CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

A Lost Lady

Willa Cather · *1923 · original English text*

Thirty or forty years ago, in one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad, there was a house well known from Omaha to Denver. In it lived Marian Forrester, wife of a railroad contractor, seen by a boy who will not forget her. The hosted text is Cather's original English, Project Gutenberg #65636, complete.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is lost when a gracious lady of the old railroad West cannot keep the life that first made her admirable, and how should a young observer's loyalty be taught?

"Thirty or forty years ago, in one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad, which are so much greyer to-day than they were then, there was a house well known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and for a certain charm of atmosphere."

Part One, I

The book is short, exact, and sad without being soft. Captain Forrester's world of the Burlington and of Sweet Water passes. Marian Forrester's charm remains, and is also spent. Niel Herbert, who loved the image of her, must come to a harder knowledge, and at last to a kind of thanks. Teach the loyalty, the disappointment, and the mercy of the last pages. For older students.

KEY CHARACTERS

Marian Forrester
The lady of the house at Sweet Water, whose charm and later life are the book's subject

Captain Daniel Forrester
Her husband, a Burlington contractor of the old railroad years

Niel Herbert
The boy, later a man, whose loyalty and disappointment measure what is lost

Ivy Peters
A figure of the later, coarser order in Sweet Water

A HOUSE, AND WHAT REMAINS

> *"Thirty or forty years ago, in one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad, which are so much greyer to-day than they were then, there was a house well known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and for a certain charm of atmosphere."*
>
> Part One, I

> *"So we may feel sure that she was well cared for, to the very end," said Niel. "Thank God for that!"*
>
> the close

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A House on the Burlington

PART ONE, I

The book opens on a grey town along the Burlington, and a house famous from Omaha to Denver. Captain Daniel Forrester, a contractor who has built hundreds of miles of road, lives at Sweet Water with his wife.

- The first sentence is exact, including "grey" / "greyer" and the hyphen in "to-day"
- Captain Forrester is a railroad man, not a mere background husband
- The house's hospitality is the first fact; the later loss will be measured against it
- Sweet Water is the place-name to keep

> *"Thirty or forty years ago, in one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad, which are so much greyer to-day than they were then, there was a house well known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and for a certain charm of atmosphere."*
>
> Part One, I

02

Niel Herbert and Mrs. Forrester

PART ONE

Niel Herbert, Judge Pommeroy's nephew, is a boy when he first comes under the roof. Mrs. Forrester's kindness and grace become, for him, a standard of what a lady is.

- The boy's admiration is genuine; it is also a way of not yet seeing
- The early chapters give the house at its height, including the Captain's friends of the railroad years
- Do not treat Marian as only a symbol of a passing West; she is a particular woman
- The book is already preparing a fall

03

What Is Lost

THE LATER CHAPTERS OF PART ONE, AND PART TWO

The Captain's strength and fortune fail. New men, and a coarser order, come into Sweet Water. Niel comes to knowledge he did not want, and Mrs. Forrester's charm is seen under a harder light.

- Ivy Peters belongs to the later, harsher order; teach him as Cather wrote him
- Niel's disappointment is part of his growing up, and part of the book's judgment
- The title names a lost lady; the loss is historical and personal at once
- Teach the adult matter with tact, for older students

04

After Sweet Water

THE CLOSE

Years later, news comes of Marian Forrester Collins, far from Sweet Water. She has sent money, year after year, for flowers on the Captain's grave at Decoration Day. Niel is glad she was cared for to the end.

- The last report is that she died about three years before the conversation
- Niel says, "So we may feel sure that she was well cared for, to the very end," and "Thank God for that!"
- The annual cheque for the Captain's grave is a loyalty that outlasts Sweet Water
- Do not invent a reunion the last pages do not give

> *"So we may feel sure that she was well cared for, to the very end," said Niel. "Thank God for that!"*
>
> the close

05

The Hosted File

PG #65636

The hosted text is complete, original English, 1923. A short novel, and one of Cather's most finished.

- Quote "to-day" and "greyer" as printed
- For older students; the book is brief enough for a careful class, and adult in its later knowledge
- It may be read with other Cather of the passing frontier, but it is its own house and its own lady
- The mercy of the last page is earned; do not skip to it

A Passing Order · Loyalty · Charm and Loss · The Railroad West · Growing Knowledge · Mercy at the End

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. The opening is exact: "Thirty or forty years ago, in one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad, which are so much greyer to-day than they were then, there was a house well known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and for a certain charm of atmosphere." Keep "greyer" and "to-day."
2. Captain Forrester is a railroad contractor at Sweet Water. The later loss is measured against that house at its height.
3. Niel Herbert's admiration, disappointment, and final thanks are the book's way of seeing Mrs. Forrester. Teach the later knowledge with tact, for older students.
4. At the close, Niel is glad she was cared for to the end, and "Thank God for that!" The annual flowers for the Captain's grave are a loyalty that remains.
5. The hosted text is complete, PG #65636, original English, 1923.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #65636, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/cather-a-lost-lady/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.