

THE RISE OF SILAS LAPHAM

By

WILLIAM D. HOWELLS

With an Introduction by

HOWARD MUMFORD JONES



Geoffrey Cumberlege

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

London New York Toronto

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

Born: Martin's Ferry, Belmont County,
Ohio

1 March 1837

Died: New York

11 May 1920

The Rise of Silas Lapham was first published in Boston in 1885. The first British edition was published in Edinburgh in the same year. In The World's Classics it was first published in 1948 and reprinted in 1950

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

The World's Classics

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**THE RISE OF
SILAS LAPHAM**

Oxford University Press, Amen House, London E.C. 4

GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS CAPE TOWN

Geoffrey Cumberlege, Publisher to the University

INTRODUCTION

The Rise of Silas Lapham was Howells's eighteenth book and eleventh novel (if one disregards minor titles) and was published in 1885 when the author was forty-eight years old. It stands in relation to his writing as *Tom Jones* or *Vanity Fair* or *Barchester Towers* stands in relation to the work of other novelists; that is, it is the title which comes immediately to mind when Howells's name is mentioned. Indeed, persons have read *Lapham* who know no other work by Howells. In one sense this is unfortunate. Howells published *A Modern Instance* in 1882, and the experienced reader senses something ominous when he opens *The Rise of Silas Lapham* to discover Bartley Hubbard, hero-villain of the earlier book, interviewing the Colonel. It is also unfortunate that more readers do not know such later works as *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), *The Quality of Mercy* (1892), *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897), and *The Son of Royal Langbrith* (1904), in which themes explicit or implied in the Lapham problem are developed. Finally, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is one of the earlier novels to show Howells's growing appreciation of Tolstoy's realism, an influence apparent in the sympathetic study of family relationships which furnishes the substance of the tale.

But our present business is with the Colonel and not with Howells's total career. And the place to begin one's study of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is where the novel begins—in Boston. In one sense the theme of the book is universal. In another sense no one can fully understand either the substructure or the nuances of the novel unless he has steeped himself in the history of Boston, particularly after the Civil War. No book by Howells is more thoroughly rooted in St. Botolph's town. Not only is the action principally conducted in the Massachusetts capital and its nearby suburbs—

across the Mill Dam to Brookline or by steamer to Nahant—but the names and local references have a flavour and vitality that have special meaning to Bostonians.

The obvious and exportable Boston problem is of course (the conflict in values and points of view between the Corey family and the Laphams.) We are to take Bromfield Corey as representative of (the Brahmin class) first amusingly described by Oliver Wendell Holmes in the first chapter of *Elsie Venner* in 1861.

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The suave culture of pre-Civil War Boston, after the termination of that struggle, was confronted even in the Hub of the Universe by a rising, untutored, wealthy group. In one sense this conflict is general in the nineteenth century and may be followed in Balzac and Stendhal. In another sense the very localism of Howells, who, if not a Bostonian by birth, was at least Boston-plated, gives this conflict special significance. The accuracy of his picture is borne out in this description of the change in Boston business habits by a writer who lived through it:

Before 'Appomatox' the banker and merchant appeared upon State Street, the business center, about ten o'clock in the morning, conventionally dressed, precise in movement and habituated to archaic methods. Within six months after the fall of the Confederacy the financial centers of the 'Hub' vitalized by the inflow of new and very red blood, had taken on the aspect which is familiar to this generation. Everything that interfered with serviceable activity was set aside. Tall hats and long coats disappeared. Office doors swung open in the early hours. Young faces were found on 'Change', in the street, everywhere. New names appeared at the head of great industrial enterprises. Boys who had gone to the War as junior officers had brought back honorable titles which vouched for responsibility, character and daring. . . . You can't, if you will, hold down a Captain, a Colonel, a General, who has earned and won the admiration of the public, and who has tested his own worth.

So it is in the novel that the Boston of culture em-

bodied in Bromfield Corey confronted the aggressive wealth and coarser values of Silas Lapham. (Howells, a kindly man, resolved the conflict by discovering business ability in young Tom Corey and native refinement in Penelope Lapham.) The solution does credit to the novelist's heart, but one wonders why he wrote no sequel, which might have revealed much.

A Boston fact less obvious is Lapham's new house. (This was rising on the 'New Land' and on the water side of Beacon Street when it was destroyed.) As the book opens the Laphams have been living comfortably in Nankeen Square in the South End, and only Silas wants to move. The social significance of this matter may escape the casual reader, for it refers to a Bostonian phenomenon. When Beacon Hill filled up, Bostonian gentry developed what is known as the South End into a second socially acceptable area. To this day the lovely little squares suggestive of London, the rows of 'swell front' brick houses, the iron balconies, the trees, and the platting of this part of Boston show how charming the Victorian world could be. But at the opening of the eighties, for inexplicable reasons, the tide of fashion turned from the South End to the filled-in lands known as Back Bay; and it is to this district on the banks of the Charles River that the Colonel wishes to go, thinking (as Bromfield Corey once stipulates) that the gates of Society, if they cannot open on golden hinges, may perhaps be crashed. (The burning of the new house is therefore both material and symbolical, representing Lapham's growing awareness that the kingdom of heaven is not to be seized by violence.)

The Corey family next deserves our comment. There are in Howells's handling of them a good many loose ends. In the first place, Bromfield Corey is too passive to be effective except as a commentator; and Howells apparently sought to embody the vitality of old Boston in his son. In the second place, the Corey fortunes shrink, we are told; yet nothing effective

follows from what would appear to be a plot datum of significance. In the third place, there are two Corey daughters who, wraiths that they are, hover on the edge of the story. Did Howells intend some parallel between the bankruptcy of Lapham and the dwindling Corey income? Did he intend to show that Bromfield Corey had a principle of action in him as Lapham grew more and more ineffective? And why two Corey sisters, unless some undeveloped parallel was intended with the Lapham girls?

There are no loose ends in the character of Mrs. Corey, a matron who frightens me. In her Howells incarnated the Boston matriarchate, a powerful and sometimes a divisive force in Brahmin society. So far as he dislikes anybody, Howells dislikes Mrs. Corey, whose calls upon the Laphams are etched in acid. But what did he intend the relations of mother and son to be? Mrs. Corey yields with suspicious readiness to a matrimonial prospect she dislikes; and I, for one, do not feel the battle is over when Penelope marries Tom. As Howells says at the end of the book, our manners and customs go for more in life than our qualities. Did he mean that Penelope was not educable in the Corey sense?

No novelist can be made to write what he does not want to write; but it must be said that Howells's Boston is an entirely Anglo-Saxon Boston. The fact that the greater part of its population was Irish, Italian, Jewish, and the like newer Americans could never be guessed from the novel. Our only glimpse into the life of the poor is a visit to 'Miss Dewey's' home, and it would appear that Howells was unaware of what Boston slums were in reality, just as he was unaware of the racial and religious tensions in his beloved town. And there are no politicians in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

If we turn from the Corey family to the Lapham household we face the true glory of the tale. The Colonel remains to this day the best portrait in

American letters of an up-state New Englander. His nearest rival is David Harum of New York state, but there is little tragic strength in Harum, whereas Lapham is as solid as (the granite of the Vermont) from which he comes. Whether in his conversation or in his silences, in prosperity or adversity, flushed with wine at the Corey dinner table (that painful, yet deliciously comic scene) or humbly consulting the minister after Tom's proposal to Penelope is known, Lapham is essentially himself, three-dimensional and foursquare. And it is a mark of the real greatness of Howells that, creating Silas, he was also able to create his wife who lives in her own right as a powerful, uneducated person, and whose relation to her husband is instinctively understood by the novelist and presented as a profound value, silent and enduring. It is sometimes said that to create a good woman in fiction who is also interesting is impossible; if this be so, Howells triumphs over an impossibility.

Controversy over the Lapham girls has continued ever since the novel first appeared. Howells is generally unsurpassed among American novelists in portraying the *jeune fille* of his period. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* he has in some sense triumphed with the well-worn device of two contrasting sisters in love with the same man. These sisters are seen in isolation from their own generation of youth, so that we are made aware of them only in the family relationship. They have no friends and no admirers except Tom Corey. Howells may have deliberately intended this as a fictional device to make the resulting complication more serious, but it threw upon him a responsibility he sought, as it were, to avoid. Novelists and dramatists are ill-advised in most cases to keep an important plot secret from the reader; and close reading will show that Howells drops a good many hints about the state of Tom Corey's affections before they are made known to the Laphams. But most readers do not see the significance of these hints and rather feel

that Howells has taken an unfair advantage of them for the cheap satisfaction of springing a surprise on everybody. Keeping this secret down, so to speak, means that Howells is unable to show any clear reason why Penelope rather than Irene should attract Corey because, through dramatizing the Irene-Tom relationship, he wishes to make the surprise more drastic and the tension more powerful. But this in turn induces a second difficulty, which is that since Irene rather than Penelope has been mostly in our eyes, it is hard to believe in Tom's continuing attachment to Penelope through a series of events, emotions, and messages that make no sense to him. It is fortunate that the novel preceded the common use of the telephone; but even so, one wonders why an ardent lover does not storm the fortress, or at least write in more burning terms than a Corey can manage. In truth, once Howells has got Tom down to Nahant, the conditions of the plot compel him to lose interest in the hero as a person; he becomes merely the occasion of tension in the Lapham family and quite fades out at the end.

The management of the plot is, I think, the real weakness here, and not, as hasty contemporary critics allege, that too much fuss is made over a trivial incident. Uninformed readers sometimes grow impatient with the emotional and ethical nuances in the Lapham family and, if they knew the word, would dismiss these as so much *marivaudage*. But the modern reader is not invariably to be trusted. Matrimony is not precisely a trivial matter even now; and even in the most advanced circles Irene's misinterpretation of Corey's friendliness would, one suspects, lead to very similar scenes. (How much more, then, would complexities pile up in the isolated Lapham circle! How much deeper the hurt in that forgotten world of the eighties, where 'young ladies' expected young men to ask permission to 'correspond'!) Possibly Howells tries to hold the situation too long, squeezing every ounce of value out of it; possibly his two plots inter-

fere with each other, but does not the very truth to life in his study of Irene and Penelope still have power to hurt and irritate those who are put off by it? And is not this a tribute to his success?

In one sense *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is the old, old tale humanity never tires of, though it never follows precept by example. It is a delicate preachment on the text not to lay up treasures on earth. (Howells in this respect is one with Thackeray, Trollope, George Eliot, and the other great Victorians.) His characters grow or fail in moral grace as characters rarely do in contemporary fiction. His kindly morality gave him measure and value; and measure is precisely what is mainly to seek in recent novels. He is therefore in American fiction what Trollope is to English literature; and precisely as there has been a return to Trollope in order to rediscover a world we have lost, so there will yet be a return to Howells in order to reevaluate American society and American family life.

HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

CAMBRIDGE
MASSACHUSETTS
March 1947

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.

'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 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-grey 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-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 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 generalised 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—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 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 pro-

bably, 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 practise 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—practising medicine in Fort Wayne.'