

THE RISE OF  
SILAS  
LAPHAM

HOWELLS



# THE RISE OF

## *Silas Lapham*

BY WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

INTRODUCTION BY HARRY HAYDEN CLARK

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN



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## Introduction



by HARRY HAYDEN CLARK

*The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) by William Dean Howells is now generally recognized as perhaps the most representative of those novels which attempt to present realistically American life of their era. This book mirrors the rise of the newly rich and socially aspiring families in the years following the Civil War—years in which the nation, and especially Boston and its hinterland, was to be transformed by the rapid growth of its industry and business.

### I

If, broadly speaking, the central theme of *Lapham* is the character of the self-made man and the problems his family faces in getting itself accepted socially by a supposedly superior class, Howells was peculiarly prepared to understand the situation and the “psychology” involved because, while the book is not literally autobiographical, he was himself self-made and the problems of the Laphams were in general terms problems he had himself faced.

Born in 1837 in a small Ohio town in a family of eight children, Howells shows in his *Years of My Youth* and *My Year in a Log Cabin* that his own beginnings were about as humble and rustic as those of Lapham. He had only a grammar-school education, supplemented by helping his father set type in the office of a rural newspaper and by much independent reading later described in *My Literary Passions*. (Lapham, of course, is not a reader of good books, but his daughter Penelope is, and Howells suggests that her reading is to be her passport to acceptance among the Boston aristocrats.) Like Lapham, Howells had come to Boston from a rustic background. Like Penelope,

Howells had married into an established and genteel New England family (the Meads), and his wife was a cousin of President Hayes, who occasionally invited them to the White House. And so Howells must have known something at first hand of the seemingly trivial but yet vitally important difficulties of adapting himself to "high society" manners and customs. On the other hand, as a reward for writing a campaign biography of Lincoln, Howells was able to spend four years (1861-65) as American consul in Venice, an experience which led him to observe and understand much-travelled Italianate Americans such as Bromfield Corey, deracinated, amateurishly devoted to painting, living on an inherited income, making a fetish of good taste as something entirely foreign to the American workaday world. Yet Howells could appreciate the charm and essential honor behind such a façade.

Few outsiders have ever won such acceptance by the cultured aristocracy of Boston: after serving as editor-in-chief of the *Atlantic Monthly* (1871-81), Howells was offered the Harvard professorship honored by such Brahmins as Longfellow and Lowell. And yet, wined and dined as he was by the Brahmins and given opportunities for observing their manners and customs intimately, Howells left Boston in 1888, three years after writing *Lapham*, and it is likely he never became completely adapted to the environment of aristocratic Boston. His experience, however, helped to burn into his mind one of his major themes, and helped to give vitality and appeal to *Lapham*. As Professor E. H. Cady concludes,

Throughout Howells's novels runs a recurrent theme. A naturally gentle but socially inexperienced person encounters a person established in society from birth. The character from Best Society always has either a defect of sensibility or a snobbish mental block which makes him permanently or temporarily inferior. This is the conflict which Howells himself described to Henry James as an experiment in "confronting two extreme American types: the conventional and the unconventional." Usually they are lady and gentleman in love. The unconventional, naturally gentle one always turns out to be superior . . .

In Howells' earlier treatments, perhaps smarting from some real or imagined snub by Holmes or Lowell or C. E. Norton

(whom he characterized in *My Literary Friends*), he tends to lack the equilibrium and tact of *Lapham*, and to show some bitterness, as in *A Chance Acquaintance* (1877), with its forthright attack on Boston snobbery, and in the playlet *Out of the Question* (1877). It is perhaps worth remembering that Howells said he realized that he could never take the western Mark Twain as a social equal to the homes of Lowell or Longfellow. Yet Howells' own final mediation between East and West is symbolized by the fact that Henry James and Mark Twain each considered Howells his dearest friend, and he was devoted to what each of them represented.

If the house *Lapham* is building on Beacon Street (to which he hopes to move from the unfashionable Nankeen (now Chester) Square is the major symbol in the book, Howells' letter of August 22, 1884, to James shows that he was weaving into the book some of his own experiences: "Drolly enough, I am writing a story in which the chief personage builds a house 'on the water side of Beacon,' and I shall be able to use all my experience, down to the quick." Just as *Lapham* is purged of false social ambitions by the burning of his house, so in four years Howells was to leave his own house at 302 Beacon Street, next to that of Holmes of the "Brahmin Caste," and to move to New York, to yearn for simpler living, and to inaugurate in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), partly influenced by Tolstoy, his long and persuasive crusade for social brotherhood. He died in 1920.

## II

Before approaching the plots of *Lapham* directly, it is important to remember that Howells, as important as a literary theorist as a novelist, was constructing *Lapham* consciously in the light of certain principles which he called realism. These are expressed in hundreds of uncollected book reviews and editorials, some of which he brought together in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891). In general, having little academic knowledge of the history of philosophy or aesthetics, Howells claimed that "at least three fifths of the literature called classic, in all languages, . . . is as dead as the people who wrote it" and is preserved merely by "a

superstitious piety." While the Platonic Emerson had emphasized universalized "archetypes" and Melville (following Shakespeare) had created the towering tragic hero Ahab melodramatically confronting a whale which to him symbolized "all evil," Howells ridiculed the Platonic archetype or anything imaginatively idealized as universal as a mere "pasteboard grasshopper," inferior to the real thing. He defined realism as "nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material," as involving "fidelity to experience and probability of motive." Since he does stress "motive" it should be noted that room is left for considerable psychological tension, and that realism as Howells saw it is not merely of the surface or pictorial.

Howells held that Darwin, the evolutionist, had "changed the thoughts of the world," and Howells was acquainted with Darwin's critical disciples, such as Taine (who read and praised *Lapham* and was responsible for having it published in a French translation), John Addington Symonds, and H. M. Posnett. Of Quaker and Swedenborgian backgrounds, Howells in his later work advocated a mild "planned economy" to counteract the "struggle for existence" and the rapacity of selfish individuals to insure the good of all; but he was considerably influenced by current evolutionary ideas about adaptation to environment and the continuity of heredity. *Lapham* will be considerably illuminated if read in the light of these ideas—the Laphams, for example, are striving to adapt themselves to their new Boston environment; Tom Corey's Roman nose, inherited from his grandfather famous in the East India trade, is a symbol of ancestral determinism; and the theme of ruthless competition is a sample of the non-ethical struggle for existence against which Howells was soon to revolt.

Thus Howells turns against romantic improbabilities, melodrama, and sentimentalism and emphasizes evolutionary relativism: to him the novelist should be a spokesman of the time and place and race which produced him. He is more of a faithful historian than a morbid creator of imaginary heroes. "It is the business of the novel," Howells told Stephen Crane, "to picture the daily life in the most exact terms possible, with an absolute and clear sense of proportion. That is the important



matter—the proportion.” And this is one key to *Lapham*: he tries to present the bad and the good sides of the American businessman in 1885, and the difficulties of our social classes in understanding one another, in terms of proportion, balance, and impartiality.

In the light of modern attacks on Howells as squeamish, it is well to remember that he said he refused to deal to any extent with illicit love not because it did not exist but because in American life of his day it was not habitual or representative of our people as a whole. Howells, however, does weave in the peripheral story of Lapham's support of Zerrilla as a stenographer (because her father saved his life in the Civil War), and he has Lapham recommend that she divorce her husband because of his drunken excesses. But this squalid episode throws the wholesome lives of the other women in the book into relief. Indeed, as Howells' *Heroines of Fiction* suggests, he prided himself upon pioneering in creating lifelike women characters, the best of whom, like Mrs. Lapham, are massively real in their intermingling of admirable and disagreeable traits. The independent and lovably vivacious heroine of *A Chance Acquaintance* is supposed to have suggested James' internationally debated Daisy Miller. Indeed, James, in reviewing Howells' voluminous work, concluded: "Stroke by stroke and book by book your work was to become, for this exquisite notation of our whole democratic light and shade and give and take, in the highest degree documentary."

### III

Guided by these literary theories, then, Howells sought to document American social history in 1885 by means of the two plots of *Lapham* well worked out in terms of proportion, symmetry, and with more integration than some critics have recognized.

The first plot might be called the bankruptcy and ethical-rise plot. From the humblest beginnings as village tavern keeper, stage driver, and army officer, Silas becomes a millionaire paint manufacturer. But he and his family continue in their simple domestic way, without friends or social interests, until Mrs. Lapham meets Mrs. Corey and her children at a summer resort

near Quebec. Silas had "squeezed out" his partner, Milton K. Rogers, when the paint company was about to become profitable; Silas insists he did nothing actually illegal, but eventually he tries to make amends by lending money to Rogers—a sort of passive Uriah Heep villain—until he owes Silas \$120,000. This loan, along with the \$100,000 Silas invests in the building of his ostentatious house, his stock gambles, and the drop in paint sales because of the financial depression drives Silas toward bankruptcy. He has a chance to save his fortune by selling some western property to agents for some "British dreamers" who wish to use it for founding a "cummunity," but Silas insists on telling them that a railroad can oblige any owner to sacrifice the property. Rogers, who had given Silas the property for a bad debt, even offers to buy it, but Silas realizes that Rogers and the agents wish to cheat their clients, and he steadfastly resists the temptation and goes bankrupt rather than hurt others. That Howells interprets Silas' resisting the temptation in the light of traditional Christian ethics is clear from the fact that at dawn, after Mrs. Lapham has listened to her husband's agonized pacing of his study floor in his debate with himself, Howells ends this climactic passage as follows: "the words of the Scripture came into her mind: 'And there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day . . . And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me . . .'" It is clear, then, that Howells in 1885 still held to the traditional Christian view that within the individual lies the cause and the cure of evil: the individual has free will and he is responsible for his acts. This view was of course commonly held by Howells' New England friends, such as Hawthorne (now long dead but still revered by Howells), Longfellow, and Lowell. We should note that Lapham rises not only by resisting this financial temptation but by gladly giving up "all hope of the social success for which people crawl and truckle" and recovering "the manhood" on his native Vermont farm.

The second plot involves the romance of Tom and Penelope, and their marriage after she has renounced the notion of morbidly sacrificing her happiness because her sister Irene imagined that Tom loved her—a theme which Howells broadly satirizes

in such scenes as that in which Tom gives Irene a shaving which she idealizes as a symbol of his supposed love. But if this sacrifice theme is satirized, the larger overarching theme involved in this plot, that of the difficulties of uneducated self-made folk being accepted by the supposedly socially superior class, is treated with great seriousness and tact.

The relation of these two plots has caused much of the lack of understanding of the book. Howells said that he hardly knew whether to laugh or weep when even the venerated Francis Parkman said that he interpreted Silas' rise as "the achievement of social recognition," while Howells himself "had supposed the rise to be a moral one." But it seems clear that Howells included in this moral rise not only Silas' resistance to the financial temptation but also his resistance to the temptation to try to approximate the "sterile elegance" of the Coreys by moving into their neighborhood. On the other hand, Horace E. Scudder's *Atlantic Monthly* review of *Lapham* held that Howells "has convinced himself of the higher value to be found in a creation which discloses morals [the first plot] as well as manners" [the second plot]. The reviewer then proceeds to call the second plot "shallow" and the "desolation" caused by Irene's misunderstanding is censured as "abnormal." But such a view would seem to miss Howells' chief point in presenting the morbid self-sacrifice theme: he is deliberately attacking it as unduly sentimental in contrast to the sensible creed of realism he himself advocated. For example, Penelope's joshing of Irene for her adoration of Tom's wood shaving as involving "the language of shavings" instead of that of flowers is obviously satirical. Howells certainly tried to emphasize the relation of this oversentimental theme to his own opposite creed in three major passages: at the Corey dinner where the Reverend Mr. Sewell and others ridicule a current sentimental novel (*Tears, Idle Tears*) as better called "Slop, Silly Slop"; just before Tom proposes to Penelope they talk over this same novel glorifying sentimental sacrifice, and her ultimate acceptance of Tom is foreshadowed by her disapproval of the way the novelist makes his heroine sacrifice her happiness for the supposed happiness of another who is unloved; and finally, the Reverend Mr. Sewell, to whom the

Lapham parents go for advice, preaches a fiery little sermon against the "false ideal" of sentimental self-sacrifice which he says is inspired only by "novels that befool and debauch almost every intelligence in some degree. It certainly doesn't come from Christianity, which instantly repudiates it . . ." Doubtless Howells' zeal as a critical reformer of fiction, as a realist trying to overthrow the reign of the sentimentally romantic, led him to give this part of the second plot an emphasis which is disproportionate, although not unclear in its implications.

It is very significant that in a fairly full manuscript synopsis of *Lapham* owned by the Huntington Library Howells has only two sentences about Penelope's romance and her parents' social position; it would seem, then, that Howells came to see the need for this second plot only after he began developing the first. Actually, the second plot as it involves the attempts of the two classes to understand one another probably has more originality and is of more timely interest today. But even as fine a critic as Professor Oscar Firkins argues in his excellent book on Howells that in *Lapham* "the momentum of a powerful story has suffered an irremediable check," for the two plots "do not concern each other." It would require much more space than is available here to demonstrate the matter fully, but this objection of Mr. Firkins' can be partially overcome if the reader will note all the intersections of the two plots and the way in which neither one could stand alone. The integration is not, of course, on a level with that of the two plots in *King Lear*, but a close reading will show that the interweaving is much more deft than this attack would suggest. Among episodes which should be discussed in this respect if space permitted are the following. The Laphams are first inspired to move to a more fashionable locality and to get into society after Mrs. Lapham meets Mrs. Corey and her children near Quebec. Tom secures a position in Lapham's factory, and the parents privately ponder the priority of interests (parallel to the two plots). Silas says in Tom's case he will insist on his interest being in "paint in the first place and Irene afterward," but Mrs. Lapham thinks Silas' hopes are in reverse order. And the elder Corey remarks whimsically to Tom, "I supposed you wished to marry the girl's money,

and here you are basely seeking to go into business with her father." It is Mrs. Corey's own brother, James Bellingham, cautious Brahmin adviser to businessmen, who encourages Tom (his nephew) to engage in Lapham's business as a "good opening," who advises Silas repeatedly, and who reports to the elder Corey that Lapham "behaved very well—like a gentleman" in declining Tom's offer of \$30,000 when Lapham had premonitions of bankruptcy. (Incidentally, it should be noted that while the elder Corey says that if Tom doesn't work at all they may have to be less extravagant, the family is by no means poverty-stricken.) The plots are further connected by the fact that after meeting the Reverend Mr. Sewell at the Coreys' dinner the Lapham parents go to consult this clerical friend of the Coreys for advice about the three-cornered love affair. Lapham's architect, Seymour, is also a friend of the Coreys and a guest at their dinner. In this way a good deal about architecture is brought into the book, as well as a discussion of the Coreys' own home. In keeping with the interesting and well-sustained symmetry throughout, the elder Corey's devotion to Titian-painting and Lapham's devotion to what one might call "barn-painting" are paralleled, and compared and contrasted, often humorously. Tom is complimented on having, like his father, a "calling" to paint, although the objects are different! Tom advises Irene about books for their proposed library, and with his father he discusses how little people of the Laphams' class read; the father remarks that, destitute of great architecture and painting, Americans must read or "barbarise," while hope is held out for Penelope because she is a thoughtful reader of such authors as George Eliot. And finally, as we shall see later, the elder Corey, professing only an interest in a taste for beauty, is partially reconciled to Lapham and "proud" of his resisting temptation because Corey "found a delicate, aesthetic pleasure in the [moral] heroism" Silas showed. There are other connections between the two plots, but perhaps enough has been said to indicate that the problem should be investigated more carefully before one claims that the two plots "do not concern each other."

## IV

In approaching Howells' characterization it is well to recall his statement (in *Hazards*) that "it is the still small voice that the soul heeds," and that most normal people "develop. There's the making of several characters in each of us." In other words, his more important characters are not static but dynamic and capable of ethical growth in contrast to their past mistakes. Both Lapham and the elder Corey develop very considerably within this novel. Just as Hawthorne shows how Donatello went through a "transformation" (the original British title of *The Marble Faun*) through sin and remorse, so Lapham concludes that "it seems to me I done wrong about Rogers in the first place; that the whole trouble came from that." But note that this remorse (which he keeps from his wife, who constantly needles his conscience) "strengthened" Lapham so that, when his great temptation comes to cheat the British investors and save himself from bankruptcy, he is strong enough to resist, to renounce something of price for something spiritually priceless. Originally Lapham had "hated" the elder Corey as a representative of a non-productive leisure class, but after he comes to understand Corey he regards him as one of the nicest men he has ever met. And the elder Corey, a bit vain about his Italianate taste for the fine arts, is at first privately contemptuous of Lapham as a "man who has rivalled the hues of nature in her wildest haunts with the tints of his mineral paint" daubed on the reefs of the ocean and disfiguring the landscape with billboards for advertising purposes. He isn't to my taste . . ." And he also dislikes Lapham because he is not "grammatical." But Tom, who is made to view Lapham after observing other self-made Americans in Texas, reminds his father of his whimsical attack on Boston provincialism as needing aërating by the relativistic judgments inspired by wide travel and observation of natives of other regions. Tom says of Lapham, "How can you expect people who have been strictly devoted to business to be grammatical . . . ? In a new country one gets to looking at people a little out of our tradition . . . It wouldn't be quite fair to test him by our standards . . . In spite of his syntax I rather

liked him." In other words, the elder Corey comes to accept his son's semi-evolutionary idea that the deficiencies of the lower class are not innate but temporary, caused by and relative to their occupations and environments, and remediable when that class has more leisure and education and better social contacts and examples. Eventually, as we have seen, Howells very subtly shows how the elder Corey's religion of taste evolves from the pictorial to the ethical: after Lapham's triumph over his temptations he was "proud" of the man he once despised; "Bromfield Corey, who found a delicate, aesthetic pleasure in the heroism with which Lapham had withstood Rogers and his temptations—something finely dramatic and unconsciously effective—wrote him a letter which would once have flattered the rough soul almost to ecstasy . . ." Bromfield's Puritan ancestry enabled him to rise to a taste for simple goodness. Indeed, one of Howells' artistic triumphs is the way in which he has Bromfield whimsically satirize what he calls "feudalism." Some readers of the novel have failed to notice, in supposing that Bromfield is defending a caste system, that Howells carefully labels his speeches of this type as "whimsical" or "ironical." Incidentally, one excellent exercise in critical intelligence would be an attempt to distinguish carefully between the humorous irony of the elder Corey and that of Penelope. Does his rest on a more mellow sympathy, with a greater polish than Penelope's? Is it more capable of purposeful satire? Thus, when Tom wishes to go into Lapham's business, the elder Corey says "*with an ironical sigh*, 'Ah, we shall never have a real aristocracy while this plebeian reluctance to live upon a parent or a wife continues the animating spirit of our youth. It strikes at the root of the whole feudal system.' " When Silas first sees Tom he admires him, but he says: "I don't see how a fellow like that, that's had every advantage in this world, can hang around and let his father support him. Seems to me, if I had his health and education, I should want to strike out and do something for myself." But this is precisely what Tom does, since he inherits his grandfather's skill in business. In fact, it might be possible to argue that the central conflict of the second plot is not so much between self-reliance and parasitism as between social crudity

(illustrated by Lapham's boasting and drinking too much at the Corey's dinner) and what Corey calls "the airy, graceful, winning superstructure" of social life which he says is still based on "good sense and right ideas." And yet, airy and graceful and winning as the Coreys' conversation at their dinner seems as one first reads that famous scene, I think that, if one analyzes it carefully, it becomes apparent that it represents Bromfield before his change of heart. It is true that he is chivalric toward Lapham's unaccustomed tipsiness, but during the conversation there appears to have been no attempt to "draw out" the Laphams on topics which interested them or to show any very genuine kindly effort to make them feel at home. Surely the Coreys knew that in debating the varieties of the current novel they were deliberately talking over the heads of their guests. One imagines that Howells, almost completely without formal academic education, had witnessed this characteristic kind of Bostonian sadism many times, but his tact is such that one has to read with care to detect his implications.

Compared to Lapham's drunkenness and boasting at the dinner, however, the Coreys' offences are inconspicuous. On Mrs. Corey's first call on the Laphams, she excuses her lateness by explaining that the coachman had not known the way, since "Nearly all our friends are on the New Land or on the Hill." There was, adds Howells, "a barb in this that rankled . . ." When Penelope does not attend the Coreys' dinner or send an excuse, and Mrs. Lapham merely says after Mrs. Corey has waited for her that "she didn't feel just like coming," "Mrs. Corey emitted a very small 'O!'—very small, very cold,—which began to grow larger and hotter and to burn into Mrs. Lapham's soul before Mrs. Corey could add, 'I'm very sorry. It's nothing serious, I hope?'" And on a later call, when Mrs. Corey is told that the Lapham girls liked to take Tom for a stroll along the rocks on the shore at Nantasket, Mrs. Corey remarks to Mrs. Lapham that she is sure Tom liked the rocks! And yet, all things considered, the overall impression the book gives surely supports Howells' concluding view that the Coreys "were not mean or unamiable people." Mrs. Corey can say truthfully after Tom's marriage to the bankrupt's daughter that "we never cared for the money" and that she thinks only of



the happiness of her son "whom she has taught that to want magnanimity was to be less than gentlemanly." As the true Apostle of Realism, Howells has Tom and Penelope go to live in Mexico, suggesting that getting used to one another and to their in-laws and friends would have to be a gradual evolution. "The differences remained uneffaced, if not uneffaceable. . . . Our manners and customs go for more in life than our qualities. The price we pay for civilization is the fine yet impassable differentiation of these. Perhaps we pay too much; but it will not be possible to persuade those who have the difference in their favor that this is so." Thus Howells suggests that even with intermarriage the "alliance" between the classes has only begun; but hope is held out that through changes in taste (both aesthetic and ethical), through reading good literature, and through a saving sense of humor, a genuine emotional harmony may gradually emerge. One cannot help wishing that Howells had written a sequel in which he dealt with the growth of a child of this marriage as the embodiment of what is good in both classes!

While many reformers have seen democracy as a matter of paper constitutions or governmental machinery or grandiose ideology, Howells places needed emphasis on the little intangible human aspects, on the social habits of our people, and on their emotional antipathies and sympathies. He thinks that we will not be truly democratic until whole families of diverse origins and economic means and aesthetic tastes come to understand and to accept one another, and to make one another feel that they are genuinely *wanted* as friends and neighbors. He suggests that simple kindliness of heart can help most.

## V

If after *Lapham* Howells turned to what might roughly be classified as a sort of Christian socialism, or belief that private enterprise and free competition should be regulated by the government for the good of all, to what extent does *Lapham* foreshadow such a development? If *Lapham* were not by virtue of its power of characterization and relative impartiality Howells' masterpiece, one might regard it (from the standpoint of ideas) as representing a *transition* from his earlier travelogue novels-of-manners to his later socialistic tracts.