

# THE RISE OF SILAS LAPHAM

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## WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS





*WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS*  
was born in Martins Ferry,

Ohio, on March 1, 1837. His father was a printer and newspaperman, and the family moved from town to town. Howells went to common school where he could. As a boy he learned the skill of printer's devil; by the time he was in his teens he was setting type for his own verse. Between 1856 and 1861 he worked as a reporter for the *Ohio State Journal*. About this time his novel began to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly*. His campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln, compiled in 1860, prompted the administration to offer him the consulate at Venice, a post he held from 1861 to 1865. He married Anne Corbode Mead, a young woman from Vermont, in 1862 in Paris. On his return to the United States in 1865, Howells worked in New York before going to Boston as assistant to James T. Fields of the *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1871 he became editor in chief of the magazine; in this position he worked with many young writers, among them Mark Twain and Henry James, both of whom became his close friends. His first novel, *Their Wedding Journey*, appeared in 1872. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* was serialized in *Century Magazine* before it was published in book form in 1885. *A Hazard of New Fortunes* was published five years later. Howells' position as critic, writer, and enthusiastic exponent of the new realism earned him the respected title of "dean of American letters." William Dean Howells died in 1920.



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*With an Afterword by*  
HARRY T. MOORE



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## I

WHEN Bartley Hubbard went to interview Silas Lap-  
ham for the "Solid Men of Boston" series, which  
he undertook to finish up in *The Events*, after he re-  
placed their original projector on that newspaper, Lap-  
ham received him in his private office by previous  
appointment.

"Walk right in!" he called out to the journalist, whom  
he caught sight of through the door of the counting room.

He did not rise from the desk at which he was writ-  
ing, but he gave Bartley his left hand for welcome, and  
he rolled his large head in the direction of a vacant  
chair. "Sit down! I'll be with you in just half a minute."

"Take your time," said Bartley, with the ease he in-  
stantly felt. "I'm in no hurry." He took a notebook from  
his pocket, laid it on his knee, and began to sharpen a  
pencil.

"There!" Lapham pounded with his great hairy fist on  
the envelope he had been addressing. "William!" he called  
out, and he handed the letter to a boy who came to get  
it. "I want that to go right away. Well, sir," he contin-  
ued, wheeling 'round in his leather-cushioned swivel  
chair, and facing Bartley, seated so near that their knees  
almost touched, "so you want my life, death, and Chris-  
tian sufferings, do you, young man?"

"That's what I'm after," said Bartley. "Your money  
or your life."

"I guess you wouldn't want my life without the



money," said Lapham, as if he were willing to prolong these moments of preparation.

"Take 'em both," Bartley suggested. "Don't want your money without your life, if you come to that. But you're just one million times more interesting to the public than if you hadn't a dollar; and you know that as well as I do, Mr. Lapham. There's no use beating about the bush."

"No," said Lapham, somewhat absently. He put out his huge foot and pushed the ground-glass door shut between his little den and the bookkeepers, in their larger den outside.

"In personal appearance," wrote Bartley in the sketch for which he now studied his subject, while he waited patiently for him to continue, "Silas Lapham is a fine type of the successful American. He has a square, bold chin, only partially concealed by the short reddish-gray beard, growing to the edges of his firmly closing lips. His nose is short and straight; his forehead good, but broad rather than high; his eyes blue, and with a light in them that is kindly or sharp according to his mood. He is of medium height, and fills an average armchair with a solid bulk, which on the day of our interview was unpretentiously clad in a business suit of blue serge. His head droops somewhat from a short neck, which does not trouble itself to rise far from a pair of massive shoulders."

"I don't know as I know just where you want me to begin," said Lapham.

"Might begin with your birth; that's where most of us begin," replied Bartley.

A gleam of humorous appreciation shot into Lapham's blue eyes.

"I didn't know whether you wanted me to go quite so far back as that," he said. "But there's no disgrace in having been born, and I was born in the state of Vermont, pretty well up under the Canada line—so well up, in fact, that I came very near being an adoptive citizen; for I was bound to be an American of *some* sort, from the word Go! That was about—well, let me see!—pretty near sixty years ago: this is '75, and that was '20. Well, say I'm fifty-five years old; and I've *lived* 'em, too; not

an hour of waste time about *me*, anywheres! I was born on a farm, and——”

“Worked in the fields summers and went to school winters: regulation thing?” Bartley cut in.

“Regulation thing,” said Lapham, accepting this irreverent version of his history somewhat dryly.

“Parents poor, of course,” suggested the journalist. “Any barefoot business? Early deprivations of any kind, that would encourage the youthful reader to go and do likewise? Orphan myself, you know,” said Bartley, with a smile of cynical good comradeship.

Lapham looked at him silently, and then said with quiet self-respect, “I guess if you see these things as a joke, my life won’t interest you.”

“Oh yes, it will,” returned Bartley, unabashed. “You’ll see; it’ll come out all right.” And in fact it did so, in the interview which Bartley printed.

“Mr. Lapham,” he wrote, “passed rapidly over the story of his early life, its poverty and its hardships, sweetened, however, by the recollections of a devoted mother, and a father who, if somewhat her inferior in education, was no less ambitious for the advancement of his children. They were quiet, unpretentious people, religious, after the fashion of that time, and of sterling morality, and they taught their children the simple virtues of the Old Testament and *Poor Richard’s Almanac*.”

Bartley could not deny himself this gibe; but he trusted to Lapham’s unliterary habit of mind for his security in making it, and most other people would consider it sincere reporter’s rhetoric.

“You know,” he explained to Lapham, “that we have to look at all these facts as material, and we get the habit of classifying them. Sometimes a leading question will draw out a whole line of facts that a man himself would never think of.” He went on to put several queries, and it was from Lapham’s answers that he generalized the history of his childhood. “Mr. Lapham, although he did not dwell on his boyish trials and struggles, spoke of them with deep feeling and an abiding sense of their reality.” This was what he added in the interview, and by the time he had got Lapham past the period where risen Americans are all pathetically alike in their narrow circumstances, their sufferings, and their aspirations,



he had beguiled him into forgetfulness of the check he had received, and had him talking again in perfect enjoyment of his autobiography.

"Yes, sir," said Lapham, in a strain which Bartley was careful not to interrupt again, "a man never sees all that his mother has been to him till it's too late to let her know that he sees it. Why, *my mother*——" he stopped. "It gives me a lump in the throat," he said apologetically, with an attempt at a laugh. Then he went on: "She was a little, frail thing, not bigger than a good-sized intermediate schoolgirl; but she did the whole work of a family of boys, and boarded the hired men besides. She cooked, swept, washed, ironed, made and mended from daylight till dark—and from dark till daylight, I was going to say; for I don't know how she got any time for sleep. But I suppose she did. She got time to go to church, and to teach us to read the Bible, and to misunderstand it in the old way. She was *good*. But it ain't her on her knees in church that comes back to me so much like the sight of an angel as her on her knees before me at night, washing my poor, dirty little feet, that I'd run bare in all day, and making me decent for bed. There were six of us boys; it seems to me we were all of a size; and she was just so careful with all of us. I can feel her hands on my feet yet!" Bartley looked at Lapham's No. 10 boots, and softly whistled through his teeth. "We were patched all over; but we wan't ragged. I don't know how she got through it. She didn't seem to think it was anything; and I guess it was no more than my father expected of her. *He* worked like a horse indoors and out—up at daylight, feeding the stock, and groaning 'round all day with his rheumatism, but not stopping."

Bartley hid a yawn over his notebook, and probably, if he could have spoken his mind, he would have suggested to Lapham that he was not there for the purpose of interviewing his ancestry. But Bartley had learned to practice a patience with his victims which he did not always feel, and to feign an interest in their digressions till he could bring them up with a round turn.

"I tell you," said Lapham, jabbing the point of his penknife into the writing pad on the desk before him, "when I hear women complaining nowadays that their

lives are stunted and empty, I want to tell 'em about my *mother's* life. *I* could paint it out for 'em."

Bartley saw his opportunity at the word paint, and cut in. "And you say, Mr. Lapham, that you discovered this mineral paint on the old farm yourself?"

Lapham acquiesced in the return to business. "*I* didn't discover it," he said scrupulously. "My father found it one day, in a hole made by a tree blowing down. There it was, lying loose in the pit, and sticking to the roots that had pulled up a big cake of dirt with 'em. *I* don't know what give him the idea that there was money in it, but he did think so from the start. I guess, if they'd had the word in those days, they'd considered him pretty much of a crank about it. He was trying as long as he lived to get that paint introduced; but he couldn't make it go. The country was so poor they couldn't paint their houses with anything; and Father hadn't any facilities. It got to be a kind of joke with us; and I guess that paint mine did as much as any one thing to make us boys clear out as soon as we got old enough. All my brothers went West, and took up land; but I hung on to New England, and I hung on to the old farm, not because the paint mine was on it, but because the old house was—and the graves. Well," said Lapham, as if unwilling to give himself too much credit, "there wouldn't been any market for it, anyway. You can go through that part of the state and buy more farms than you can shake a stick at for less money than it cost to build the barns on 'em. Of course, it's turned out a good thing. I keep the old house up in good shape, and we spend a month or so there every summer. M'wife kind of likes it, and the girls. Pretty place; sightly all 'round it. I've got a force of men at work there the whole time, and I've got a man and his wife in the house. Had a family meeting there last year; the whole connection from out West. There!" Lapham rose from his seat and took down a large, warped, unframed photograph from the top of his desk, passing his hand over it, and then blowing vigorously upon it, to clear it of the dust. "There we are, *all* of us."

"I don't need to look twice at *you*," said Bartley, putting his finger on one of the heads.

"Well, that's Bill," said Lapham, with a gratified laugh. "He's about as brainy as any of us, I guess. He's one of

their leading lawyers, out Dubuque way; been judge of the Common Pleas once or twice. That's his son—just graduated at Yale—alongside of my youngest girl. Good-looking chap, ain't he?"

"*She's* a good-looking chap," said Bartley, with prompt irreverence. He hastened to add, at the frown which gathered between Lapham's eyes, "What a beautiful creature she is! What a lovely, refined, sensitive face! And she looks *good*, too."

"*She is* good," said the father, relenting.

"And, after all, that's about the best thing in a woman," said the potential reprobate. "If my wife wasn't good enough to keep both of us straight, I don't know what would become of me."

"My other daughter," said Lapham, indicating a girl with eyes that showed large, and a face of singular gravity. "Mis' Lapham," he continued, touching his wife's effigy with his little finger. "My brother Willard and his family—farm at Kankakee. Hazard Lapham and his wife—Baptist preacher in Kansas. Jim and his three girls—milling business at Minneapolis. Ben and his family—practicing medicine in Fort Wayne."

The figures were clustered in an irregular group in front of an old farmhouse, whose original ugliness had been smartened up with a coat of Lapham's own paint, and heightened with an incongruous piazza. The photographer had not been able to conceal the fact that they were all decent, honest-looking, sensible people, with a very fair share of beauty among the young girls; some of these were extremely pretty, in fact. He had put them into awkward and constrained attitudes, of course; and they all looked as if they had the instrument of torture which photographers call a headrest under their occiputs. Here and there an elderly lady's face was a mere blur; and some of the younger children had twitched themselves into wavering shadows, and might have passed for spirit photographs of their own little ghosts. It was the standard family-group photograph, in which most Americans have figured at some time or other; and Lapham exhibited a just satisfaction in it. "I presume," he mused aloud, as he put it back on top of his desk, "that we shan't soon get together again, all of us."

"And you say," suggested Bartley, "that you stayed



right along on the old place, when the rest cleared out West?"

"No-o-o-o," said Lapham, with a long, loud drawl; "I cleared out West too, first off. Went to Texas. Texas was all the cry in those days. But I got enough of the Lone Star in about three months, and I come back with the idea that Vermont was good enough for me."

"Fatted calf business?" queried Bartley, with his pencil poised above his notebook.

"I presume they were glad to see me," said Lapham, with dignity. "Mother," he added gently, "died that winter, and I stayed on with Father. I buried him in the spring; and then I came down to a little place called Lumberville, and picked up what jobs I could get. I worked 'round at the sawmills, and I was ostler awhile at the hotel—I always *did* like a good horse. Well, I *wan't* exactly a college graduate, and I went to school odd times. I got to driving the stage after while, and by and by I *bought* the stage and run the business myself. Then I hired the tavern stand, and—well, to make a long story short—then I got married. Yes," said Lapham, with pride, "I married the schoolteacher. We did pretty well with the hotel, and my wife, she was always at me to paint up. Well, I put it off, and *put* it off, as a man will, till one day I give in, and says I, 'Well, *let's* paint up. Why, Pert'—m'wife's name's Persis—'I've got a whole paint mine out on the farm. Let's go out and look at it.' So we drove out. I'd let the place for seventy-five dollars a year to a shif'less kind of a Kanuck that had come down that way; and I'd hated to see the house with him in it; but we drove out one Saturday afternoon, and we brought back about a bushel of the stuff in the buggy seat, and I tried it crude, and I tried it burnt; and I liked it. M'wife, she liked it too. There wan't any painter by trade in the village, and I mixed it myself. Well, sir, that tavern's got that coat of paint on it yet, and it hain't ever had any other, and I don't know's it ever will. Well, you know, I felt as if it was a kind of harumscarum experiment, all the while; and I presume I shouldn't have tried it, but I kind of liked to do it because Father'd always set so much store by his paint mine. And when I'd got the first coat on"—Lapham called it *cut*—"I presume I must have set as much as half an hour, looking at it

and thinking how he would have enjoyed it. I've had my share of luck in this world, and I ain't a-going to complain on my *own* account, but I've noticed that most things get along too late for most people. It made me feel bad, and it took all the pride out my success with the paint, thinking of Father. Seemed to me I mighta taken more interest in it when he was by to see; but we've got to live and learn. Well, I called my wife out—I'd tried it on the back of the house, you know—and she left her dishes—I can remember she came out with her sleeves rolled up and set down alongside of me on the trestle—and says I, 'What do you think, Persis?' And says she, 'Well, you hain't got a paint mine, Silas Lapham; you've got a *gold* mine.' She always was just so enthusiastic about things. Well, it was just after two or three boats had burned up out West, and a lot of lives lost, and there was a great cry about noninflammable paint, and I guess that was what was in her mind. 'Well, I guess it ain't any gold mine, Persis,' says I; 'but I guess it *is* a paint mine. I'm going to have it analyzed, and if it turns out what I think it is, I'm going to work it. And if Father hadn't had such a long name, I should call it the Nehemiah Lapham Mineral Paint. But, any rate, every barrel of it, and every keg, and every bottle, and every package, big or little, has got to have the initials and figures N. L. f. 1835, S. L. t. 1855, on it. Father found it in 1835, and I tried it in 1855.' "

" 'S. T.—1860—X.' business," said Bartley.

"Yes," said Lapham, "but I hadn't heard of Plantation Bitters then, and I hadn't seen any of the fellow's labels. I set to work and I got a man down from Boston; and I carried him out to the farm, and he analyzed it—made a regular job of it. Well, sir, we built a kiln, and we kept a lot of that paint ore red hot for forty-eight hours; kept the Kanuck and his family up, firing. The presence of iron in the ore showed with the magnet from the start; and when he came to test it, he found out that it contained about seventy-five percent of the peroxide of iron."

Lapham pronounced the scientific phrases with a sort of reverent satisfaction, as if awed through his pride by a little lingering uncertainty as to what peroxide was.



He accented it as if it were *purr-ox-eyed*; and Bartley had to get him to spell it.

"Well, and what then?" he asked, when he had made a note of the percentage.

"What then?" echoed Lapham. "Well, then, the fellow set down and told me, 'You've got a paint here,' says he, 'that's going to drive every other mineral paint out of the market. Why,' says he, 'it'll drive 'em right into the Back Bay!' Of course, I didn't know what the Back Bay was then; but I begun to open my eyes; thought I'd had 'em open before, but I guess I hadn't. Says he, 'That paint has got hydraulic cement in it, and it can stand fire and water and acids'; he named over a lot of things. Says he, 'It'll mix easily with linseed oil, whether you want to use it boiled or raw; and it ain't a-going to crack nor fade any; and it ain't a-going to scale. When you've got your arrangements for burning it properly, you're going to have a paint that will stand like the everlasting hills, in every climate under the sun.' Then he went into a lot of particulars, and I begun to think he was drawing a longbow, and meant to make his bill accordingly. So I kept pretty cool; but the fellow's bill didn't amount to anything hardly—said I might pay him after I got going; young chap, and pretty easy; but every word he said was gospel. Well, I ain't a-going to brag up my paint; I don't suppose you came here to hear me blow——"

"Oh yes, I did," said Bartley. "That's what I want. Tell all there is to tell, and I can boil it down afterward. A man can't make a greater mistake with a reporter than to hold back anything out of modesty. It may be the very thing we want to know. What we want is the whole truth; and more; we've got so much modesty of our own that we can temper almost any statement."

Lapham looked as if he did not quite like this tone, and he resumed a little more quietly. "Oh, there isn't really very much more to say about the paint itself. But you can use it for almost anything where a paint is wanted, inside or out. It'll prevent decay, and it'll stop it, after it's begun, in tin or iron. You can paint the inside of a cistern or a bathtub with it, and water won't hurt it; and you can paint a steam boiler with it, and heat won't. You can cover a brick wall with it, or a railroad

car, or the deck of a steamboat, and you can't do a better thing for either."

"Never tried it on the human conscience, I suppose," suggested Bartley.

"No, sir," replied Lapham gravely. "I guess you want to keep that as free from paint as you can, if you want much use of it. I never cared to try any of it on mine." Lapham suddenly lifted his bulk up out of his swivel chair, and led the way out into the wareroom beyond the office partitions, where rows and ranks of casks, barrels, and kegs stretched dimly back to the rear of the building, and diffused an honest, clean, wholesome smell of oil and paint. They were labeled and branded as containing each so many pounds of Lapham's Mineral Paint, and each bore the mystic devices *N. L. f. 1835—S. L. t. 1855*. "There!" said Lapham, kicking one of the largest casks with the toe of his boot, "that's about our biggest package; and here," he added, laying his hand affectionately on the head of a very small keg, as if it were the head of a child, which it resembled in size, "this is the smallest. We used to put the paint on the market dry, but now we grind every ounce of it in oil—very best quality of linseed oil—and warrant it. We find it gives more satisfaction. Now, come back to the office, and I'll show you our fancy brands."

It was very cool and pleasant in that dim wareroom, with the rafters showing overhead in a cloudy perspective, and darkening away into the perpetual twilight at the rear of the building; and Bartley had found an agreeable seat on the head of a half barrel of the paint, which he was reluctant to leave. But he rose and followed the vigorous lead of Lapham back to the office, where the sun of a long summer afternoon was just beginning to glare in at the window. On shelves opposite Lapham's desk were tin cans of various sizes, arranged in tapering cylinders, and showing, in a pattern diminishing toward the top, the same label borne by the casks and barrels in the wareroom. Lapham merely waved his hand toward these; but when Bartley, after a comprehensive glance at them, gave his whole attention to a row of clean, smooth jars, where different tints of the paint showed through flawless glass, Lapham smiled, and waited in pleased expectation.

"Hello!" said Bartley. "That 's pretty!"

"Yes," assented Lapham, "it is rather nice. It's our latest thing, and we find it takes with customers first rate. Look here!" he said, taking down one of the jars and pointing to the first line of the label.

Bartley read, "THE PERSIS BRAND," and then he looked at Lapham and smiled.

"After *her*, of course," said Lapham. "Got it up and put the first of it on the market her last birthday. She was pleased."

"I should think she might have been," said Bartley, while he made a note of the appearance of the jars.

"I don't know about your mentioning it in your interview," said Lapham dubiously.

"That's going into the interview, Mr. Lapham, if nothing else does. Got a wife myself, and I know just how you feel." It was in the dawn of Bartley's prosperity on *The Boston Events*, before his troubles with Marcia had seriously begun.

"Is that so?" said Lapham, recognizing with a smile another of the vast majority of married Americans; a few underrate their wives, but the rest think them supernal in intelligence and capability. "Well," he added, "we must see about that. Where'd you say you lived?"

"We don't live; we board. Mrs. Nash, 13 Canary Place."

"Well, we've all got to commence that way," suggested Lapham consolingly.

"Yes; but we've about ~~got to the~~ end of our string. I expect to be under a ~~roof of my own~~ on Clover Street before long. I suppose," said Bartley, returning to business, "that you didn't ~~let the grass~~ grow under your feet much after you found out what was in your paint mine?"

"No, sir," answered Lapham, withdrawing his eyes from a long stare at Bartley, in which he had been seeing himself a young man again, in the first days of his married life. "I went right back to Lumberville and sold out everything, and put all I could rake and scrape together into paint. And Mis' Lapham was with me every time. No hang back about *her*. I tell you she was a *woman*!"

Bartley laughed. "That's the sort most of us marry."

"No, we don't," said Lapham. "Most of us marry silly little girls grown up to *look* like women."



“Well, I guess that’s about so,” assented Bartley, as if upon second thought.

“If it hadn’t been for her,” resumed Lapham, “the paint wouldn’t have come to anything. I used to tell her it wan’t the seventy-five percent of purr-ox-eyed of iron in the *ore* that made that paint go; it was the seventy-five percent of purr-ox-eyed of iron in *her*.”

“Good!” cried Bartley. “I’ll tell Marcia that.”

“In less’n six months there wan’t a board fence, nor a bridge girder, nor a dead wall, nor a barn, nor a face of rock in that whole region that didn’t have ‘Lapham’s Mineral Paint—Specimen’ on it in the three colors we begun by making.” Bartley had taken his seat on the windowsill, and Lapham, standing before him, now put up his huge foot close to Bartley’s thigh; neither of them minded that.

“I’ve heard a good deal of talk about that S. T.—1860—X. man, and the stove-blackening man, and the kidney-cure man, because they advertised in that way; and I’ve read articles about it in the papers; but I don’t see where the joke comes in, exactly. So long as the people that own the barns and fences don’t object, I don’t see what the public has got to do with it. And I never saw anything so very sacred about a big rock, along a river or in a pasture, that it wouldn’t do to put mineral paint on it in three colors. I wish some of the people that talk about the landscape, and *write* about it, had to bu’st one of them rocks *out* of the landscape with powder, or dig a hole to bury it in, as we used to have to do up on the farm; I guess they’d sing a little different tune about the profanation of scenery. There ain’t any man enjoys a sightly bit of nature—a smooth piece of interval with half a dozen good-sized wine-glass elms in it—more than *I* do. But I ain’t a-going to stand up for every big ugly rock I come across, as if we were all a set of dumn Druids. I say the landscape was made for man, and not man for the landscape.”

“Yes,” said Bartley carelessly; “it was made for the stove-polish man and the kidney-cure man.”

“It was made for any man that knows how to use it,” Lapham returned, insensible to Bartley’s irony. “Let ’em go and live with nature in the *winter*, up there along