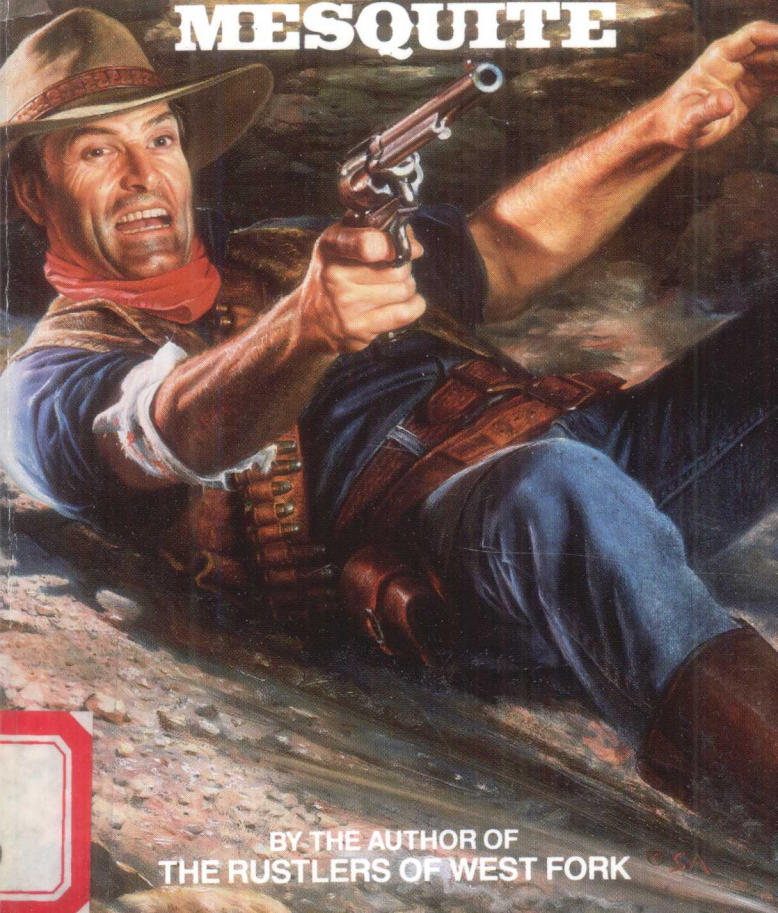


THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

LOUIS L'AMOUR

A COLLECTION OF FRONTIER STORIES

THE OUTLAWS OF MESQUITE



BY THE AUTHOR OF
THE RUSTLERS OF WEST FORK

THE OUTLAWS OF MESQUITE

Frontier Stories by
Louis L'Amour



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Editor's Note

The Author's Notes preceding each of the stories you are about to read are adapted from recording sessions conducted with Louis L'Amour for his Introductions to the audio dramatizations of his short stories, available from Bantam Audio Publishing on cassette tapes.

THE OUTLAWS OF MESQUITE

A Bantam Book

Bantam hardcover edition / June 1990

Bantam paperback edition / June 1991

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 89-18254.

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For information address: Bantam Books.

ISBN 0-553-28714-1

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

OPM 28 27 26 25 24

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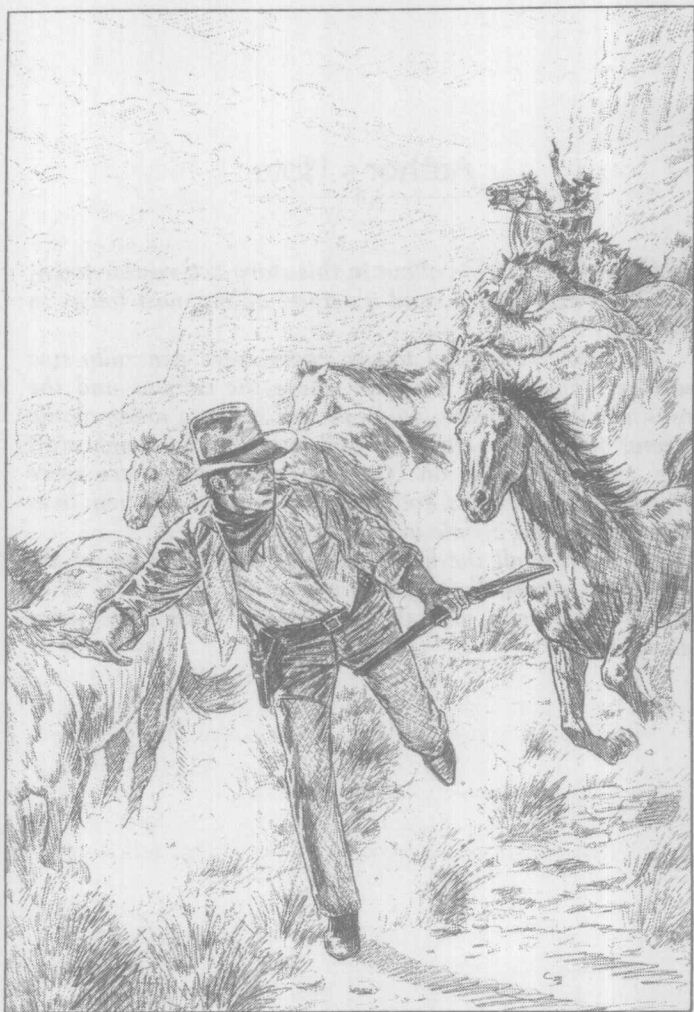
The Outlaws of Mesquite

Author's Note

The Mesquite I wrote about in this story is a rustler town, a holdup man's town, and it's quite unlike most towns in the West.

In more traditional towns, there were generally two sections. There was the part where the saloons and the red-light district were, what we still refer to today as the wrong side of the tracks, where most of the rough stuff like gunfights went on. On the other side there were churches and schools and citizens carrying on their lives the way normal people would.

Sometimes all the law-abiding people knew about the gunfights across the way was the sound of gunfire. They didn't know who was shooting whom until they heard about it later.



Milt Cogar was at the corral catching the paint when Thacker walked down from the store. "You'd better get out of this town, boy. They are fixin' to make trouble for you."

Milt turned around and looked at the big, clumsy man, his shirt stuffed into his trousers and held there by a rope belt. Thacker never seemed to have a full beard and always seemed to need a shave. His watery blue eyes looked vague. He rolled his quid in his jaws and spat.

"It's what I'm tellin' you, son. You done me a favor or two."

"Why should they be after me?" Cogar demanded. He was a lean young man with a dark, leatherlike face. His eyes were almost black, and keen.

"Spencer wants your horses. You know that. He sets a sight of store by good horseflesh, and he's had a thorn in his side ever since you rode into the valley. Anyway, you're a stranger, and this country don't cotton to strangers."

Milt Cogar hitched his gun belts and stared at Thacker. "Thanks. I'll not forget it. But betwixt the two of us, this country has reason to be afraid of strangers."

Thacker's eyes shifted uneasily. "Don't you be sayin' that aloud. Not around here. And don't you tell nobody what I said."

Thacker drifted off down toward his shack, and Milt Cogar stood there, uncertainly. He was not ready to drift, nor did he like being pushed, but he had sensed the undercurrent of feeling against him.

Mesquite was a rustler town. It was a holdup man's town, and he was a wild horse wrangler and a drifter. He threw the saddle on the paint and cinched it down. All the while he was thinking of Jennie Lewis, for she was the reason he had stayed on at Mesquite.

Milt Cogar was no trouble-hunting man. He knew that of himself and he told that to himself once more. In nearly thirty years of drifting, he had kept clear of most of the trouble that came his way. Not that he hadn't had his share, for times came when a man couldn't dodge fights. This could be that kind of time.

Dan Spencer was ramrodding the town. He was the big wheel. Milt had seen the big man's eyes trailing him down the dusty corner of road that did duty as Mesquite's main street. There were only four buildings on that street, and a dozen houses. Jennie lived in the house back under the cottonwoods with Joe and Mom Peters.

Spencer wasn't only big and rough. He was slick. He was slicker than blue mud on a side hill, only he didn't look it. Milt was a top hand at reading sign, and he could read the tracks years left across a man's face. He knew what manner of a man Dan Spencer was, and what to expect from the others, from Record and Martinez.

It was a mean little place, this valley. The scattering of ugly, unpainted frame buildings, the hillsides covered with scrub pine and juniper, the trail a dusty pathway through the pine and huge, flat-faced boulders. There was a waterhole, and it was that which had started the town. And somewhere back in the cliff and brush country there was a canyon where Spencer and his boys backed up their stolen cattle.

Thacker was right. He should throw a leg over his horse right now and light a shuck out of here. If he stayed, there would be trouble, and he was no gunfighter like Spencer or Record, nor a knife-in-the-belly killer like Martinez. He should light out of here right now, but there was Jennie Lewis.

Jennie was eighteen now, a slim, lovely girl with soft

gray eyes and ash-blond hair. She looked like the wind could blow her away but there was quick, bubbling laughter in her, and sometimes a look in her eyes that touched something away down inside of a man.

She was a casualty of the trail. Cholera had wiped out her family, and Joe Peters had found her, ten years old and frightened, and carried her home. Only now she was big enough and old enough for Spencer to see, and what Dan Spencer wanted, he took.

Nobody in town would stop Spencer. There were twenty-seven people in Mesquite, but those who weren't outlaws were shy, frightened people who made themselves obscure and came and went as silently as possible, fearful of speaking lest Dan Spencer lay eyes upon them.

That was how it had been until Milt Cogar rode into town with his catch of wild horses, sixteen head of them, and all fine stock, and most of them broke to ride. Milt was going on through, but he stopped by the waterhole with his horses, and while they drank he talked with Jennie.

"You've beautiful horses," she said wistfully. "I never saw anything so beautiful, not even the horses that Spencer has."

"They are nice." Cogar was a man unused to the sound of his voice, for he lived much alone. "That's one of the reasons why I catch them. I like working with horses."

She was standing near one of them, and the black put out a friendly nose, and she touched it. The horse did not shy.

"You would never guess they had ever been wild," she said wonderingly. "They are so gentle."

"Most horses are nice folks, ma'am," he said. "They like people. You teach one he doesn't have to be afraid, and right away he gets mighty curious and friendly. For the first few days you just keep them around, no sudden

movements, no violence. Just keep a firm hand on them, and feed them well.

"Horses when frightened can't think, not even so much as people, but once they know a man, they'll trust him to take them anywhere at all."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "You must be a kind man," she said gently. "Most men around here break their horses rough."

He flushed and looked away, feeling the slow red on his face and neck and hating himself for being self-conscious. "I don't know about that, ma'am."

Hurriedly, he tried to change the subject. "Your folks live here?"

A shadow touched her face. "No, they are dead, long ago. I live with Joe Peters over on the sidehill. He and Mom took me in when I was a child." Her eyes went to his. "You aren't staying here?"

"I was figuring on drifting through," he said, "down toward the canyon country. I got me a little place down there, and I figured to rest up for a while."

"It must be nice to go wherever you want," she said slowly, shifting the heavy wooden bucket in her hands. "This is an awful place!"

The sudden feeling in her voice shocked him. "Why don't you leave?"

"I can't. Dan Spencer wouldn't let me, not even if I found a way to get out."

"Spencer? What's he to you?" Milt Cogar pushed his black hat back on his head and looked at her, seeing the softness in her eyes, and the worry, too. Yet it was more than worry: it was fear.

"He runs Mesquite and everybody in it. He . . . wants me."

"Do you want him? You aim to marry him?"

She flushed anew. "I've not much to say about it here. If he wants me, there's nobody to stop him. As for the rest of it, he hasn't said anything about marrying."

Milt Cogar felt chill anger rising within him. "Who does this Spencer think he is?" he demanded. "Nobody can take a girl unless she wants to go! This country's free!"

"Not in Mesquite, it isn't! This is Dan Spencer's town, and nothing happens in it he don't like. You'd better keep him from seeing your horses, too. He'll want them."

"He'll trip himself up gettin' them!" Cogar said decisively. His eyes went to Jennie's face. "Ma'am, why don't you mount up and ride out of here? If you want to go, I'll see you get safe to the Ferry. Once across the river, you can head down toward Prescott or somewhere you'd be safe."

"Oh, if I only could—" Her voice died, and Milt looked up.

A burly, heavy-shouldered man with two guns was standing across the waterhole.

"If you could what?" the burly man asked. Then his eyes shifted to Milt, and from him to his horses, which he studied with a slow, appraising look, then back to Cogar. "Who are you?"

Milt looked at him with careful eyes. There was danger in this man, but he had faced danger before.

"I'm a man ridin' through," Milt said. "Who are you?"

Spencer stiffened. "Dan Spencer's the name, and I run this town."

Milt lifted his eyes insultingly toward the collection of miserable shacks. "Must keep you busy," he said.

"Not too busy but what I could teach you some manners!" Spencer's voice rang harshly. He walked around the waterhole, hands swinging at his sides. "Jennie, you go on home!"

Only an instant did the girl hesitate, apprehension for Cogar in her eyes. Then she began backing away.

Spencer stopped, a dozen feet from Milt, and dropped his hand to his gun butt—then the hand froze where it was, and Dan Spencer's eyes bulged. He was looking into

the muzzle of a .44 Winchester carbine. "Unbuckle your belt, and be careful!" Milt warned.

Dan Spencer's face was gray. Very slowly he moved his fingers to the belt and unbuckled it, letting the Colts fall. "Now take a step toward me," Cogar commanded.

The big man complied. Color was coming back into his face and with it the realization that Milt Cogar had shown him up in front of the girl. Yet there was little he could do. His guns were on the ground behind him now.

"Now, let me tell you something, Spencer." Cogar spoke quietly, but coldly. "You let me alone. I'm passin' through Mesquite. I may decide to stay over a couple of days, but don't let that give you any ideas, because if you get tough with me, I'll kill you! Now pull your freight."

When Spencer was gone, Milt stooped and shucked the shells from Spencer's guns, then from the belt, shoving the shells into his pocket—all but a few. He stood there by his horses and, taking out his knife, worked for a few minutes over those shells. Then he fed them back into the guns. When he was about to mount and ride on, he heard a low call from the brush. It was Jennie.

He mounted and rode over to where she waited, leaving his horses tied in groups of four.

"You'd better go quickly!" she warned. "He'll kill you! It isn't only him alone. He has other men. Two of them are John Record and Pablo Martinez. Both are killers and with him nearly all the time."

Cogar looked down at the girl. He was a tall, spare man with a quiet, desert man's face.

"This is no place for a girl. You want to leave?" he said.

Hope flashed into her eyes. "Oh, I'd love to! But I've nowhere to go, and even if I wanted to, Spencer wouldn't allow it. Mom has wanted Joe to smuggle me away, but he's afraid."

"Well, you get back to your house and get together whatever you want to take along, but not much of it. You fix us a mite of grub, too. Then you slip out of the house, come daybreak, and meet me by that white boulder I can

see just below town. I'll take you out of here, and see you get safe to help. You ain't afraid of me?"

Jennie looked at him quickly. "No, I guess not. You look like an honest man. Also I'm remembering you treat your horses kind. I trust you. Anyway," she added, "there's nobody else."

He grinned. "That makes it simple. You be there, now. We may have to ride fast."

When Milt Cogar had his horses bedded down on the edge of Mesquite, he studied the place warily. There was a saloon, a general store, a blacksmith shop, and an eating house. Leaving his carbine concealed near a clump of mesquite, he hitched his guns to an easier position and headed up the street. A heavy-bodied man with a stubble of beard showed on the saloon stoop. Milt avoided the place, rightly guessing it would be Spencer's hangout, and walked to the restaurant and went in.

A fat man with freckles and a fringe of sandy hair around a bald spot was cooking over an iron range. He glanced up.

"Fix me some grub," Milt suggested. "I'm sure hungry."

Red nodded briefly and, grabbing a big plate, ladled out a thick chunk of beef, a couple of scoops of beans, and some potatoes. Then he poured a cup of coffee from a battered coffeepot and picked up some sourdough bread.

Cogar ate in silence for a while, then glanced up. "You one of Dan Spencer's outfit?"

Red stiffened. "I run my own shebang. If Spencer wants to eat, I feed him. That's all I have to do with him."

"I heard this was his town."

"It is. All but me." The door pushed open as he spoke, and Thacker came in. He sat down heavily on a chair across the table from Milt Cogar.

"Nice horses you got," he said tentatively.

Milt glanced up, taking in Thacker with a glance. "They'll do," he agreed.

"Don't need a hand, do you? Sixteen horses are a bunch for one man."

"My horses are gentle. I can handle them."

Thacker's face flushed a slow red, and he glanced toward the sandy-haired cook. He said softly:

"I could use a mite of work now. I'm sort of short."

Milt Cogar could sense the big man's embarrassment and it stirred his quick generosity. "Might lend you a bit," he suggested, keeping his own voice low. "Would ten dollars help?"

Thacker's face glowed red, but there was surprise and gratitude in his eyes. "I ain't no hand to borry," he said, "and you ridin' through like you are." He spoke hesitantly. "I reckon I hadn't better."

Cogar pushed a gold piece across the table. "Take it, man, and welcome. I've been staked a couple of times with no chance to pay back, so forget about paying me. When you have it, stake some other hombre."

When Thacker had gone, Red turned around. "Heard that," he said, then jerked his head toward the way Thacker had gone. "He ain't much good, either, but he's got him a boy he fair worships. He'll buy grub for that kid with the money, you can bank on it."

It was later, by the corral, that Thacker had come to Cogar with his warning. It was unnecessary, for Milt knew what he was facing. He also knew he was going to ride out of that town with Jennie Lewis or there would be blood on the streets. Yet he was no fighting man unless pushed. He wanted to get her away without trouble, yet when he faced the facts, he knew that Spencer grated on his nerves, that the thought of the man ruling the helpless people of the town angered him.

Carefully, he looked over his horses, checking to see if any had injured feet, and stopping to talk and pet each one of them. They were fine stock, and would sell well, yet he never gentled a bunch like this without hating to part with them.

Up the street he could see lights going on in the saloon. He felt better with the meal under his belt, and he inspected his gun again. Spencer, Record, and Martinez,

and half the town at least in cahoots with them. Nor could he expect any help. It was his game.

Milt backed up against a corral post and faced the town. He could watch from here. The horses liked to see him close. He dozed a little, knowing trouble would come later, if at all. For a while they would wait for him at the saloon, and that was a place he had no intention of going.

Darkness crawled over the hills and pushed patrols of shadow between the buildings and along the edge of the woods. More lights came on. Behind him a horse stamped and blew, and somewhere out on the desert, a blue quail called softly, inquiringly.

It was very quiet. A tin bucket rattled somewhere, and he could smell the oil on his guns. Once he got up and walked among his horses, talking softly to them. His eyes shifted toward the light in the cabin where Jennie lived.

It seemed strange, having a woman to think about. He was a lonely man, and like so many lonely men he knew how to value love, attention, and the nearness of someone. He remembered the dusty spun gold of her hair, and the slim figure under the faded dress. There was something fine about her, something that spoke of another world than the world of Mesquite, Dan Spencer, and his followers.

He grinned ruefully. After all, she was not his to think about. He had only offered to help her, and once she was safely away—well, who was he to expect interest from such a girl as that?

A door opened and closed, and he glanced toward the saloon, making out a dark figure on the porch. The pale blotch above it was the man's face, looking toward him. Yet the watcher could not see Milt, for the blackness of his body would merge with the blackness of the corral corner.

They were beginning to wonder if he was coming, and when. He sat perfectly still, keeping his ears ready for the slightest sound. He did not look directly at the figure, but near it, and he did not allow his gaze to become fixed. He must be wary and ready always.