and the rocks, brought the boat neatly in among them and headed for a boulder-strewn gray beach where water curled and left a white ruffle of surf. Presentation de l'diteur Rafe Caradec gambler, wanderer, soldier of fortune was as hard a man as the battlefields and waterfronts of Latin America could fashion, but he was as good as his word. As Charles Rodney lay dying in a dank ship's focsle, Rafe swore to make sure that Rodney's Wyoming ranch went to his daughter, Ann. In Painted Rock, Wyoming, Caradec found land for a man to love, miles of rolling grasslands and towering mountains. He also found that one of the most ruthless men in the territory had set his sights on both Rodney's ranch and his daughter. But Rafe Caradec had given his word, and once he'd looked deep into Ann Rodney's eyes, nothing short of death would stop him from keeping the promise he'd made.