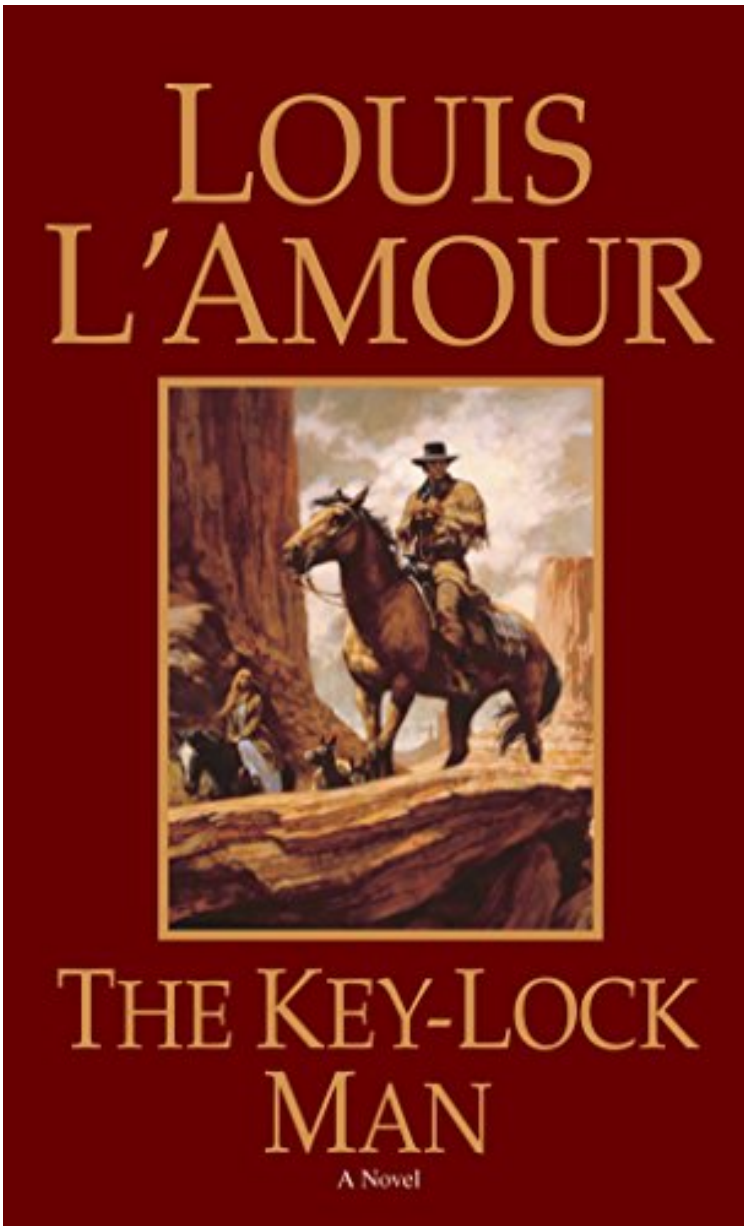


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# The Key-Lock Man



*Par Louis L'Amour*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurHe had led the posse for miles through the desert, but now Matt Keelock was growing desperate. He was worried about Kristina. His trip to the town of Freedom for supplies had ended in a shootout. If caught he would hang. Even though Kris could handle a horse and rifle as well as most men, the possibility of Oskar Neerlands finding her made Matts blood run cold. He knew the violent and obsessive Neerland, publicly embarrassed when Matt had stepped in and stolen Kris away, would try to kill them both if given half a chance. Matt tried to convince himself that Neerland had returned to the East. But Matt was

wrong. Miles away in the town of Freedom, Oskar Neerland was accepting a new job. In his first duty as marshal, he would lead the posse that was tracking down Matt Keelock. From the Paperback edition. Extrait Chapter One The man called Key-Lock was a man alone, and before him lay wilderness. Behind him were searching men, and each was armed, each carried a rope. Each rope was noosed for hanging, and each man was intent on the purpose of the chase. The solitary rider did not fear his aloneness, for he had the companionship of the mind. He had strength also, patience beyond that of most men, and some knowledge of the wild lands into which he rode. If the men who pursued knew nothing of him, he at least knew their kind, and was stronger because of this. They were men shaped and tempered to the harsh ways of a harsh land, strong in their sense of justice, ruthless in their demand for punishment, relentless in pursuit. In the desert and the wilderness they had built their homes, and from the desert and the wilderness they drew their courage and their code. And the desert knows no mercy, the wilderness shows no kindness. Before the man called Key-Lock lay a land fragmented and torn, a magnificent land, gnarled and ancient. It was a land of shattered battlements, broken towers, and the headless figures of vast and shapeless gods. An empty land, yet crowded with epics in stone, harried by wind and thunderstorm, ripped by flash floods, blistered by summer's heat, frozen by winter's cold. He rode now in Arizona, but beyond the horizon to the north lay Utah, and between himself and the border, a desert. Between himself and escape if he chose to escape lay an almost waterless waste in which he must trust to his ingenuity to keep him free. The border lay ahead, but the border was merely a line on a map, and did not exist in the minds of the men who pursued him. If they knew of this border, it would have no place in their thinking, for to them he had already crossed another border, a border between the law and the lawless, between the right and the wrong, between what was done and what was not done. To kill a man who faced you with a gun was in their minds no crime, nor was it a crime in the customs of their period. In the East and in Europe men settled affairs of honor with pistols, but according to plan and ritual. In the West, in what was a new world, where men were often strangers to each other, the settling of such an affair was immediate, and without ritual. To shoot a man in the back, however, was a crime, and this they believed he had done, and for this he must be hung. But it was not enough for the man called Key-Lock to understand the philosophy of the hunters; the important thing for him was to escape them. Though he knew none of the men back there personally, he knew there must be good men among them, and on a different occasion he might have been riding as one of them, the pursuer instead of the pursued. For he had worked beside such men, fought beside them, and he knew that they were hardworking men, stern but just, according to their code. When such men come to a new land the law comes with them, for they are builders of homes, builders of towns, layers of foundations. And now he must escape or fight. If he fought, he must be prepared to kill, and he had no enmity for these men . . . not yet. Where's he bound? "Home, more'n likely. He'll need an outfit if he aims to run far . . . if we don't get to him first." "Where's he live?" "He was a stranger, and had no trail outfit with him. Over to the store they said that when he taken out to get away, the one thing he latched onto was a woman's comb." "A comb?" "Seems daft, but that's what was told us. One of those fancy combs like Spanish women wear in their hair. He rummaged through all that grub and truck in the store just for that." Kimmel's eyes narrowed against the sun's hard glare. "He's got him a good horse. Moves right along." "Big buckskin," Chesney said. "I seen the horse. Wears a Key-Lock brand. A key alongside a keyhole never seen it before." For a few minutes silence rode among them, except for the beat of their horses' hoofs and the creak of saddle leather. "He's covering ground, all right." Neill was the youngest of them, and he felt the need of words. He was also the latest to arrive in this part of the country only four years ago. Hardin was the best of them at reading sign, and from the first he had been disturbed that the rider had not put his horse to the run. He held him to a steady, distance-eating gait, but showed no inclination to make a sudden dash to get away. Studying those tracks, and reading what they indicated, Hardin had an uneasy feeling that they had brought themselves a packet of trouble. "He's no tenderfoot." Chesney expressed the thought Hardin held. "He's covering ground, but he knows how to save a horse, and he knows wild country." Dust lifted from the hoofs of their horses. The sun was hot upon their shoulders. The land was parched and baked. Dancing heat waves promised water that was not there, and the distant blue of mountains a coolness they would not provide. The trail lay straight before them. Only at clumps of rock or thorny brush did it swerve. Like a thrown lance, it seemed to thrust at the distant heart of the hills. The six men of the posse rode warily, their thoughts uneasy about what lay in the mind of the man they pursued. You can know a man if you follow his trail, if you follow long enough. By his tracks on the land the ways of a man are made plain his kindness or his cruelty, his ignorance or his cunning, his strength or his weakness. Many a man who could read not a word of print could read character, story, and plot from a

pattern of tracks, and from the building of fires. In the hours of riding since leaving the town of Freedom, these men had learned much, but they had much still to learn. "What started it?" one of them asked now. In the vast hollow of silence the words hung empty and alone. Hardin turned his head in the manner of a man who rides much in the wind, and let the words drift back. As he spoke he shifted the rifle from one hand to the other to dry his sweaty palms upon his shirt front. "Loose talk. He was buyin' grub in the Bon Ton an' took offense at something Johnny said. Johnny was wearin' a gun, an' the Key-Lock man wasn't, so Johnny told him to go fill his hand or he'd hunt him down anyway." Johnny was in the saloon when he came back an' pushed the door open an' shot Johnny twice in the back whilst he stood drinkin' at the bar. Third shot busted a bottle of whiskey. "After a moment's silence, Neill asked slyly, "We hanging him for killing Johnny, or for busting the whiskey?" It was a fair question, but the dignity of the riders and their mission was not to be lightened by humor. They offered no reply, nor any acknowledgment that he had spoken. Neill's eyes wandered over the white and copper land, cut here and there by deep arroyos or ridged by the raw backs of ancient lava flows. He held no liking for the lynching of any man, and he knew nothing of the one for whom they hunted, beyond what had been told him. The men he rode with were his friends and neighbors, the men with whom he shared work and their few pleasures. Like himself, they had come to this wild land bringing the potential of home, and homes demanded order and consideration for the rights of others, a recognition of the necessities of regulations and law. Their womenfolk came with them or followed after, bringing their own desires, among them the need for church and school, for human association. The town of Freedom had only such law as its citizens chose to provide. If lawlessness was wary of Freedom, it was due to the fact that, as in most western towns, the butcher, the baker, and the banker were veterans of the War Between the States and the Indian wars. Every citizen had grown to manhood handling guns, and all were prepared to use such weapons when need be. The idea of some gunman or band of outlaws "treeing" a western town was known, but here it had never happened. The James-Younger band tried it at Northfield and they were run out of town, shot to doll rags and leaving their dead behind; the Daltons tried it at Coffeyville, and the one man who survived had sixteen buckshot in him. There were a few other attempts, no more successful often to the regret of the townspeople, for such attempts came under the head of entertainment in towns where there was not much of any other kind. The gunman stayed to his side of town, like the gambler and the lady of light company, and was tolerated as long as he offered no trouble to the established citizenry. Freedom was scarcely old enough to have the need to draw such a line, and as yet there was no law except such as was administered by themselves. However, they had all known Johnny, and Johnny had been shot in the back. "Who saw the shooting?" Neill asked. "Nobody saw it, actually. Sam was tendin' bar, but he was down at the other end and it happened too fast. But this Key-Lock man couldn't have given Johnny a chance. Johnny was too good with a gun." Johnny, Neill recalled, was far better than just good with a gun. He was damned good, and prided himself on the fact. Neill felt a twinge of uneasiness, and then a faint sense of guilt that he should for an instant doubt anything that was said of Johnny; but he couldn't help recalling that Johnny was a little less than friendly to strangers. The dust grew thicker, and Neill pulled his bandana up over his mouth and nose as the others had. His eyes sought the shimmering blue of those distant lakes. Enticing and lovely, they lay across the trail ahead and in the bottoms off to the right. They were mirage, but many a man had been led to his death by their ever-retreating shorelines. Maybe there was water in those heat waves if a man only knew how to extract it. The thought drew his hand to his canteen, where the slosh of water was inviting, but he knew that by this time the water was warm and brackish, and too little of it remained. Moreover, none of the older men had yet shown any inclination to drink. "Will you know him if you see him, Kimmel?" Chesney asked. "He's a big man, maybe on the lean side, but strong-made. Maybe thirty-five. No hand to talk about his business, but over to the store where he did his buying folks said he shaped up like a mighty hard piece of merchandise." Chesney himself was a wiry man with strong brown hands. He was hard as a whipstock, with bits of sharp steel for eyes. He had built his outfit carefully, driving in a few head when he first came, and tending them like a dairy herd through the first season. He was a good man and a good neighbor, but there was no give in him. He was stubborn in his opinions and a driver, pushing hard on himself and all about him. He had been the first to reach Neill's place that time when a prairie fire threatened. Kimmel had been a close second, racing his wagon as if it was a buckboard, and it was filled with sacking already wet, and with shovels. Last year when Hardin was laid up with a broken leg, Kimmel fed Hardin's stock and his own, too, all through a hard winter, and he had a long ride every day to do it. Chesney and Johnny had been saddle partners on the old Squaw Mountain roundups, and when Chesney drove his small herd into this part of the country, Johnny had come along to see him through, then

located a place of his own and stayed on. Johnny Webb had been a daredevil and a hellion, but he was well liked for all of that. He laughed a lot, played practical jokes, and was ready to break a horse for anybody just for the hell of it. He was fast with a gun, and no man was likely to beat him in a fair, stand-up shooting. When Neill had come into the country, he had quickly realized the kind of community he had entered and he built solid friendships. There was a lot he did not know about the West, for back in Ohio he had been a farmer, but he was catching on fast. When they invited him to be a posse member he knew he had been accepted and was one of them. It was an honor to ride beside such men into what might become a shooting affair. Neill stared at the tracks of the big buckskin and felt a queer sensation when he realized the rider of that horse might soon be dead, hung by the neck, and Neill's own hand would be on that rope. He had never killed a man not even an Indian nor seen one killed. He was probably the only man in the group of whom that could be said. Now Johnny Webb was gone, Johnny with his laughter and his jokes, brightening more than one day's work on the range. And Neill was feeling guilty at remembering that he had never really liked Johnny, and that there had been strain between them when Neill first came into this part of the country. It was only after Chesney accepted him, and after Johnny apparently realized that Neill was not a potential rival that a sort of friendship developed. Johnny might have been a little overanxious with that gun, Neill thought, but he deserved something better than a shot in the back. "He's afoot," Chesney said suddenly, "leadin' his horse." "He's a big man," Hardin said, "and he figures to give us a long chase." "His horse has gone lame, maybe," McAlpin suggested. "No, that horse doesn't limp. He's just a canny one, that's all." A mile fell behind them, and then another mile. The deep dust gave way to a parched dry plain of desert sand. Hardin indicated a couple of flecks on the sand-crust where something had spilled. "Water," he said. From the Paperback edition. Presentation de l'diteur He had led the posse for miles through the desert, but now Matt Keelock was growing desperate. He was worried about Kristina. His trip to the town of Freedom for supplies had ended in a shootout. If caught he would hang. Even though Kris could handle a horse and rifle as well as most men, the possibility of Oskar Neerlands finding her made Matt's blood run cold. He knew the violent and obsessive Neerland, publicly embarrassed when Matt had stepped in and stolen Kris away, would try to kill them both if given half a chance. Matt tried to convince himself that Neerland had returned to the East. But Matt was wrong. Miles away in the town of Freedom, Oskar Neerland was accepting a new job. In his first duty as marshal, he would lead the posse that was tracking down Matt Keelock. From the Paperback edition.