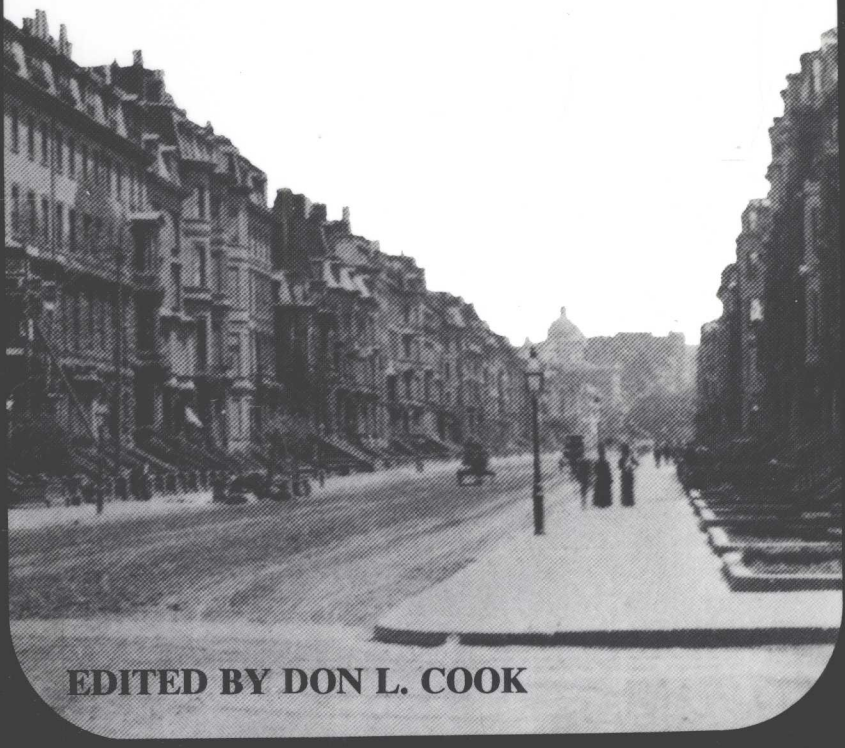
A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

The Rise of Silas Lapham

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS



EDITED BY DON L. COOK

AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
COMPOSITION AND BACKGROUNDS
CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES
CRITICISM

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Edited by
DON L. COOK
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

W • W • NORTON & COMPANY
New York *London*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Howells, William Dean, 1837–1920.
The Rise of Silas Lapham.
(A Norton critical edition)
Bibliography: p.
1. Howells, William Dean, 1837–1920. The rise
of Silas Lapham. I. Cook, Don Lewis, 1928– II.
Title.
PZ3.H84Ri 1980 [PS2025] 813'.4 80–12149

4 5 6 7 8 9 0

ISBN 0-393-04433-5
ISBN 0-393-09165-1 {PBK.}

Preface

The reputation of William Dean Howells (1837–1920) has varied enormously over the years and is still far from settled. After a childhood of poverty and hard work in his father's Ohio printing office he became a newspaper reporter. Though he had little formal schooling, he taught himself foreign languages and literatures, and began publishing poems, first in local newspapers and finally in the prestigious *Atlantic* magazine. A campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln, written for the election of 1860, earned Howells an appointment as American consul in Venice, and it was there that he completed his literary apprenticeship, writing poems, travel letters, and translations and criticisms of Italian literature which he sent back to the United States for publication. Shortly after his return to America in 1865 he became assistant editor of the *Atlantic,* and settled in Boston. He succeeded to the chief-editorship in 1871 and, during the next ten years, established himself as a major essayist, novelist, and literary critic as well as a sponsor of foreign and domestic authors as yet unfamiliar to the American reading public. He was the early advocate and friend of Henry James and Mark Twain, and later defended and explained the works of Ibsen, Tolstoy, Zola, Turgenev, and many others to an often hostile public. By the end of the century Howells was recognized as the semi-official "dean of American letters," had received honorary degrees from Yale, Columbia, Princeton, and Oxford universities (he had long before refused a professorship at Harvard), and was elected first president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. But during the next two decades changing public tastes and the self-assertive rejection of Howells' quiet realism by a new generation of writers diminished his readership and fastened on him the damning labels of "tea-cup realist" and "pious Victorian." It was not until after World War II that a revival of interest in Howells began. Even now, though a handful of his novels are recognized as American classics, the unavailability of most of his books and the resulting unawareness of the scope and quality of his works, even among generally well-informed readers, keep his reputation well below that of many of his contemporaries.

One aim of this volume is to make available to the largest possible reading public a reliable text of Howells' most popular novel, along with a record of the major variants that he chose, or was forced, to

introduce into its subsequent editions. The text printed here is that of *A Selected Edition of W. D. Howells,* published by the Indiana University Press in 1971. That text was established by Walter J. Meserve and David J. Nordloh, who selected as their copy-text the novel as it was serialized in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* in ten installments between 8 October 1884 and 11 July 1885. Then, after careful examination of the seven other English and American editions and impressions over which Howells may have had some control, they introduced into the serial text those alterations that they felt represented Howells' intentions rather than the editorial stylings and inadvertent corruptions that occured in the printing plants. They were at all times reluctant to alter the serial text since it was the text closest to Howells' manuscript (no longer extant) and involved the least opportunity for departures from what Howells had written. The decisions to emend this text were based on research in the correspondence between Howells and his publishers, friends, and readers (some of that correspondence is reproduced in this volume), and on records of the publishing houses and the copyright depositories. The fascinating details of this scholarly detective work can be found in the Textual Apparatus section of the Indiana University Press volume, a feature of all the volumes that bear the seal of textual reliability awarded, after scrupulous inspection, by the Modern Language Association's Center for Editions of American Authors.

This Critical Edition provides the surviving sources of Howells' story and the author's comments (as well as some of the advice he received) on the composition of the book. Like most enduring works of popular fiction, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* embodies (often critically) some of the deep, even subconscious, public attitudes and values prevalent at the time the book was written. The second group of letters and articles focuses attention on some of these popular myths and on the way Howells uses them to comment on American society. The initial responses to the book, both from his literary friends and from the often hostile book reviewers, are provided in order to help the reader see the book in its historical context. There follows a series of critical articles written from the perspective of years, articles chosen not only because they say sound and stimulating things about Howells' book, but because they illustrate the diversity of critical viewpoints from which *The Rise of Silas Lapham* has been fruitfully examined. And, finally, a group of articles considers the book and its author as literary-historical phenomena, as products and agents of an intellectual and literary movement away from an ideal, romantic conception of the individual and society and toward a realistic, pragmatic acceptance of the limited choices and virtues with which people have to get by in the world in which they find themselves.

I wish to thank the scholars whose work is reprinted in this volume as well as the many others who continue to contribute to the dialogue that helps each of us better to understand what an author has written and what we can sensibly read out of it. I am particularly indebted to Edwin H. Cady and David J. Nordloh for their generous contributions to my understanding of Howells and his age, and to Jerry Herron for assistance in research.

DON L. COOK

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The Text of
The Rise of Silas Lapham

I

WHEN BARTLEY HUBBARD went to interview Silas Lapham for the "Solid Men of Boston" series, which he undertook to finish up in "The Events," after he replaced their original projector on that newspaper, Lapham received him in his private office by previous appointment.[1]

"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 writing, 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 instantly felt. "I'm in no hurry." He took a note-book 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 continued, 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 Christian 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 book-keepers, 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

1. Bartley Hubbard and his wife Marcia Gaylord Hubbard are the central characters in Howells' novel *A Modern Instance*, where they are divorced after Bartley's journalistic career, and his personality, degenerate.

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 arm-chair 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 comradery.

Lapham looked at him silently, and then said with quiet self-respect, "I guess if you see these things as a joke, my life wont inter*est* 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."[2]

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 school-girl; 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—

2. *Poor Richard's Almanac* was published by Benjamin Franklin and contained such good advice as "A penny saved is a penny earned," and "Early to bed and early to rise make a man healthy wealthy and wise."

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 aint 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 wa'n'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 in doors 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 note-book, 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, laying 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.[3] 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, aint 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

3. The paint mine consists of a deposit of an iron compound which when burned, pulverized, and mixed with linseed oil produces a high-quality paint.