

# A LOST LADY

by WILLA CATHER

*Author of ONE OF OURS.*



*Publisher*

ALFRED · A · KNOPF

*New York*

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by  
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".....Come, my coach!  
Good night, ladies; good night, sweet ladies,  
Good night, good night."

MCMXXIII  
ALFRED H. KNOPF  
*New York*

## PART ONE

### I

Thirty or forty years ago, in one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad, which are so much greyer today than they were then, there was a house well known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and for a certain charm of atmosphere. Well known, that is to say, to the railroad aristocracy of that time; men who had to do with the railroad itself, or with one of the "land companies" which were its by-products. In those days it was enough to say of a man that he was "connected with the Burlington." There were the directors, the general managers, vice-presidents, superintendents, whose names we all knew; and their younger brothers or nephews were auditors, freight agents, departmental assistants. Everyone "connected" with the Road, even the large cattle- and grain-shippers, had annual passes; they and their families rode about over the line a great deal. There were then two distinct social strata in the prairie States; the homesteaders and hand-workers who were there to make a living, and the bankers and gentlemen ranchers who came from the Atlantic seaboard to invest money and to "develop our great West," as they used to tell us.

When the Burlington men were travelling back and forth on business not very urgent, they found it agreeable to drop off the express and spend a night in a pleasant house where their importance was delicately recognized; and no house was pleasanter than that of Captain Daniel Forrester, at Sweet Water. Captain Forrester was himself a railroad man, a contractor, who had built hundreds of miles of road for the Burlington—over the sage brush and cattle country, and on up into the Black Hills.

The Forrester place, as every one called it, was not at all remarkable; the people who lived there made it seem much larger and finer than it was. The house stood on a low round hill, nearly a mile east of town; a white house with

a wing, and sharp-sloping roofs to shed the snow. It was encircled by porches, too narrow for modern notions of comfort, supported by the fussy, fragile pillars of that time, when every honest stick of timber was tortured by the turning-lathe into something hideous. Stripped of its vines and denuded of its shrubbery, the house would probably have been ugly enough. It stood close into a fine cottonwood grove that threw sheltering arms to left and right and grew all down the hillside behind it. Thus placed on the hill, against its bristling grove, it was the first thing one saw on coming into Sweet Water by rail, and the last thing one saw on departing.

To approach Captain Forrester's property, you had first to get over a wide, sandy creek which flowed along the eastern edge of the town. Crossing this by the footbridge or the ford, you entered the Captain's private lane bordered by Lombardy poplars, with wide meadows lying on either side. Just at the foot of the hill on which the house sat, one crossed a second creek by the stout wooden road-bridge. This stream traced artless loops and curves through the broad meadows that were half pasture land, half marsh. Any one but Captain Forrester would have drained the bottom land and made it into highly productive fields. But he had selected this place long ago because it looked beautiful to him, and he happened to like the way the creek wound through his pasture, with mint and joint-grass and twinkling willows along its banks. He was well off for those times, and he had no children. He could afford to humour his fancies.

When the Captain drove friends from Omaha or Denver over from the station in his democrat wagon, it gratified him to hear these gentlemen admire his fine stock, grazing in the meadows on either side of his lane. And when they reached the top of the hill, it gratified him to see men who were older than himself leap nimbly to the ground and run up the front steps as Mrs. Forrester came out on the porch to greet them. Even the hardest and coldest of his friends, a certain narrow-faced Lincoln banker, became animated when he took her hand, tried to meet the gay challenge in her eyes and to reply cleverly to the droll word of greeting on her lips.

She was always there, just outside the front door, to welcome their visitors, having been warned of their approach by the sound of hoofs and the rumble of wheels on the wooden bridge. If she happened to be in the kitchen, helping her Bohemian cook, she came out in her apron, waving a buttery iron spoon,

or shook cherry-stained fingers at the new arrival. She never stopped to pin up a lock; she was attractive in dishabille, and she knew it. She had been known to rush to the door in her dressing-gown, brush in hand and her long black hair rippling over her shoulders, to welcome Cyrus Dalzell, president of the Colorado & Utah; and the great man had never felt more flattered. In his eyes, and in the eyes of the admiring middle-aged men who visited there, whatever Mrs. Forrester chose to do was "lady-like" because she did it. They could not imagine her in any dress or situation in which she would not be charming. Captain Forrester himself, a man of few words, told Judge Pommeroy that he had never seen her look more captivating than on the day when she was chased by the new bull in the pasture. She had forgotten about the bull and gone into the meadow to gather wild flowers. He heard her scream, and as he ran puffing down the hill, she was scudding along the edge of the marshes like a hare, beside herself with laughter, and stubbornly clinging to the crimson parasol that had made all the trouble.

Mrs. Forrester was twenty-five years younger than her husband, and she was his second wife. He married her in California and brought her to Sweet Water a bride. They called the place home even then, when they lived there but a few months out of each year. But later, after the Captain's terrible fall with his horse in the mountains, which broke him so that he could no longer build railroads, he and his wife retired to the house on the hill. He grew old there—and even she, alas! grew older.

## II

But we will begin this story with a summer morning long ago, when Mrs. Forrester was still a young woman, and Sweet Water was a town of which great things were expected. That morning she was standing in the deep bay-window of her parlour, arranging old-fashioned blush roses in a glass bowl. Glancing up, she saw a group of little boys coming along the driveway, barefoot, with fishing-poles and lunch-baskets. She knew most of them; there was Niel Herbert, Judge Pommeroy's nephew, a handsome boy of twelve whom she liked; and polite George Adams, son of a gentleman rancher from Lowell, Massachusetts. The others were just little boys from the town; the butcher's red-headed son, the leading grocer's fat brown twins, Ed Elliott (whose flirtatious old father kept a shoe store and was the Don Juan of the lower world of Sweet Water), and the two sons of the German tailor—pale, freckled lads with ragged clothes and ragged rust-coloured hair, from whom she sometimes bought game or catfish when they appeared silent and spook-like at her kitchen door and thinly asked if she would "care for any fish this morning."

As the boys came up the hill she saw them hesitate and consult together. "You ask her, Niel."

"You'd better, George. She goes to your house all the time, and she barely knows me to speak to."

As they paused before the three steps which led up to the front porch, Mrs. Forrester came to the door and nodded graciously, one of the pink roses in her hand.

"Good-morning, boys. Off for a picnic?"

George Adams stepped forward and solemnly took off his big straw hat. "Good-morning, Mrs. Forrester. Please may we fish and wade down in the marsh and have our lunch in the grove?"

"Certainly. You have a lovely day. How long has school been out? Don't you

miss it? I'm sure Niel does. Judge Pommeroy tells me he's very studious."

The boys laughed, and Niel looked unhappy.

"Run along, and be sure you don't leave the gate into the pasture open. Mr. Forrester hates to have the cattle get in on his blue grass."

The boys went quietly round the house to the gate into the grove, then ran shouting down the grassy slopes under the tall trees. Mrs. Forrester watched them from the kitchen window until they disappeared behind the roll of the hill. She turned to her Bohemian cook.

"Mary, when you are baking this morning, put in a pan of cookies for those boys. I'll take them down when they are having their lunch."

The round hill on which the Forrester house stood sloped gently down to the bridge in front, and gently down through the grove behind. But east of the house, where the grove ended, it broke steeply from high grassy banks, like bluffs, to the marsh below. It was thither the boys were bound.

When lunch time came they had done none of the things they meant to do. They had behaved like wild creatures all morning; shouting from the breezy bluffs, dashing down into the silvery marsh through the dewy cobwebs that glistened on the tall weeds, swishing among the pale tan cattails, wading in the sandy creek bed, chasing a striped water snake from the old willow stump where he was sunning himself, cutting sling-shot crotches, throwing themselves on their stomachs to drink at the cool spring that flowed out from under a bank into a thatch of dark watercress. Only the two German boys, Rheinhold and Adolph Blum, withdrew to a still pool where the creek was dammed by a reclining tree trunk, and, in spite of all the noise and splashing about them, managed to catch a few suckers. The wild roses were wide open and brilliant, the blue-eyed grass was in purple flower, and the silvery milkweed was just coming on. Birds and butterflies darted everywhere. All at once the breeze died, the air grew very hot, the marsh steamed, and the birds disappeared. The boys found they were tired; their shirts stuck to their bodies and their hair to their foreheads. They left the sweltering marsh-meadows for the grove, lay down on the clean grass under the grateful shade of the tall cottonwoods, and spread out their lunch. The Blum boys never brought anything but rye bread and hunks of dry cheese—their companions wouldn't have touched it on any account. But Thaddeus Grimes, the butcher's red-headed son, was the only

one impolite enough to show his scorn. "You live on wienies to home, why don't you never bring none?" he bawled.

"Hush," said Niel Herbert. He pointed to a white figure coming rapidly down through the grove, under the flickering leaf shadows— Mrs. Forrester, bareheaded, a basket on her arm, her blue-black hair shining in the sun. It was not until years afterward that she began to wear veils and sun hats, though her complexion was never one of her beauties. Her cheeks were pale and rather thin, slightly freckled in summer.

As she approached, George Adams, who had a particular mother, rose, and Niel followed his example.

"Here are some hot cookies for your lunch, boys." She took the napkin off the basket. "Did you catch anything?"

"We didn't fish much. Just ran about," said George.

"I know! You were wading and things." She had a nice way of talking to boys, light and confidential. "I wade down there myself sometimes, when I go down to get flowers. I can't resist it. I pull off my stockings and pick up my skirts, and in I go!" She thrust out a white shoe and shook it.

"But you can swim, can't you, Mrs. Forrester," said George. "Most women can't."

"Oh yes, they can! In California everybody swims. But the Sweet Water doesn't tempt me—mud and water snakes and blood-suckers— Ugh!" she shivered, laughing.

"We seen a water snake this morning and chased him. A whopper!" Thad Grimes put in.

"Why didn't you kill him? Next time I go wading he'll bite my toes! Now, go on with your lunch. George can leave the basket with Mary as you go out." She left them, and they watched her white figure drifting along the edge of the grove as she stopped here and there to examine the raspberry vines by the fence.

"These are good cookies, all right," said one of the giggly brown Weaver twins. The German boys munched in silence. They were all rather pleased that Mrs. Forrester had come down to them herself, instead of sending Mary. Even rough little Thad Grimes, with his red thatch and catfish mouth—the



characteristic feature of all the Grimes brood—knew that Mrs. Forrester was a very special kind of person. George and Niel were already old enough to see for themselves that she was different from the other townswomen, and to reflect upon what it was that made her so. The Blum brothers regarded her humbly from under their pale, chewed-off hair, as one of the rich and great of the world. They realized, more than their companions, that such a fortunate and privileged class was an axiomatic fact in the social order.

The boys had finished their lunch and were lying on the grass talking about how Judge Pommeroy's water spaniel, Fanny, had been poisoned, and who had certainly done it, when they had a second visitor.

"Shut up, boys, there he comes now. That's Poison Ivy," said one of the Weaver twins. "Shut up, we don't want old Roger poisoned."

A well-grown boy of eighteen or nineteen, dressed in a shabby corduroy hunting suit, with a gun and gamebag, had climbed up from the marsh and was coming down the grove between the rows of trees. He walked with a rude, arrogant stride, kicking at the twigs, and carried himself with unnatural erectness, as if he had a steel rod down his back. There was something defiant and suspicious about the way he held his head. He came up to the group and addressed them in a superior, patronizing tone.

"Hullo, kids. What are you doing here?"

"Picnic," said Ed Elliott.

"I thought girls went on picnics. Did you bring teacher along? Ain't you kids old enough to hunt yet?"

George Adams looked at him scornfully. "Of course we are. I got a 22 Remington for my last birthday. But we know better than to bring guns over here. You better hide yours, Mr. Ivy, or Mrs. Forrester will come down and tell you to get out."

"She can't see us from the house. And anyhow, she can't say anything to me. I'm just as good as she is."

To this the boys made no reply. Such an assertion was absurd even to fish-mouthed Thad; his father's business depended upon some people being better than others, and ordering better cuts of meat in consequence. If everybody ate round steak like Ivy Peters' family, there would be nothing in the butcher's

trade.

The visitor had put his gun and gamebag behind a tree, however, and stood stiffly upright, surveying the group out of his narrow beady eyes and making them all uncomfortable. George and Niel hated to look at Ivy—and yet his face had a kind of fascination for them. It was red, and the flesh looked hard, as if it were swollen from bee-stings, or from an encounter with poison ivy. This nickname, however, was given him because it was well known that he had "made away" with several other dogs before he had poisoned the Judge's friendly water spaniel. The boys said he took a dislike to a dog and couldn't rest until he made an end of him.

Ivy's red skin was flecked with tiny freckles, like rust spots, and in each of his hard cheeks there was a curly indentation, like a knot in a tree-bole—two permanent dimples which did anything but soften his countenance. His eyes were very small, and an absence of eyelashes gave his pupils the fixed, unblinking hardness of a snake's or a lizard's. His hands had the same swollen look as his face, were deeply creased across the back and knuckles, as if the skin were stretched too tight. He was an ugly fellow, Ivy Peters, and he liked being ugly.

He began telling the boys that it was too hot to hunt now, but later he meant to steal down to the marsh, where the ducks came at sundown, and bag a few. "I can make off across the corn fields before the old Cap sees me. He's not much on the run."

"He'll complain to your father."

"A whoop my father cares!" The speaker's restless eyes were looking up through the branches. "See that woodpecker tapping; don't mind us a bit. That's nerve!"

"They are protected here, so they're not afraid," said precise George.

"Hump! They'll spoil the old man's grove for him. That tree's full of holes already. Wouldn't he come down easy, now!"

Niel and George Adams sat up. "Don't you dare shoot here, you'll get us all into trouble."

"She'd come right down from the house," cried Ed Elliott.

"Let her come, stuck-up piece! Who's talking about shooting, anyway? There's more ways of killing dogs than choking them with butter."

At this effrontery the boys shot amazed glances at one another, and the brown Weaver twins broke simultaneously into giggles and rolled over on the turf.

But Ivy seemed unaware that he was regarded as being especially resourceful where dogs were concerned. He drew from his pocket a metal sling-shot and some round bits of gravel. "I won't kill it. I'll just surprise it, so we can have a look at it."

"Bet you won't hit it!"

"Bet I will!" He fitted the stone to the leather, squinted, and let fly. Sure enough, the woodpecker dropped at his feet. He threw his heavy black felt hat over it. Ivy never wore a straw hat, even in the hottest weather. "Now wait. He'll come to. You'll hear him flutter in a minute."

"It ain't a he, anyhow. It's a female. Anybody would know that," said Niel contemptuously, annoyed that this unpopular boy should come along and spoil their afternoon. He held the fate of his uncle's spaniel against Ivy Peters.

"All right, Miss Female," said Ivy carelessly, intent upon a project of his own. He took from his pocket a little red leather box, and when he opened it the boys saw that it contained curious little instruments: tiny sharp knife blades, hooks, curved needles, a saw, a blow-pipe, and scissors. "Some of these I got with a taxidermy outfit from the Youth's Companion, and some I made myself." He got stiffly down on his knees—his joints seemed disinclined to bend at all—and listened beside his hat. "She's as lively as a cricket," he announced. Thrusting his hand suddenly under the brim, he brought out the startled bird. It was not bleeding, and did not seem to be crippled.

"Now, you watch, and I'll show you something," said Ivy. He held the woodpecker's head in a vice made of his thumb and forefinger, enclosing its panting body with his palm. Quick as a flash, as if it were a practised trick, with one of those tiny blades he slit both the eyes that glared in the bird's stupid little head, and instantly released it.

The woodpecker rose in the air with a whirling, corkscrew motion, darted to the right, struck a tree-trunk—to the left, and struck another. Up and down, backward and forward among the tangle of branches it flew, raking its feathers,

falling and recovering itself. The boys stood watching it, indignant and uncomfortable, not knowing what to do. They were not especially sensitive; Thad was always on hand when there was anything doing at the slaughter house, and the Blum boys lived by killing things. They wouldn't have believed they could be so upset by a hurt woodpecker. There was something wild and desperate about the way the darkened creature beat its wings in the branches, whirling in the sunlight and never seeing it, always thrusting its head up and shaking it, as a bird does when it is drinking. Presently it managed to get its feet on the same limb where it had been struck, and seemed to recognize that perch. As if it had learned something by its bruises, it pecked and crept its way along the branch and disappeared into its own hole.

"There," Niel Herbert exclaimed between his teeth, "if I can get it now, I can kill it and put it out of its misery. Let me on your back, Rhein."

Rheinhold was the tallest, and he obediently bent his bony back. The trunk of a cottonwood tree is hard to climb; the bark is rough, and the branches begin a long way up. Niel tore his trousers and scratched his bare legs smartly before he got to the first fork. After recovering breath, he wound his way up toward the woodpecker's hole, which was inconveniently high. He was almost there, his companions below thought him quite safe, when he suddenly lost his balance, turned a somersault in the air, and bumped down on the grass at their feet. There he lay without moving.

"Run for water!"

"Run for Mrs. Forrester! Ask her for whiskey."

"No," said George Adams, "let's carry him up to the house. She will know what to do."

"That's sense," said Ivy Peters. As he was much bigger and stronger than any of the others, he lifted Niel's limp body and started up the hill. It had occurred to him that this would be a fine chance to get inside the Forresters' house and see what it was like, and this he had always wanted to do.

Mary, the cook, saw them coming from the kitchen window, and ran for her mistress. Captain Forrester was in Kansas City that day.

Mrs. Forrester came to the back door. "What's happened? It's Niel, too! Bring him in this way, please."

Ivy Peters followed her, keeping his eyes open, and the rest trooped after him—all but the Blum boys, who knew that their place was outside the kitchen door. Mrs. Forrester led the way through the butler's pantry, the dining-room, the back parlour, to her own bedroom. She threw down the white counterpane, and Ivy laid Niel upon the sheets. Mrs. Forrester was concerned, but not frightened.

"Mary, will you bring the brandy from the sideboard. George, telephone Dr. Dennison to come over at once. Now you other boys run out on the front porch and wait quietly. There are too many of you in here." She knelt by the bed, putting brandy between Niel's white lips with a teaspoon. The little boys withdrew, only Ivy Peters remained standing in the back parlour, just outside the bedroom door, his arms folded across his chest, taking in his surroundings with bold, unblinking eyes.

Mrs. Forrester glanced at him over her shoulder. "Will you wait on the porch, please? You are older than the others, and if anything is needed I can call on you."

Ivy cursed himself, but he had to go. There was something final about her imperious courtesy—high-and-mighty, he called it. He had intended to sit down in the biggest leather chair and cross his legs and make himself at home; but he found himself on the front porch, put out by that delicately modulated voice as effectually as if he had been kicked out by the brawniest tough in town.

Niel opened his eyes and looked wonderingly about the big, half-darkened room, full of heavy, old-fashioned walnut furniture. He was lying on a white bed with ruffled pillow shams, and Mrs. Forrester was kneeling beside him, bathing his forehead with cologne. Bohemian Mary stood behind her, with a basin of water. "Ouch, my arm!" he muttered, and the perspiration broke out on his face.

"Yes, dear, I'm afraid it's broken. Don't move. Dr. Dennison will be here in a few minutes. It doesn't hurt very much, does it?"

"No'm," he said faintly. He was in pain, but he felt weak and contented. The room was cool and dusky and quiet. At his house everything was horrid when one was sick...What soft fingers Mrs. Forrester had, and what a lovely lady she was. Inside the lace ruffle of her dress he saw her white throat rising and falling so quickly. Suddenly she got up to take off her glittering rings— she had not

thought of them before—shed them off her fingers with a quick motion as if she were washing her hands, and dropped them into Mary's broad palm. The little boy was thinking that he would probably never be in so nice a place again. The windows went almost down to the baseboard, like doors, and the closed green shutters let in streaks of sunlight that quivered on the polished floor and the silver things on the dresser. The heavy curtains were looped back with thick cords, like ropes. The marble-topped wash-stand was as big as a sideboard. The massive walnut furniture was all inlaid with pale-coloured woods. Niel had a scroll-saw, and this inlay interested him.

"There, he looks better now, doesn't he, Mary?" Mrs. Forrester ran her fingers through his black hair and lightly kissed him on the forehead. Oh, how sweet, how sweet she smelled!

"Wheels on the bridge; it's Doctor Dennison. Go and show him in, Mary."

Dr. Dennison set Niel's arm and took him home in his buggy. Home was not a pleasant place to go to; a frail egg-shell house, set off on the edge of the prairie where people of no consequence lived. Except for the fact that he was Judge Pommeroy's nephew, Niel would have been one of the boys to whom Mrs. Forrester merely nodded brightly as she passed. His father was a widower. A poor relation, a spinster from Kentucky, kept house for them, and Niel thought she was probably the worst housekeeper in the world. Their house was usually full of washing in various stages of incompleteness—tubs sitting about with linen soaking—and the beds were "aired" until any hour in the afternoon when Cousin Sadie happened to think of making them up. She liked to sit down after breakfast and read murder trials, or peruse a well-worn copy of "St. Elmo." Sadie was a good-natured thing and was always running off to help a neighbour, but Niel hated to have anyone come to see them. His father was at home very little, spent all his time at his office. He kept the county abstract books and made farm loans. Having lost his own property, he invested other people's money for them. He was a gentle, agreeable man, young, good-looking, with nice manners, but Niel felt there was an air of failure and defeat about his family. He clung to his maternal uncle, Judge Pommeroy, white-whiskered and portly, who was Captain Forrester's lawyer and a friend of all the great men who visited the Forresters. Niel was proud, like his mother; she died when he was five years old. She had hated the West, and used haughtily to tell her neighbours that she would never think of living anywhere but in Fayette county,