



Flint: A Novel

By Louis L'Amour

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He left the West at the age of seventeen, leaving behind a rootless past and a bloody trail of violence. In the East he became one of the wealthiest financiers in America—and one of the most feared and hated.

Now, suffering from incurable cancer, he has come back to New Mexico to die alone. But when an all-out range war erupts, Flint chooses to help Nancy Kerrigan, a local rancher. A cold-eyed speculator is setting up the land swindle of a lifetime, and Buckdun, a notorious assassin, is there to back his play.

Flint alone can help Nancy save her ranch...with his cash, his connections—and his gun. He still has his legendary will to fight. All he needs is time, and that's fast running out....

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Editorial Review

From the Publisher

He came out of Malpais, the terrible volcanic badlands where nothing can live, riding a giant red stallion no other man could put a hand to. His boots were polished, his speech was gentle, but his guns were quick and smooth as silk. He shot first and talked later.

About the Author

Our foremost storyteller of the American West, **Louis L'Amour** has thrilled a nation by chronicling the adventures of the brave men and women who settled the frontier. There are more than 300 million copies of his books in print around the world.

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Chapter One

It is given to few people in this world to disappear twice but, as he had succeeded once, the man known as James T. Kettleman was about to make his second attempt.

If he did not succeed this time he would never know it, for he would be dead.

When a man has but a few months to live, he can, if he so wills, choose the manner of his going, and Kettleman had made such a choice. He was now on his way to a place of which he alone knew, and there he would die. He would die as he had lived—alone.

It was ironic that he who hated the West should return there to die, but like a wild animal which knows when death is upon it, he was seeking a dark and lonely place where he could die in peace, and in his own way.

At this moment no man in the railroad car looked stronger, more alive, more resolute, yet the seed of death was in him and the plant had but a little while to grow.

There were five people in the car. The lights were dim, the passengers lay sprawled in uncomfortable sleep. The train rushed westward through the cold, clear night, carrying the man steadily toward his final destination.

A very pretty young woman, who had got on at Santa Fe, sat a few seats ahead of him and across the aisle. Farther front, three men were seated, each traveling alone. Occasionally the conductor entered, accompanied by a blast of cold air. Several times he added fuel to the cast-iron stove.

People interested Kettleman only as prospective antagonists, and of the men in the car only one seemed likely to fit that category. He was a straw-haired man with a lean and dangerous look, like a wolf among sheep.

The girl was tall, gracefully slender, and her brown eyes had a way of looking directly at a man that was frank without boldness. Kettleman decided she was a girl who had been much around men, that she was used to them and liked them. Her name was Nancy Kerrigan. He overheard it when she was giving directions for packages to be placed in the baggage car.

The country outside was invisible. The windows had steamed over, and the train moved as if through an endless tunnel. To Kettleman it did not matter, for he knew every foot of this roadbed and the surrounding country from descriptions which had come to his desk in New York.

The high plain was broken at intervals with long ridges and outcroppings of lava, and in the mountains there was marketable timber. When he began planning his second disappearance, Kettleman had gone over all available reports and maps.

They were climbing steadily. Ahead were high mesas, more lava, and occasional ruins. Soon the train would slow for a long, steep grade. When that time came he would step off the train into the darkness.

His destination was familiar only from a description given him fifteen years ago, over a campfire, by a man who had often used the place for a hideout. When he left the train he would return to the oblivion from which he had emerged fifteen years earlier.

Then James T. Kettleman would cease to exist—although actually he had ceased to exist a few days ago, in Virginia. For the few weeks that remained to him he would be nameless once more.

To disappear the first time had been relatively easy for the lanky, seventeen-year-old youngster he was then.

No one noticed him when he came into the saloon at The Crossing that night with Flint. It was not until the brief silence that followed the blasting of guns that their attention was drawn to him by the cocking of his gun.

The men who killed Flint had scarcely seen the boy until that moment, but, within the space of five seconds, five of them were shot dead and two were dying. Two more were wounded, but would live to carry the memory of that shocking five seconds to their graves.

And in the darkness after the lights had been shot out, the boy had carried Flint from the room. There was a doctor at an Army post twenty miles away, but they were never to make it.

Legend was born that night in Kansas, and the story of the massacre at The Crossing was told and retold over many a campfire. Neither the man at the card table nor the youngster who carried him away was known, and both vanished as if the earth had opened to receive them.

The events preceding the shooting provided only the information that two roughly dressed men had come in out of the night, and one bought chips in a poker game while the other dozed near the door.

This was the youngster who, upon that night, was to shoot himself into Western history.

The man at the table played a shrewd, intelligent game, and at the end of two hours he was winner by a small amount. The first indications of trouble came from the bar where a group of Texas trail drivers were drinking.

The trail drivers had noticed the stranger playing cards and, after some whispering among them, they had drifted over to gather around the table. Suddenly two of the trail hands grabbed the stranger's arms, and one of the others said, "This man is a hired killer." Then four of the trail drivers fired into his body.

In the instant of silence that followed the shooting they heard the click of a drawn-back gun hammer, and

every head turned. "He was my friend," the youngster said, and he started shooting. Of the five killed in the first blast, four died from head shots, all fired in the split seconds before somebody shot out the lights. Of the two survivors, neither would talk, but one of the dying men had whispered, "Flint!" It was rumored that Flint was the name of an almost legendary killer who was occasionally hired by big cattle outfits or railroad companies.

The train whistled, the lonely sound trailing off across the wind-swept plains. Kettleman got out his pipe and lighted it. His two bags and haversack were at the back of the car. When he opened that door there would be a moment when the cold air might awaken the others, but he would be gone.

Up to a point he had planned every move, but once arrived at Flint's old hideout there would be nothing to do but wait. Some time ago his doctor told him he would not live a year, and most of that year had passed.

He sat in what was called a parlor car, because of its elaborate lamp fixtures and narrow strips of mirror between the windows. In one of these he glimpsed himself.

His face was lean and hard, triangular, with high cheekbones, green eyes, and a strong jaw. His sideburns were long in the fashion of the time, his hair dark brown and curly. In the light it showed a tinge of red. His skin was dark, his features, except for his eyes, normally without expression.

James T. Kettleman, financier and speculator, had often been called a handsome man. He had never been called a friendly one.

In the fifteen years since leaving Kansas he had not been west of the Appalachians until now.

There had been more than fifteen hundred dollars in Flint's pockets when he died on that rain-soaked Kansas hillside, following the shooting at The Crossing. The boy who was to become James T. Kettleman had sixty dollars of his own, which he used to buy an outfit of store clothes in Kansas City.

He traveled to New York and sold his four horses for an additional four hundred dollars. With this stake he started in business. It was more money than either Jay Gould or Russell Sage had started with.

The name Kettleman was a switch on "cattleman," a name invented for him by Flint when the boy entered school. He had never had a name of his own.

The train whistled and he got to his feet and stretched, the movement drawing the attention of the young woman. "It is some distance to Alamitos," she told him.

When he smiled his face lighted up. "It isn't the stations one has to worry about," he said, "it's the side tracks."

He caught her puzzled glance, and smiled again, strolling to the back of the car where he rubbed the steam from the window and looked out, seeing the scattered stars, and grass bending before the wind. On the edge of the embankment there was snow.

Nancy Kerrigan was disturbed by the comment, yet she thought of its truth. So many people became sidetracked and missed the things that were worthwhile. Maybe she herself was one of them. She glanced at the man again. He did not look like a Western man, yet he did. He was a striking man, but he looked lean and savage.

James T. Kettleman returned to his seat and sat down. Another ten minutes . . .

In the fifteen years following that night at The Crossing he had built his small stake to many millions, making many enemies and no friends in the process. He married a wife who tried to have him killed, and had no children.

Now he was stepping out of that life as he had stepped into it, leaving nothing behind that mattered. Nor would he take anything with him, not even a memory that he cared to keep.

Thirty years earlier, when he was two years old, he had been picked from the brush near a burned wagon train, where he had been overlooked by raiding Comanche's. There were no other survivors. Nothing remained to tell who he was, and those who found him had no interest in learning. During the next four years he was handed around from family to family and finally abandoned on a cold night in a one-street Western town.

Kettleman walked to the rear of the car again, glancing back at the occupants. All were asleep, or apparently asleep. The train was slowing for the long climb. Lifting his bags through the rear door he closed it carefully behind him. The stars blinked coldly from an almost clear sky, the train whistled, the wind blew long across the high grass plains.

He threw his bags to the roadbed and put a leg over the rail, hesitating one brief instant to look back into the dimly lighted car. This was the end of everything and the beginning of nothing. He put the other leg over the rail and dropped to the roadbed.

He stood watching the red lights on the back of the train, which moved away, scarcely faster than a man could walk, until it rounded a curve and left no more than a humming of the rails to tell of its passing, and the long whistle of the locomotive echoing down the night sky.

The dry grass bent before the wind, and seed pods rattled in the brush along the right of way.

James T. Kettleman was ended, and the man who had borne that name, making it feared and respected, stood now where he had stood so many years before, without a name. He was now a man without a past as he had been a boy without one.

"Good-bye," he said, but there was nobody to say the word to, and nothing to remember.

Slinging the haversack over his shoulders, he retrieved the two bags and, climbing from the shallow cut where the track ran, he started off across the plain toward a high, comblike ridge, crested with trees.

A sharp pain struck him suddenly and he stopped abruptly, bending far over and retching violently.

He dropped to his knees, caught by a sudden weakness, and remained there, frightened at the agony. He had never known physical pain—although often hunger—and anything that robbed him of strength left him shaken, for his strength was all he had. Now, here at the end, he needed it desperately.

Later there would be more pain, but in the last days, his doctor had said, there would be less of it.

Among the pines he searched for and found a hollow protected from the wind. He broke twigs from the lower trunks of the trees and built a small fire. He found a deadfall which he dragged nearer to use for a wind-break. With a razor-sharp bowie knife, he cut limbs to hold the fire. He took a kettle from his gear and put on water for coffee. He changed into jeans, a wool shirt, and a sheepskin coat. He put on flat-heeled hiking boots and got out his two pistols, one of which he belted on.

The pistols were Smith & Wesson .44 Russians, and the best gun built. He thrust the second gun into his waistband. Out of the longer case he took a high-powered custom-made rifle and assembled it, then a shotgun.

He made a bed on pine boughs, spreading a thin ground sheet and blankets atop the boughs. He loaded the remaining clothing, food, and ammunition into the big haversack. With his gear packed, the load weighed over eighty pounds.

Then he warmed some soup and drank it, and the gnawing pain in his stomach subsided a little. He carried the two bags into the woods and buried them under some thick brush.

A

searching wind prowled the forest, far off a faint call sounded, and a shot. He listened, but the sound faded.

From a few yards off in the brush his fire was not visible, and he was pleased. He gathered more fuel, removed his boots, and crawled into his bed.

Every move of his disappearance had been carefully prepared. Fortunately he had dealt largely in cash and always kept large quantities of it available. Quietly he had transferred some funds, shifted stock from one company to another, and made arrangements to cover every need in case he should live longer than expected.

On a trip to his Virginia farm he had consulted an attorney in Baltimore, a former Supreme Court judge. Drawing up a will, he followed it with a carefully prepared document for the management of his affairs.

"I shall go away," he explained, "as I have learned I have but a short time to live. If, after seven years, I have not returned I will naturally be declared legally dead and my affairs can be settled."

"And if you die before that length of time?"

"I want nothing done until after seven years. As you will see, I have provided for my wife."

"For a man of your means," the judge suggested, "it is very little."

"This I have not mentioned to anyone, nor do I want it mentioned, but last week in Saratoga my wife tried to have me killed—my wife and her father. You will find the reports from the Pinkerton Agency and my own statement among the papers in my safe-deposit box."

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From reader reviews:

John Dinwiddie:

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