

## EL DORADO

BY LLOYD MORRIS

THE hour that was to usher me through an unobtrusive door three hundred feet in the air, passed up the street on a windy flaw in failing pulses of chiming sound; and the clock, its signal completed, moved a warning finger of gold one space forward on the black dial registering in terms of Man, the incomputable. Yet I lingered in the throbbing ways below, where all that was purposeful in human life jostled with accomplishment.

I thought as I faltered in my going that the minatory tongue beneath the crocketed spire, bidding men from the marts of stridency to appointed quietudes of prayer, was not greatly dissimilar in harsh utterance from the street car's horatory clangor addressed alike to those who trafficked, and him who loitered in this lane of marque and merchandise. And I wondered if for me this sounding hour of noon knelled something cherished, now to receive meed and gesture of farewell; or was the bright clarion of an emergence richer in fancy and fruition than that of the dreams and wakings which had attended all the earnest days that had been my life's idyll.

History was about me, shuffled into obscure byways by avid years; its outworn braveries cared for by reverent hands. Plumed with futurity, the present, imperious and oppressive, shouldered arrogantly upwards; its terraced loftiness of steel and stone four-square about a House of God that crouched small and weather-stained, in its own iron-gated garden planted all-a-row with seed of perishability.

A few score lives of men and this History will have become touched with the mellowing tones of tradition; and this present taken on the wistful charm of a faded chronicle; but the fevered hope and curse of futurity plumes for ever trodden street and beetling facade.

Here but yesterday the insolence of power was rebuked, and from the declaration of a people free by the redemption of blood, came to hardy nativity a nation ripened now to stature exceeding any ever set down in annaled time. From here but a longbow shot away, some wandering Indian in yet recent day did stand at gaze where there was much mariners' noise, with heave and ho; and wave-scarred argosies limped in to their landfall; or, yielding proudly from the river's sheltering banks, passed with stately carriage of summer clouds, beneath the circle of the sea. And in retired *bouwerij*, a brief promenade onward from where now I stayed, moccasined runner had panted tidings from outfall and foray consummated no distant leagues in space, yet already old in time.

Here, today, in titanesque impressiveness the coffered wealth of nations reposes; obedient in Pactolian flow to pens whose slightest tracteries diminish antique epics of graven stele to pleasing simplicities of quiet story. Here at this high noon in a second's space of time, whispering wires tell of devastation from earth and sky butchering pygmy mankind, and toppling fair cities and gracious landscape to wholesale catastrophe beyond the world's rim where night is still on the land; while from the air tongueless voices call a pentacostal medley of grievous announcings, far-supplications of perilled and lonely men, and manifold divertissements.

To this place on this autumn morning I had come from pursuit of lettered Art and simple sylvan joys; once again in a rough but honored mart to dice with fortune for stake of gold against my very self in future thrall; and on a winning hazard, set cherished hostages free from jeopardy of economic circumstance; and myself turn anew to where a scorned road of little ease goes marvelously on with noble company of knights and dames riding there in gallant mien to El Dorado.

Often beside the smiling Pacific as the declining sun mantled the darkening Sierras with silken gold and purple, opulent hours of friendship took on grace and fragrance of immortality from the frank shy confidences of eager minds exploring the extremities of life and love; but beneath bubble of wit and sober presentment of russet sense, the careful mind of one friend to me brooded over my material occasions and moved to avert my regard from phantasms of ideality, wherein spiritualization was accepted the essence of endeavor, to the display of life's adventure as a deferential obeisance to sociological inexorabilities; to which in duty and wis-

dom I should address myself. For I in youth had duffed the world aside to join those riders to El Dorado; and now the first rime of age touched me to winter of years with small store of economic substance garnered; while on receding horizons in planes of shifting light gleamed and wavered the still uncaptured, still unscaled shining streets and bannered roofs of towered El Dorado.

I do suppose that once to each of us all in some one moment, some one hour comes a great Wonder of enlightenment; which none may tell if it be a perturbation of Divine disquietude, or thing remembered from dead celestial years, or aura of epileptoid significance. That is El Dorado; shining, elusive El Dorado.

It is a fashion of Man that some in their certain day should doubt, extinguish or deny this thin flame of inner visitation which motions the laborer, as seems, to till the barren, reap the stubble, and bring to harvest at life's ending only the unsubstantial husbandry of dreams. To others the manner is to follow secretly, intermitently, in furtive shamefastnesses, or with obsequious expedience of deference to the authorized and customary. A few follow wholly; consistently pursuing a conviction of ideality to its logical extremities of conduct. And once or twice or thrice in our human story comes one that transcends the vision.

The fruits of negation are apples of Sodom plucked in fields of Asphodel; but every human aspiration, every intrepid endeavor is El Dorado. In youth and the prides of life it is the vision of the eye, the sounds in the ear, and all the gay and variant pleasantries of the physical world that rioting in our blood inform our exaltations; till the very linaments of ecstasy seem to lie in the whorl of the flesh, and slumber in the essence of beauty on all the flowing symmetry of unveiled loveliness. But when adolescence is done the fairest image takes on stain of mortality; and our unsophisticated candidness withers and is gone; when it is seen that the ultimate frankness of nature is not beyond question, and indeed utterly is suspect of perpetuating its economy by shallow deceits offered before the human race which so pathetically is eager to be deceived. Romeo and Juliet exchanging vows in the perfumed dusk beneath a heaven painted with bright gold are purely selfish, and in no degree concerned with the continued existence of the *genus homo*. Yet, all their aureate rapture is but the sugared comfit of a prelude whose passion is decreed to an obstetric end: for the concerto of life's orchestration—its most tenderly muted motif of wood-wind; its

triumphancies of polyphonic brass—has for its secret sardonic theme the dignification of the continuity of the human race.

With Isis unveiled and deflowered, the Hegelian Absolute must needs put forth fresh artifice and lure disillusioned mortals anew with philoprogenitiveness, and the pomps and circumstance of corporate life draping our sordid individual ephemerality. But tinsel and tapestry alike wear thin; the very bones of Being grin outwardly through the cunningest fabric; and we turn as in avoidance of a charnel house, away from ideals of the flesh, to where in shifting confusion of splendour, El Dorado reappears in the beautiful austerities of philosophical abstraction.

In calm contemplation of our cold new god, we reflect in contemptuous tranquility on those derogatory days when the delusive snares of the sensory world seemed to have form of loveliness or hold shape and truth of beauty. There is no god but intellect, we cry; and philosophy is its prophet. Nothing to us in our fervor of new servitude is it, except evidence of our present rightness, that to our paens be joined in jangled discordancy, the sorrows of Rachel weeping for her children in hospitals; with crooked backs and crumbling skeletons; or griped with hunger, wolfing through city thoroughfares; or staring up to the sky on sodden battlefields—their emptied skulls pillowed on the soft pudding of their own spilled brains—Nothing, till in the tears of a universe our El Dorado of ethic or metaphysic; esthetic or corporeal perfection—our very categorical imperative crumbles, and totters down through the shallows of utilitarianism into annihilation beneath obliterating tides of sentiment.

To us poor mariners adrift on this perilous sea, every sail on the horizon wafts a galleon more utterly desirable than our own poor hulk; till we board it and find the glittering allurements was only the gold of sunset lacquering the weathered poop of a billow-raked old hull newly come from battling desperate seas in its passage to some homely anchorage; and from its deck the barque we abandoned seems now to have the similitude of a fine tall ship pendent on the mirror of the sea; and bound with jocund company for El Dorado.

It is then the cry goes up from the deeps of human character: "Where is El Dorado that with lance in rest, beaver up and gonfalon blazoned on the streaming wind, we set out to seek and to follow?—What is El Dorado? Is it but many things to many people; and to each a kaleidoscope of idealities shaken into and shaken out of

variant pattern by the sums and differences of psychological states; which have their fervid consciousness at the functional dictate of physiological being?"

For the eye never ceases to look differently upon its local world nor reflection to be of a different temper. Day by day ancient songs tell other tales than those we read into them yesterday. Day by day the Art of forgotten days takes on changing significances and the piled up wisdom of eras yields stranger and simpler conclusions. In the morning of our life we laugh softly to ourselves and say, Thus, will we do, and Thus. At life's heyday we dispose ourselves to conclaves of solemn discourse and grave intents to mould and elevate mankind. In the evening of our days when our importunities, our curses, our ineffective defiance and nugatory efforts are done, we remember the thoughts that we thought in youth; when in the ways of human life appeared no harshness, and our ambition clad itself in shining mail and hewed at Beauty's foes, or with stout lance thrust at enchantments and bore its affection to dazzling palaces forlorn in fantasy. We remember how our stammering tongue could never confess nor our lively eye convey the fulness of our lover's passion, nor exhaust our friendship for a friend. We recall the hour when our exquisite idylls of innocence became pierced by protusion into human affairs of inhuman potentialities; and existence no more appeared a gentle thing of physical delights to our irresponsible young animalities, but presented aspects that appalled; and experience gave such meaning to what before had been mere words of academic definition, that we had perforce to dream stronger dreams of the envy of men and love of women; of being a solid man in the city; a leader of politics; an author of many editions; a painter with a picture well hung on the line; a nice fat balance in the bank, a man of property and perhaps great possessions. In the twilight of life's little day when the physiological timepiece ticks low, and the assured Reason recoiling from pursuit of that which is fugitive to the understanding, is stricken from its heroic complacency, we think on the time when our human spirit entered upon a strong endeavor to discover a corrective to the enigmas that troubled it. We clashed ethic of the Dust with ethics of the Stars; we looked down into the manure that gave delicacy to the hue of the blossoms waving above it; and up to the subtility that weaved the stars in patterns; we searched among the shadows in the eyes of the friend who clasped our hand, and we thought to



read more plainly there when the light of life had been stifled out; we pondered upon the imponderable to part the greater from the less, to grasp faiths and establish theories; we heard the voice of the Absolute in Archangelic Trump and the regurgitatory murmurs of hyperchlorhydria; we hunted the Final Reason from oviduct to a warp in space, and thought to catch and cage it in apparatus and formulae and in temples that we builded and hung with blue and with silver. At nightfall, sitting in the shadow of the Infinite we wonder supinely if any of those hard-won and tremulously cherished beliefs we evolved cloaked Truth, and if they and all that we fabricated and followed were only idols and salve for our offended Ego; and if El Dorado itself is nothing but a cowardly escape, or perchance a pragmatic carrot dangled from the Infinite before our asses' nose. We wonder if the Absolute is pragmatic; if the Pragmatic is absolute; if in the shadows lying beyond human understanding, unnegated by definition, a Celestial Observer looking upon the dissensions comprising human effort sees them each and all of one value and no one of greater delusion than another; and if it be not well for Mankind that there is ever a residuum which evades research and renders the pageant of life a glory of growth that justifies; and not a dirge of decay whose accents are nothing but despair.

El Dorado is nothing till it has ceased to be El Dorado; nothing till it has ceased to be something; nothing but a city of dreams which none shall ever find; though into it all shall ride at last from over the hills and far away; nothing but a great weariness of the flesh till we shall have beheld windmills become whirligigs and Barataria a plain hoax; and seeing have ceased to be offended; and passing through egoism to the Ego are convicted with the positive conviction that the pragmatic cannot endure, and the end of all rationalization is irrational.

Our pursuit of the real has its recalcitrant hours in which we wantonly lubricate our egotisms with the unctuous oil of pragmatism; or are so straitly compelled to palter with Nominalist exiguousness that Inspiration, taking alarm, clutches for defence at the ludicrous; by reducing to cynical paraphrase of catchpenny philosophy the short but vulgar aphorisms of the poor; who question with leery knowingness if it be possible to worship God with cold feet; if it were not well for him who has his head in the clouds to keep his feet in a bun-shop; if spiritual equilibrium is only feasible

on a gold basis, and the path to life's superlatives, a devious motion of planetary economics.

Such insurgence of speculative dubities held me immobilized now in the vortex of the world's traffic; and the cheating devices of caricature were of no present avail to repel the starkly pervasive reflection that whereas in time previous I had extended but small salute of dalliance or *devoir* to the world and yet had it seemed failed to achieve the ineffable; might it not be that here in the booths of the money-changers was not merely all the eye desired and the heart hoped, but that Ideality itself waited to yield happily captive to him who never came.

Here in this Broadhighway no magic casements looked down from cloud-capped towers; yet perhaps Romance was twenty-five floors up in a frowning office building over against the House of God—for did Romance always take the air gorgeously in sumptuous gown and never tread plain ways in hodden gray? The pallid-faced men of immobile mien and snapping diction who had their waking being in dollar frenzies within that vibrant congeries of offices: was that what they visioned of the future forty years since; when chin on knees they embraced their shins and started into the sunbright surface of the "ol' swimmin' hole?" When with the long, long thoughts of youth they stared abroad their little world to kingdoms beyond—was the face that came between their inner eye and the outer heaven, that of the peevish blonde or atrabilious brunette who bears their name? The youth and age of femininity, also, going about their economic business in that economic pen; what thoughts are theirs as they battle age and strain with cosmetics? Was this the El Dorado that glowed in their girlhood's golden dreams? Was the gentle knight who carcolled over their fancy's plain; or the troubadour who luted his *rondelet* in the secret chambers of their heart, the husband over whom the turf is green; the husband absconded to parts unknown; or the loose-lipped wastrel for whom they must leave their day's drugery to drudge anew at night?

Yet, because there is measurability to our knowledge, not alone of ourselves, but of those with whom we have been life-long trencherman and bedfellow in the jog-trot of human association; may it not be that some other insight than the critical faculties could discern within the lives of these lords and conscripts of industry here—and of all who live move and have their being in the common-

place—heroisms of simple duties simply done, sacrifices silently, ungrudgingly, lovingly made, and cherished ambitions denied that have lit for the doers a splendour exceeding any that seemed to them a sacred lamp in the morning of their life? May it not be that in very deed and sober fact there is for us all an ivory gate three hundred feet up or down or at street level; behind which all our rich imaginings, and the wild errantries of our questing souls are caught and held without end in despised beatitudes of drab occupation; and that we have only to put forth our hand and the wicket will roll back on its valves, and our wandering feet from garden of rue, and fields of asphodel shall tread the streets of El Dorado.

Be that as it would; here in this street at this moment of time, decision was to be made whether I followed still the prompting I had ever cherished as El Dorado, and whose effulgencies had been the lure and compensation of laborious years; or whether El Dorado, timed for noon, lay behind an ivory gate no larger round than the tip of my thumb, and Pegasus being foundered, I must ride thither in the express—twenty-fifth floor only—click! click! slam!

In childhood days, old wives tales overheard in chimney nooks when winter's storms fouled all the ways, bound me with spells of fearful delight. I listened to stories of men who, coming victoriously from grim and sudden contest with death by flood and field; had declared life as they had lived it from its earliest recollections even unto that strangling moment, flashed before their eyes glazing upon the verge of dissolution. In later years I came by ways more philosophic to surmise that for all poor souls upon whom are come the ends of Fate the shuttle of Time is reversed; and, even as the physiological embryo epitomises in its foetal history the evolutionary story of the genus; so, at the point between quickness and death there is a process of psychological devolution correspondent to physical disintegration, during which consummated individual existence retraces in swiftest panorama to puling infancy; and the ego crying aloud at the portal of this second threshold of the unknown often ejaculates a parental call; and even seeks mystical passage through the very umbilical cord into the womb that was the earliest shelter of its fleshed Odyssey.

I have seen many men die, and of some roystering metropolitan blades might bear witness that "a babbled o' green fields;" and that some as their last timeous act did from adopted tongues and secular



fields of thought revert to their native Aramic. And not alone, it would seem, is this recessional phenomenon peculiar to crises of Mortality; but those episodic occasions when the conduct of life comes up for sharp settlement, are, also, under its governance to the extent that under present mental and emotional stresses there is a tendency to escape or solve them by retreat to some anterior plan of reference.

Myself in Ultima Thule had both infancy and youth. Age was about my growing years. As preceptors to adolescence there attended me, Romance—in withdrawing rooms fragrant with roseleaf; in paneled halls and oriel-litten galleries hung with panoplies of chivalry; in quiet churchyards; in ancient chantries commemorative of the dust and themselves epitaphic memorials of men's desire so to register himself in the book of life, that later travellers might read and know that here, too, had passed before them, one like unto themselves along the road to El Dorado. Upon me, too, the transcendental laid its impress; when of nightfall the vesper bell ringing across the meres filled my bedchamber with a golden wistfulness of sound. While as the shadows drew out and ruffling winds complained through casement and corridor, and whooped among twisted chimney stacks; I lay, a wisp of human consciousness in my high and carved and curtained bed, and hearing the great bell in the neighbouring church tower strike out its loud curfew, thought of the world that lay beyond the sound of bells, where no king's writ ran and the tongue of episcopacy spake not; and of the time when I should adventure it.

So now under the press of decision in the pulsing heart of modernity, life flashed for me to youth; and at the sound of the bell striking out its harsh monition here where no king's writ ran; I thought on the world that lay beyond the sound of bells where the tongue of episcopacy spake not; and of the time when I should adventure it. . . . and turning aside I went through the iron gate and sat among the rude emblems of mortality.