

# **El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional**

Willa Sibert Cather

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## I.

PEOPLE who have been so unfortunate as to have travelled in western Kansas will remember the Solomon valley for its unique and peculiar desolation. The river is a turbid, muddy little stream, that crawls along between naked bluffs, choked and split by sand bars, and with nothing whatever of that fabled haste to reach the sea. Though there can be little doubt that the Solomon is heartily disgusted with the country through which it flows, it makes no haste to quit it. Indeed, it is one of the most futile little streams under the sun, and never gets anywhere. Its sluggish current splits among the sand bars and buries itself in the mud until it literally dries up from weariness and ennui, without ever reaching anything. The hot winds and the river have been contending for the empire of the valley for years, and the river has had decidedly the worst of it. Never having been a notably ambitious stream, in time it grew tired of giving its strength to moisten barren fields and corn that never matured. Beyond the river with its belt of amber woodland rose the bluffs, ragged, broken, covered with shaggy red grass and bare of trees, save for the few stunted oaks that grew upon their steep sides. They were pathetic little trees, that sent their roots down through thirty feet of hard clay bluff to the river level. They were as old as the first settler could remember, and yet no one could assert that they had ever grown an inch. They seldom, if ever, bore acorns; it took all the nourishment that soil could give just to exist. There was a sort of mysterious kinship between those trees and the men who lived, or tried to live, there. They were alike in more ways than one.

Across the river stretched the level land like the top of an oven. It was a country flat and featureless, without tones or shadows, without accent or emphasis of any kind to break its vast monotony. It was a scene done entirely in high lights, without relief, without a single commanding eminence to rest the eye upon. The flat plains rolled to the unbroken horizon vacant and void, forever reaching in empty yearning toward something they never attained. The tilled fields were even more discouraging to look upon than the unbroken land. Although it was late in the autumn, the corn was not three feet high. The leaves were seared and yellow, and as for tassels, there were none. Nature always dispenses with superfluous appendages; and what use had Solomon valley corn for tassels? Ears were only a tradition there, fabulous fruits like the golden apples of the Hesperides; and many a brawny Hercules had died in his own sweat trying to obtain them. Sometimes, in the dusk of night, when the winds were not quite so hot as usual and only the stars could hear, the dry little corn leaves whispered to each other that once, long ago, real yellow ears grew in the Solomon valley.

Near the river was a solitary frame building, low and wide, with a high sham front, like most stores in Kansas villages. Over the door was painted in faded letters, "Josiah Bywaters, Dry Goods, Groceries and Notions." In front of the store ran a straight strip of ground, grass grown and weedy, which looked as if it might once have

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been a road. Here and there, on either side of this deserted way of traffic, were half demolished buildings and excavations where the weeds grew high, which might once have been the sites of houses. For this was once El Dorado, the Queen City of the Plains, the Metropolis of Western Kansas, the coming Commercial Centre of the West.

Whatever may have been there once, now there were only those empty, windowless buildings, that one little store, and the lonely old man whose name was painted over the door. Inside the store, on a chair tilted back against the counter, with his pipe in his mouth and a big gray cat on his knee, sat the proprietor. His appearance was not that of the average citizen of western Kansas, and a very little of his conversation told you that he had come from civilization somewhere. He was tall and straight, with an almost military bearing, and an iron jaw. He was thin, but perhaps that was due to his diet. His cat was thin, too, and that was surely owing to its diet, which consisted solely of crackers and water, except when now and then it could catch a gopher; and Solomon valley gophers are so thin that they never tempt the ambition of any discerning cat. If Colonel Bywaters's manner of living had anything to do with his attenuation, it was the solitude rather than any other hardship that was responsible. He was a sort of "Last Man." The tide of emigration had gone out and had left him high and dry, stranded on a Kansas bluff. He was living where the rattlesnakes and sunflowers found it difficult to exist.

The Colonel was a man of determination; he had sunk his money in this wilderness and he had determined to wait until he had got it out. His capital had represented the industry of a lifetime. He had made it all down in Virginia, where fortunes are not made in a day. He had often told himself that he had been a fool to quit a country of honest men for a desert like this. But he had come West, worse than that, he had come to western Kansas, even to the Solomon valley, and he must abide the consequences. Even after the whole delusion was dispelled, and the fraud exposed, when the other buildings had been torn down or moved away, when the Eastern brokers had foreclosed their mortgages and held the land empty for miles around, Colonel Bywaters had stubbornly refused to realize that the game was up. Every one had told him that the best thing he could do was to get out of the country; but he refused to listen to advice. Perhaps he had an unreasoning conviction that money could not absolutely vanish, and that, if he stayed there long enough, his must some time come back to him. Perhaps, even had he wished to go, he actually lacked the means wherewith to get away. At any rate, there he remained, becoming almost a part of that vast solitude, trying to live the life of an upright Christian gentleman in this desert, with a heart heavy and homesick for his kind, always living over again in memory the details of that old, peaceful life in the valley of Virginia. He rose at six, as he had always done, ate his meagre breakfast and swept out his store, arranged his faded calicoes and fly-specked fruit cans in the window, and then sat down to wait. Generally he waited until bedtime. In three years he had not sold fifty dollars' worth. Men were almost unknown beings in that region, and men with money were utterly so. When the town broke up, a few of the inhabitants had tried to farm a little, — tried until they had no grain to sow and no horses to plough and no money to get away with. They were dead, most of them. The only human faces the Colonel ever saw were the starved, bronzed countenances of the poor fellows who sometimes passed in wagons, plodding along with their wives and children and cook stoves and feather beds, trying to get back to "God's country." They never bought anything; they only stopped to water their horses and swear a little, and then drove slowly eastward. Once a little girl had cried so bitterly for the red stick candy in the window that her father had taken the last nickel out of his worn, flat pocketbook. But the Colonel was too kind a man to take his money, so he gave the child the money and the candy, too; and he also gave her a little pair of red mittens that the moths had got into, which last she accepted gratefully, though it was August.

The first day of the week brought the exceptions in the monotonous routine of the Colonel's life. He never rose till nine o'clock on Sunday. Then, in honor of the day, he shaved his chin and brushed out his mustache, and dressed himself in his black suit that had been made for him down in Winchester four years ago. This suit of clothes was an object of great care with the Colonel, and every Sunday night he brushed it out and folded it away in camphor gum. Generally he fished on Sunday. Not that there are any fish in the Solomon; indeed, the mud turtles, having exhausted all the nutriment in the mud, have pretty much died out. But the Colonel was fond of fishing, and fish he would. So in season, every Sunday morning, he would catch a bottle of flies for bait and take his pole and, after locking his store against impossible intruders, he would go gravely down the street. He really went through

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the weed patch, but to himself and his cat he always spoke of it as the street.

### II.

On this particular afternoon, as the Colonel sat watching the autumn sunlight play upon the floor, he was feeling more bitterly discouraged than usual. It was exactly four years ago that day that Major Penelton had brought into his store on Water Street a tall, broad shouldered young man, with the frankest blue eyes and a good-natured smile, whom he introduced as Mr. Apollo Gump of Kansas. After a little general conversation, the young man had asked him if he wished to invest in Western lands. No, the Colonel did not want to put out any money in the West. He had no faith in any of the new states. Very well; Apollo did not wish to persuade him. But some way he saw a good deal of the young man, who was a clever, open-handed sort of a chap, who drank good whiskey and told a good story so that it lost nothing in the telling. So many were the hints he threw out of the fortunes made every day in Western real estate, that in spite of himself the Colonel began to think about it. Soon letters began pouring in upon him, letters from doctors, merchants, bankers, all with a large map on the envelope, representing a town with all the railroads of the West running into it. Above this spidery object was printed the name, El Dorado. These communications all assured him of the beauty of the location, the marvellous fertility of the surrounding country, the commercial and educational advantages of the town. Apollo seemed to take a wonderful liking to him; he often had him to dine with him at the little hotel, and took him down to Washington to hear Patti, assuring him all the time that the theatres of Kansas City were much better than anything in the East, and that one heard much better music there. The end of the matter was that when Apollo went back to Kansas the Colonel sold out his business and went with him. They were accompanied by half a dozen men from Baltimore, Washington and the smaller towns about, whom Apollo had induced to invest in the fertile tracts of land about El Dorado and in stock in the Gump banking house.

The Colonel was not a little surprised to find that El Dorado, the metropolis of western Kansas, was a mere cluster of frame houses beside a muddy stream, that there was not a railroad within twenty-five miles, and that the much boasted waterworks consisted of a number of lead pipes running from the big windmill tank on the hill; but Apollo assured him that high buildings were dangerous in that windy country, that the railroads were anxious and eager to come as soon as the town voted bonds, and that the waterworks — pipes, pumps, filters and all, a complete "Holly" system — were ordered and would be put in in the spring. The Colonel did not quite understand how an academy of arts and science could be conducted in the three-room sod shack on the hill; but Aristotle Gump showed him the plan of a stately building with an imposing bell-tower that hung over the desk in his office, assuring him that it would go up in May, and that the workmen from Topeka were already engaged for the job. He was surprised, too, to find so few people in a town of two thousand inhabitants; but he was told that most of the business men had gone East to settle up their affairs, and would be back in the spring with their new goods. Indeed, in Ezekiel Gump's office, the Colonel saw hundreds of letters, long glowing letters, from these absent citizens, telling of their great business schemes and their unshaken faith in the golden future of El Dorado. There were few houses, indeed, but there were acres and acres of foundations; there were few businesses in operation, but there were hundreds of promises; and Apollo laughingly said that Western towns were built on promises.

But what most puzzled the Colonel was the vast number and importance of the Gumps. The Gumps seemed to be at the head of everything. The eldest brother was Isaiah Gump, the minister, a red faced, clean shaven man, with a bald pate and dark, wrinkled little hands. Then there were De Witt Gump, the physician and druggist; Chesterfield Gump, the general dry goods merchant; Aristotle Gump, architect and builder, and professor of mathematics in the Gump Academy; Hezekiah Gump, the hardware merchant and president of the El Dorado Board of Trade; Ezekiel Gump, real estate agent, superintendent of waterworks, professor of natural sciences, etc. These were the Gumps. But stay, — were there not also Almira Gump, who taught history and Italian in the academy, and Venus Gump, who conducted a dressmaking and millinery establishment? The Colonel learned from Apollo that the Gump brothers had bought the land and founded the town, that it was, in short, a monument of Gump enterprise, it having been their long cherished ambition to become municipal promoters.

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The Sunday after the Colonel's arrival, Isaiah preached a sermon on the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and told how the Jews built each man before his own door, with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. This was preliminary to urging the citizens of El Dorado to build sidewalks before their respective residences. He gave a long and eloquent discourse upon the builders of great cities from Menes, Nimrod and Romulus down, and among these celebrated personages, the Gumps were by no means forgotten.

After the sermon, the Colonel went to dine with Apollo at the little hotel. As they sat over their claret and cigars, Apollo said, "Colonel, if you can work any kind of a deal with Zeke, I would advise you to buy up your land before the railroad comes, for land is sure to go up then. It's a good plan out here to buy before a road comes and sell as soon as possible afterwards."

"About how much would you advise me to invest in land, Mr. Gump?" inquired the Colonel.

"Well, if I were you, I would about halve my pile. Half I would put into real estate and half into bank stock. Then you've got both realty and personal security and you are pretty safe."

"I think I will get back into business. I may as well open a little shop and give your brother Chesterfield a little competition. I find I have been in the harness so long that I scarcely know what to do with myself out of it. I am too old to learn to be a gentleman of leisure."

"That's a good idea; but whatever you do, do it before the road comes. That's where the mistake is made in Western towns; men buy at high tide of the boom instead of having foresight enough to buy before. A boom makes the man it finds; but woe to the man it leaves in its track." A year later the Colonel found that Apollo had spoken a great truth.

"I think I rather like that land your brother showed me yesterday. Right next to the 'eighty' Mr. Thompson just bought. I would a little rather get tilled land, though."

"Now, Colonel, you are buying this land to sell; and wild land will sell just as well as any. You don't want to bother with crops; that's for the fellows that come in later. Let them do the digging. As soon as you have made up your mind, I want to spring a little scheme on you. I want to run you for city mayor next spring; and as soon as you have invested, we can begin to talk it up."

That suggestion pleased the Colonel and it rather soothed his conscience. He had his own scruples about land speculation; it seemed to him a good deal like gambling. But if he could really make an effort to further the interests of the town, he felt he would have a better right to make his fortune there.

After dinner they went out to look at Apollo's blooded horses, and then to Apollo's rooms over the bank to smoke. Apollo's rooms were very interesting apartments. They were decorated with boxing gloves, ball bats, fishing rods, an old pair of foils and pictures of innumerable theatrical people, mostly vaudeville celebrities and ladies of the ballet. As the Colonel showed some interest in these, Apollo began rattling off their names and various accomplishments, professional and otherwise, with a familiarity that astonished the old gentleman. One, he declared, could do the best double dislocation act on the horizontal bars to be seen in Europe or America, and his talents had been highly applauded by the Prince of Wales. Another was the best burnt cork artist of his time; and another a languishing blond lady, whose generous outlines were accentuated by the nature of her attire, he declared was "the neatest thing in tights that ever struck Kansas City." From Apollo that was a sweeping statement; for Kansas City was the unit of measure which he applied to the universe. At one end of his sleeping room there was a large, full length painting of a handsome, smiling woman, in short skirts and spangles. She stood on the toe of her left foot, her right foot raised, her arms lifted, her body thrown back in a pose of easy abandon. She was just beginning to dance, and there was something of lassitude in the movement of the picture. Behind her hung a dark red curtain, creating a daring effect of color through the sheer whiteness of her skirts, and the

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footlights threw a strong glare up into her triumphant face. It was broadly and boldly painted, something after the manner of Degas, but handled less cruelly than his subjects. The name at the bottom of the picture was that of a young American painter, then better known in Paris than in his own country. There were several photographs of the same person ranged about on Apollo's dressing case, and, as he thought her extremely beautiful, and as Apollo had not mentioned her, the Colonel politely inquired who she was.

"She was called Therese Barittini," replied Apollo, not looking at the picture.

"I never heard of her," remarked the Colonel, wondering at Apollo's strange manner.

"Probably not; she is dead," said Apollo shortly; and as the Colonel saw that he did not wish to discuss the subject, he let it drop. But he could never refrain from looking at that picture when he was in Apollo's room; and he had conjectures of his own. Incidentally he learned that Apollo had grown up about the theatres of Kansas City, ushering as a boy, and later working up to the box office. Had he known more of the theatres of that river metropolis, the Colonel would have realized that they are bad places for a boy. As it was, he attributed Apollo's exaggerated manner and many of his bad habits to his early environment.

It chanced that the next day was the day for voting on railroad bonds, and of course bonds were voted. There was great rejoicing among the builders of the city. The Gump band was out, and Apollo fired a fine display of fireworks which he had ordered from Kansas City in anticipation of the happy event. Those fireworks must have cost Apollo a nice little sum, for there were a great many of them. Why, there were actually some of the blackened rocket sticks lying around the streets next spring when every one knew that the railroad companies had never heard of such a place as El Dorado.

None of the Gumps had their families with them; they were to come out in the spring. They spoke often and affectionately of their families, — all but Apollo, who never mentioned having any. The Colonel had supposed that he had never been married, until one day when he and Apollo were dining with Isaiah. Isaiah, after droning away in his prosy fashion about his wife and little ones and commenting upon the beauty of family ties, began moralizing upon Apollo's unfortunate marriage. Apollo, who had been growing whiter and whiter, rose, set down his glass and, reaching across the table, struck the Reverend Isaiah in the mouth. This was the first that the Colonel saw of the bitter altercations which sometimes arose among the Gump brothers.

By the close of the winter the Colonel had put out his money and opened his store. Everything went on at a lively enough pace in El Dorado. Men took large risks because their neighbors did, as blind to the chances against them as the frequenters of the bucket shops on Wall Street. Hope was in the atmosphere, and each man was immersed in his own particular dream of fortune. One thinking man might have saved the community; but many communities have gone to ruin through the lack of that rare man. Afterwards, when the news of the great Gump swindle spread abroad over the land, and its unique details commanded a column's space in one of the New York papers, financiers laughed and said that a child could have grasped the situation. The inhabitants of El Dorado were chiefly men who had made a little capital working for corporations in large cities, and were incompetent to manage an independent business. They had been mere machines in a great system, consulted by no one, subject to complete control. Here they were "prominent citizens," men of affairs, and their vanity and self-confidence expanded unduly. The rest were farming people who came to make homes and paid little attention to what went on in the town. And the farmer is always swindled, no matter by whom offences come. The crash may start in Wall Street, but it ends in the hillside farms and on the prairie. No matter where the lightning strikes, it blackens the soil at last.

As the winter wore away, Apollo Gump drank harder than ever, drank alone in his rooms now, indulging in the solitary form of the vice, which is its worse form. No one saw much of him after business hours. He was gloomy and abstracted and seemed to dread even the necessary intercourse with men which his position in the bank entailed. The Gump brothers commissioned the Colonel to remonstrate with him upon the error of his ways,

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which he did without much effect. Still, there were many likable things about Apollo. He was different from the rest; his face was finer and franker, in spite of its heavy marks of dissipation, and his heart was kinder. His dogs were better treated than many men's children. His brothers were very clever fellows, some of them, all of them free handed enough, except old Isaiah, who was the greatest bore and the sorriest rascal of them all. But the Colonel liked Apollo best. The great end of his life was to serve Mammon, but on the side he served other and better gods. Dante's lowest hell was a frozen one; and wherever Apollo's tortured soul writhes, it is not there; that is reserved for colder and perhaps cleaner men than he.

At last spring came, that fabled spring, when all the business men were to return to El Dorado, when the Gump Academy was to be built, when the waterworks were to be put in, when the Gumps were to welcome their wives and children. Chesterfield, Hezekiah and Aristotle had gone East to see to bringing out their families, and the Colonel was impatiently awaiting their return, as the real estate business seemed to be at a standstill and he could get no satisfaction from Apollo about the condition of affairs. One night there came a telegram from New York, brought post haste across the country from the nearest station, announcing that the father of the Gumps was dying, and summoning the other brothers to his bedside. There was great excitement in El Dorado at these tidings, and the sympathy of its inhabitants was so genuine that they scarcely stopped to think what the departure of the Gumps might mean.

De Witt and Ezekiel left the next day accompanied by Miss Venus and Miss Almira. Apollo and Isaiah remained to look after the bank. The Colonel began to feel anxious, realizing that the Gumps had things pretty much in their own hands and that if the death of their father should make any material difference in their projects and they should decide to leave Kansas for good, the town and his interests would be wofully undone. Still, he said very little, not thinking it a time to bring up business considerations; for even Apollo looked worried and harassed and was entirely sober for days together.

The Gumps left on Monday. On the following Sunday Isaiah delivered a particularly powerful discourse on the mutability of riches. He compared temporal wealth to stock in the great bank of God, which paid such rich dividends of grace daily, hourly. He earnestly exhorted his hearers to choose the good part and lay up for themselves treasures in heaven, where moths cannot corrupt nor thieves break through and steal. Apollo was not at church that morning. The next morning the man who took care of Apollo's blooded horses found that two of them were missing. When he went to report this to Apollo he got no response to his knock, and, not succeeding in finding Isaiah, he went to consult the Colonel. Together they went back to Apollo's room and broke in the door. They found the room in wretched disorder, with clothing strewn about over the furniture; but nothing was missing save Apollo's grip and revolver, the picture of the theatrical looking person that had hung in his sleeping room, and Apollo himself. Then the truth dawned upon the Colonel. The Gumps had gone, taking with them the Gump banking funds, land funds, city improvement funds, academy funds, and all funds, both public and private.

As soon as the news of the hegira of the Gumps got abroad, carriages and horses came from all the towns in the country, bringing to the citizens of El Dorado their attentive creditors. All the townsmen had paid fabulous prices for their land, borrowed money on it, put the money into the Gump bank, and done their business principally on credit obtained on the Gump indorsement. Now that their money was gone, they discovered that the land was worth nothing, was a desert which the fertile imagination of the Gumps had made to blossom as the rose. The loan companies also discovered the worthlessness of the land, and used every possible means to induce the tenants to remain on it; but the entire country was panic-stricken and would hear no argument. Their one desire was to get away from this desolate spot, where they had been duped. The infuriated creditors tore down the houses and carried even the foundation stones away. Scarcely a house in the town had been paid for; the money had been paid to Aristotle Gump, contractor and builder, who had done his business in the East almost entirely on credit. The loan agents and various other creditors literally put the town into wagons and carried it off. Meanwhile, the popular indignation was turned against the Colonel as having been immediately associated with the Gumps and implicated in their dishonesty. In vain did he protest his innocence. When men are hurt they must have something to turn upon, like children who kick the door that pinches their fingers. So the poor old Colonel, who was utterly



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ruined and one of the heaviest losers, was accused of having untold wealth hidden away somewhere in the bluffs; and all the tempest of wrath and hatred which the Gumps had raised broke over his head. He was glad, indeed, when the town was utterly deserted, and he could live without the continual fear of those reproachful and suspicious glances. Often as he sat watching those barren bluffs, he wondered whether some day the whole grand delusion would not pass away, and this great West, with its cities built on borrowed capital, its business done on credit, its temporary homes, its drifting, restless population, become panic-stricken and disappear, vanish utterly and completely, as a bubble that bursts, as a dream that is done. He hated Western Kansas; and yet in a way he pitied this poor brown country, which seemed as lonely as himself and as unhappy. No one cared for it, for its soil or its rivers. Every one wanted to speculate in it. It seemed as if God himself had only made it for purposes of speculation and was tired of the deal and doing his best to get it off his hands and deed it over to the Other Party.

### III.

On this particular morning, the fourth anniversary of the fatal advent of Apollo Gump into his store at Winchester, as the Colonel sat smoking in his chair, a covered wagon came toiling slowly up from the south. The horses were thin and fagged, and it was all that they could do to drag the creaking wagon. The harness was old and patched with rope. Over the hames and along the back strap hung pieces of sunflower brush to serve as fly nets. The wagon stopped at the well and two little boys clambered out and came trotting up the path toward the store. As they came the Colonel heard them chattering together in a broad Southern dialect; and the sound of his own tongue was sweet to his ears.

"What is it, boys?" he asked, coming to the door.

"Say, boss, kin we git some watah at yo' well?"

"Of course you can, boys. Git all you want."

"Thank yo', sir ;" and the lads trotted back to the wagon.

The Colonel took up his stick and followed them. He had not seen such good natured, tow-headed little chaps for a long while; and he was fond of children. A little girl, dressed in that particularly ugly shade of red in which farming people seem to delight, clambered out of the wagon and went up to the well with a tin cup, picking her way carefully with her bare feet to avoid the sand burrs. A fretful voice called from the wagon.

"Law me, boys, haint you most got that watah yit?"

A wan woman's face appeared at the front of the wagon, and she sat down and coughed heavily, holding her hand over her chest as if it hurt her. The little girl filled the tin cup and ran toward the wagon.

"Howdy do, sir?" said the woman, turning to the Colonel as soon as she had finished drinking.

"Right smart, ma am, thank 'ee."

"Mercy, air yo' from the South? Virginy? Laws! I am from Mizzoura myself an' I wisht I was back there. I 'low we'd be well enough off if we could git back to Pap."

She looked wistfully off toward the southwest and put her hand to her side again. There was something in the look of her big, hollow eyes that touched the Colonel. He told her she had better stay there a few days and rest the horses, — she did not look well enough to go on.

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"No, thank yo', sir, we must git on. I'll be better in the mornin', maybe. I was feelin' right smart yisterday. It's my lungs, the slow consumption. I think I'll last till I git back to Pap. There has been a good deal of the consumption in our family, an' they most all last." She talked nervously on, breathing heavily between her words. "Haint there a town Eldorader somewheres about here?"

The Colonel flushed painfully. "Yes, this is El Dorado."

"Law me, purty lookin' town!" said the woman, laughing dismally. "Superb's better'n this." She pronounced Superb as though it had but one syllable. "They got a blacksmith shop an' a hardware store there, anyways. I am from nigh Superb, yo' see. We moved there ten years ago, when the country was lookin' mighty green and purty. It's all done burnt up long ago. It's that dry we couldn't raise any garden stuff there these three years. Everything's gone now, exceptin' these horses Pap give me when I was married. No, my man haint with me; he died jist afore we come away. A bull gored him through an' through, an' he crawled outsiden the bob-wire fence and died. It was mighty hard. He didn't want to die there; he craved to die in Mizzoura. We shot the bull and brought t'other cattle with us; but they all died on the way."

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the side of the wagon. Suddenly she roused herself and said:

"Law me, boys, this must be the sto' that man told us on. Yo' see our meat and stuff give out most a week ago, an' we been a livin' on pancakes ever since. We was all gittin' sick, fur we turned agin' 'em, when we met a feller on horseback down the valley, a mighty nice lookin' feller, an' he give us five dollars an' told us we'd find a store someers up here an' could git some groceries."

"It must have been one of them loan company fellows," said the Colonel meditatively. "They still come sneakin' about once in a while, though I don't know what they're after. They haven't left us much but the dirt, an' I reckon that wouldn't do 'em much good if they could carry it off."

"That I can't tell yo'. I never seen him befo', — but he was a mighty kind sort of a feller. He give us the money, and he give me some brandy."

The Colonel helped her out of the wagon, and they went up to the store, while the boys watered the horses. Their purchases were soon made; but the Colonel refused to take their money.

"No, ma'am, I can't do that. You'll need your money before you get to Missouri. It's all in the family, between blood kin like. We're both from the South; and I reckon it would have been enough better for us if we'd never left it."

"Thank yo' mighty kindly, sir. Yo' sholey can't be doin' much business heah; better git in an' go with us. Good day to yo', an' thank you kindly, sir."

The Colonel stood wistfully watching the wagon until it rolled slowly out of sight, and then went back to his store, and with a sigh sat down, — sat down to wait until water came from the rock and verdure from the desert, a sort of Sphinx of the Solomon who sat waiting for the end of time. This was a day when his mind dwelt even more than usual upon his misfortunes, and homesickness was heavy upon him, and he yearned for his own people and the faces of his kindred; for the long Virginia twilights in which he and Major Denney used to sit under the great trees in the courthouse yard, living the siege of Richmond over again; for the old comrades who took a drink with him at the Taylor House bar; for the little children who rolled their hoops before his door every morning, and went nutting with him in the fall; for the Great North Mountains, where the frosts would soon be kindling the maples and hickories into flame; for the soft purple of the Blue Ridge lying off to the eastward; and for that sound which every Virginian hears forever and forever in his dreams, that rhythmic song of deathless devotion, deep and solemn as the cadence of epic verse, which the Potomac and Shenandoah sing to the Virginia shore as they meet

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at Harper's Ferry. To every exile from the Valley of Virginia that sound is as the voice of his mother, bidding him keep his honor clean, and forever calling him to come home. The Colonel had stopped his horse there on the moonlight night in '62 when he rode away to the wars, and listened long to that sound; and looking up at the towering grandeur of Maryland heights above him, he had lifted his hand and sworn the oath that every young Virginian swore and that every young Virginian kept. For if the blood shed for those noble rivers could have been poured into their flood, they would have run crimson to the sea; and it is of that that they sing always as they meet, chanting the story over and over in the moonlight and the sunlight, through time and change unable to forget all that wasted glory of youth, all that heroic love. Before now, when the old man had heard them calling to him in the lonely winter nights, he had bowed his head in his hands and wept in an almost physical passion of homesickness.

Toward evening the clouds banked up in the western sky, and with the night a violent storm set in, one of those drenching rains that always come too late in that country, after a barren summer has waned into a fruitless autumn. For some reason he felt indisposed to go to bed. He sat watching the lightning from the window and listening to the swollen Solomon, that tore between its muddy banks with a sullen roar, as though it resented this intrusion upon its accustomed calm and indolence. Once he thought he saw a light flash from one of the bluffs across the river, but on going to the door all was dark. At last he regretfully put out his lamp and went to bed.

### IV.

That night, a few hours before, when the storm was at its worst, a horseman had come galloping along the bank of the Solomon. He drew rein at the foot of a steep, naked bluff and sat in his saddle looking about him. It was a sorry night for a man to be out. The blackness of the sky seemed to bear down upon him, save when now and then it was ripped from end to end by a jagged thrust of lightning, which rent it like the veil of the temple. At each flash he could see the muddy water of the swollen river whirling along wraiths of white foam over the little shivering willows. Save for that one lonely light across the river, there was no sign of man. He dismounted from his horse and, tying it to a sapling, he took a spade, strapped to the saddle, and began to climb the bluff. The water from the uplands was running down the hill wearing channels in the soft stone and made the grass so slippery that he could scarcely stand. When he reached the top he took a dark lantern from his pocket and lit it, sheltering it under the cape of his mackintosh; then he set it behind a clump of bunch grass. Starting from a lone oak, he carefully paced a distance and began to dig. His clothing was wet through, and even his mackintosh was wet enough to impede his arms. He impatiently threw off everything but his shirt and trousers and fell to work again. His shirt was wet and his necktie hung like a rag under his collar. His black hair hung wet over his white forehead, his brows were drawn together and his teeth were set. His eyes were fixed on the ground, and he worked with the desperation of a man who works to forget. He drove the spade in to the top at every thrust and threw the soggy earth far down the hillside, blistering his white hands with the rigor of his toil. The rain beat ceaselessly in his face and dripped from his hair and mustache; but he never paused save when now and then he heard some strange sound from the river. Then he started, shut off the light from his dark lantern and waited until all was quiet.

When he had been digging for some time, he knelt down and thrust his arm into the hole to feel its depth. Close beside him he heard a shrill, whirring, metallic sound which a man who hears it once remembers to his dying day. He felt a sharp pain in the big vein of his right arm and sprang to his feet with an oath; and then the rattlesnake, having been the avenger of many, slid quietly off through the wet grass.

### V.

Next morning the sun rose radiantly over the valley of the Solomon. The sky was blue and warm as the skies of the South, the hard, straight line of the horizon was softened by a little smokelike haze, and the yellow leaves of the cottonwoods, still wet from the drenching rain, gleamed in the sunshine, and through the scant foliage the

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white bark glittered like polished silver. All the land was washed fresh and clean from the dust of the desert summer. It was a day of opal lights, a day set in a heaven of gold and turquoise and bathed in sapphirine airs; one of those rare and perfect days that happen only in desert countries, where Nature seems sometimes to repent of her own pitilessness and by the glory of her skies seems trying to compensate for the desolation of the lands that stretch beneath them. But when the Colonel came out to view the ravages of the storm the exultant beauty of the morning moved him little. He knew how false it was and how fleeting. He knew how soon Nature forgets. Across the river he heard a horse whinnying in the bushes. Surprised and curious, he went over to see what it might mean. The horse stood, saddled and bridled, among the sumac bushes, and at the back of the saddle carried a long waterproof roll. He seemed uneasy and stood pawing the wet ground and chewing at the withered leaves. Looking about the Colonel could see no rider and he went up the bluff to look for him. And there he found him. About five paces from the oak tree was a newly dug hole, with the spade still sticking upright in the earth. The grass around it was cut and crushed as though it had been beaten by a strong man in his rage. Beside the hole was the body of a man. His shirt was torn open to the waist and was wet and spattered with mud; his left hand was wound in the long grass beside him; his right, swollen and black, was thrown over his head; the eyes were wide open, and the teeth were set hard upon the lower lip. The face was the handsome, dissolute face of Apollo Gump.

The Colonel lifted him up and laid him under the little tree. A glance at his arm told how he died. There was a brandy flask beside him, and the wound had been enlarged with his knife, but the snake had struck a vein and the poison had been too swift. Taking up the spade, the Colonel set to work to finish what the dead man had begun. At a depth of about four feet he found a wooden box, cased in tin. He whistled softly to himself as he loosened the earth about it. So the Gumps had not been so clever, after all; they had brought down more game than they could bag, and at the last moment they had been compelled to bury part of their spoil. For what else on earth or in heaven would Apollo Gump have risked his rascally neck in the Solomon valley?

But no, there was no money, only the picture of the handsome, theatrical looking woman he had seen in Apollo's room, a few spangled stage dresses, a lot of woman's clothing, dainty garments that looked like a trousseau and some tiny gowns made for a little, little baby, that had never been worn. That was all. The Colonel drew a long breath of astonishment, and stood looking at the picture. There, at the back of the saddle, was the waterproof roll which was to have carried it away. This then was Apollo Gump's weakness, and this was the supreme irony that life had held in store for him, that when he had done evil without penalty and all his sins had left him scathless, his one poor virtue should bring him to his death! As the Colonel glanced at that poor distorted body, lying there in the sunlight amid the glistening grasses, he felt for a moment a throb of that old affection he had once known for him. Already the spiders had woven a rainbow web over that set, white face, a gossamer film of protection against man's vengeance; and it seemed as though Nature had already begun her magnificent and complete work of pardon, as though the ground cried out for him, to take him into her forgiving breast and make him again a part of the clean and fruitful earth.

When he searched the dead man's body he found a leather belt and pouch strapped about his waist next his skin. In this were ten thousand dollars in bank notes and a ticket to San Francisco. The Colonel quietly counted the money and put it into his own pocket.

"There, sir, I've waited a long time to square my account with you. You owe me six thousand still, but they say a dead man's debts are cancelled and I'll take your horse and call it square. If there is a recording angel that keeps the run of these things, you can tell him you are square with me and take that much off your poor soul; you'll have enough to answer for without that, God knows."

That afternoon the Colonel dragged up the bluff a long rough box made from weather boards torn from his store. He brought over his best suit of clothes from its odorous camphor chest and with much difficulty succeeded in forcing it on to the stiffened limbs of the dead man.

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"Apollo, I liked you mighty well. It cut me to the heart when you turned rascal, — and you were a damned rascal. But I'll give you a decent burial, because you loved somebody once. I always knew you were too good a fellow for your trade and that you'd trip up in it somewhere. This would never have happened to those precious brothers of yours. I guess I won't say any prayers over you. The Lord knows you better than I do; there have been worse men who have lived and died Christians. If I thought any words of mine could help you out, I'd say 'em free. But the Lord has been forgiving sin from the beginning of the world, till it must have kept him pretty busy before now. He knows his business by this time. But I hope it will go a bit easy with you, Apollo, that I do."

He sunk the box in the hole and made a pillow of the light spangled dresses and laid the dead man in upon them. Over him he laid the picture of the handsome, smiling woman, who was smiling still. And so he buried them.

Next day, having got his money out of the place, the Colonel set fire to his old store and urged his horse eastward, never once casting back a look at the last smoking ruin of El Dorado.

In the spring the sunflowers grew tall and fair over every street and house site; and they grew just as fair over the mound beside the oak tree on the bluff. For if Nature forgets, she also forgives. She at least holds no grudge, up in her high place, where she watches the poles of the heavens. The tree itself has stopped growing altogether. It has concluded that it is not worth the effort. The river creeps lazily through the mud; it knows that the sea would be only a great, dirty, salty pond if it should reach it. Year by year it buries itself deeper in the black mud, and burrows among the rotting roots of the dead willows, wondering why a river should ever have been put there at all.