ALDRICH THOMAS BAILEY

THE STILLWATER TRAGEDY

Thomas Aldrich

The Stillwater Tragedy

Aldrich T.

The Stillwater Tragedy / T. Aldrich — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Thomas Bailey Aldrich
The Stillwater Tragedy

I

It is close upon daybreak. The great wall of pines and hemlocks that keep off the west wind from Stillwater stretches black and indeterminate against the sky. At intervals a dull, metallic sound, like the guttural twang of a violin string, rises form the frog-invested swamp skirting the highway. Suddenly the birds stir in their nests over there in the woodland, and break into that wild jargoning chorus with which they herald the advent of a new day. In the apple-orchards and among the plum-trees of the few gardens in Stillwater, the wrens and the robins and the blue-jays catch up the crystal crescendo, and what a melodious racket they make of it with their fifes and flutes and flageolets!

The village lies in a trance like death. Possibly not a soul hears this music, unless it is the watchers at the bedside of Mr. Leonard Tappleton, the richest man in town, who has lain dying these three days, and cannot last until sunrise. Or perhaps some mother, drowsily hushing her wakeful baby, pauses a moment and listens vacantly to the birds singing. But who else?

The hubbub suddenly ceases,–ceases as suddenly as it began,–and all is still again in the woodland. But it is not so dark as before. A faint glow of white light is discernible behind the ragged line of the tree-tops. The deluge of the darkness is receding from the face of the earth, as the mighty waters receded of old.

The roofs and tall factory chimneys of Stillwater are slowly taking shape in the gloom. Is that a cemetery coming into view yonder, with its ghostly architecture of obelisks and broken columns and huddled head-stones? No, that is only Slocum's Marble Yard, with the finished and unfinished work heaped up like snowdrifts,–a cemetery in embryo. Here and there in an outlying farm a lantern glimmers in the barn-yard: the cattle are having their fodder betimes. Scarlet-capped chanticleer gets himself on the nearest rail-fence and lifts up his rancorous voice like some irate old cardinal launching the curse of Rome. Something crawls swiftly along the gray of the serpentine turnpike,–a cart, with the driver lashing a jaded horse. A quick wind goes shivering by, and is lost in the forest.

Now a narrow strip of two-colored gold stretches along the horizon.

Stillwater is gradually coming to its senses. The sun has begun to twinkle on the gilt cross of the Catholic chapel and make itself known to the doves in the stone belfry of the South Church. The patches of cobweb that here and there cling tremulously to the coarse grass of the inundated meadows have turned into silver nets, and the mill-pond–it will be steel-blue later–is as smooth and white as if it had been paved with one vast unbroken slab out of Slocum's Marble Yard. Through a row of button-woods on the northern skirt of the village is seen a square, lap-streaked building, painted a disagreeable brown, and surrounded on three sides by a platform,–one of seven or eight similar stations strung like Indian heads on a branch thread of the Great Sagamore Railway.

Listen! That is the jingle of the bells on the baker's cart as it begins its rounds. From innumerable chimneys the curdled smoke gives evidence that the thrifty housewife–or, what is rarer in Stillwater, the hired girl–has lighted the kitchen fire.

The chimney-stack of one house at the end of a small court–the last house on the easterly edge of the village, and standing quite alone–sends up no smoke. Yet the carefully trained ivy over the porch, and the lemon verbena in a tub at the foot of the steps, intimate that the place is not unoccupied. Moreover, the little schooner which acts as weather-cock on one of the gables, and is now heading due west, has a new top-sail. It is a story-and-a-half cottage, with a large expanse of roof, which, covered with porous, unpainted shingles, seems to repel the sunshine that now strikes full upon it. The upper and lower blinds on the main building, as well as those on the extensions, are tightly closed. The sun

appears to beat in vain at the casements of this silent house, which has a curiously sullen and defiant air, as if it had desperately and successfully barricaded itself against the approach of morning; yet if one were standing in the room that leads from the bed-chamber on the ground-floor–the room with the latticed window–one would see a ray of light thrust through a chink of the shutters, and pointing like a human finger at an object which lies by the hearth.

This finger, gleaming, motionless, and awful in its precision, points to the body of old Mr. Lemuel Shackford, who lies there dead in his night-dress, with a gash across his forehead.

In the darkness of that summer night a deed darker than the night itself had been done in Stillwater.

II

That morning, when Michael Hennessey's girl Mary–a girl sixteen years old–carried the can of milk to the rear door of the silent house, she was nearly a quarter of hour later than usual, and looked forward to being soundly rated.

"He's up and been waiting for it," she said to herself, observing the scullery door ajar. "Won't I ketch it! It's him for growling and snapping at a body, and it's me for always being before or behind time, bad luck to me. There's no plazing him."

Mary pushed back the door and passed through the kitchen, serving herself all the while to meet the objurgations which she supposed were lying in wait for her. The sunshine was blinding without, but sifted through the green jalousies, it made a gray, crepuscular light within. As the girl approached the table, on which a plate with knife and fork had been laid for breakfast, she noticed, somewhat indistinctly at first, a thin red line running obliquely across the floor from the direction of the sitting-room and ending near the stove, where it had formed a small pool. Mary stopped short, scarcely conscious why, and peered instinctively into the adjoining apartment. Then, with a smothered cry, she let fall the milk-can, and a dozen white rivulets, in strange contrast to that one dark red line which first startled her, went meandering over the kitchen floor. With her eyes riveted upon some object in the next room, the girl retreated backward slowly and heavily dragging one foot after the other, until she reached the gallery door; then she turned swiftly, and plunged into the street.

Twenty minutes later, every man, woman, and child in Stillwater knew that old Mr. Shackford had been murdered.

Mary Hennessey had to tell her story a hundred times during the morning, for each minute brought to Michael's tenement a fresh listener hungry for the details at first hand.

"How was it, Molly? Tell a body, dear!"

"Don't be asking me!" cried Molly, pressing her palms to her eyes as if to shut out the sight, but taking all the while a secret creepy satisfaction in living the scene over again. "It was kinder dark in the other room, and there he was, laying in his night-gownd, with his face turned towards me, so, looking mighty severe-like, jest as if he was a-going to say, 'It's late with the milk ye are, ye hussy!'–a way he had of spaking."

"But he didn't spake, Molly darlin'?"

"Niver a word. He was stone dead, don't you see. It was that still you could hear me heart beat, saving there wasn't a drop of beat in it. I let go the can, sure, and then I backed out, with me eye on 'im all the while, afeard to death that he would up and spake them words."

"The pore child! for the likes of her to be wakin' up a murthered man in the mornin'!"

There was little or no work done that day in Stillwater outside the mills, and they were not running full handed. A number of men from the Miantowona Iron Works and Slocum's Yard–Slocum employed some seventy or eighty hands–lounged about the streets in their blouses, or stood in knots in front of the tavern, smoking short clay pipes. Not an urchin put in an appearance at the small red brick building on the turnpike. Mr. Pinkham, the school-master, waited an hour for the recusants, then turned the key in the lock and went home.

Dragged-looking women, with dishcloth or dustpan in hand, stood in door-ways or leaned from windows, talking in subdued voices with neighbors on the curb-stone. In a hundred far-away cities the news of the suburban tragedy had already been read and forgotten; but here the horror stayed.

There was a constantly changing crowd gathered in front of the house in Welch's Court. An inquest was being held in the room adjoining the kitchen. The court, which ended at the gate of the cottage, was fringed for several yards on each side by rows of squalid, wondering children, who understood it that Coroner Whidden was literally to sit on the dead body,–Mr. Whidden, a limp,

inoffensive little man, who would not have dared to sit down on a fly. He had passed, pallid and perspiring, to the scene of his perfunctory duties.

The result of the investigation was awaited with feverish impatience by the people outside. Mr. Shackford had not been a popular man; he had been a hard, avaricious, passionate man, holding his own way remorselessly. He had been the reverse of popular, but he had long been a prominent character in Stillwater, because of his wealth, his endless lawsuits, and his eccentricity, an illustration of which was his persistence in living entirely alone in the isolated and dreary old house, that was henceforth to be inhabited by his shadow. Not his shadow alone, however, for it was now remembered that the premises were already held in fee by another phantasmal tenant. At a period long anterior to this, one Lydia Sloper, a widow, had died an unexplained death under that same roof. The coincidence struck deeply into the imaginative portion of Stillwater. "The Widow Sloper and old Shackford have made a match of it," remarked a local humorist, in a grimmer vain than customary. Two ghosts had now set up housekeeping, as it were, in the stricken mansion, and what might not be looked for in the way of spectral progeny!

It appeared to the crowd in the lane that the jury were unconscionably long in arriving at a decision, and when the decision was at length reached it gave but moderate satisfaction. After a spendthrift waste of judicial mind the jury had decided that "the death of Lemuel Shackford was caused by a blow on the left temple, inflicted with some instrument not discoverable, in the hands of some person or persons unknown."

"We knew that before," grumbled a voice in the crowd, when, to relieve public suspense, Lawyer Perkins–a long, lank man, with stringy black hair–announced the verdict from the doorstep.

The theory of suicide had obtained momentary credence early in the morning, and one or two still clung to it with the tenacity that characterizes persons who entertain few ideas. To accept this theory it was necessary to believe that Mr. Shackford had ingeniously hidden the weapon after striking himself dead with a single blow. No, it was not suicide. So far from intending to take his own life, Mr. Shackford, it appeared, had made rather careful preparations to live that day. The breakfast-table had been laid over night, the coals left ready for kindling in the Franklin stove, and a kettle, filled with water to be heated for his tea or coffee, stood on the hearth.

Two facts had sharply demonstrated themselves: first, that Mr. Shackford had been murdered; and, second, that the spur to the crime had been the possession of a sum of money, which the deceased was supposed to keep in a strong-box in his bedroom. The padlock had been wrenched open, and the less valuable contents of the chest, chiefly papers, scattered over the carpet. A memorandum among the papers seemed to specify the respective sums in notes and gold that had been deposited in the box. A document of some kind had been torn into minute pieces and thrown into the waste-basket. On close scrutiny a word or two here and there revealed the fact that the document was of a legal character. The fragments were put into an envelope and given in charge of Mr. Shackford's lawyer, who placed seals on that and on the drawers of an escritoire which stood in the corner and contained other manuscript.

The instrument with which the fatal blow had been dealt–for the autopsy showed that there had been but one blow–was not only not discoverable, but the fashion of it defied conjecture. The shape of the wound did not indicate the use of any implement known to the jurors, several of whom were skilled machinists. The wound was an inch and three quarters in length and very deep at the extremities; in the middle in scarcely penetrated to the cranium. So peculiar a cut could not have been produced with the claw part of a hammer, because the claw is always curved, and the incision was straight. A flat claw, such as is used in opening packing-cases, was suggested. A collection of the several sizes manufactured was procured, but none corresponded with the wound; they were either too wide or too narrow. Moreover, the cut was as thin as the blade of a case-knife.

"That was never done by any tool in these parts," declared Stevens, the foreman of the finishing shop at Slocum's.

The assassin or assassins had entered by the scullery door, the simple fastening of which, a hook and staple, had been broken. There were footprints in the soft clay path leading from the side gate to the stone step; but Mary Hennessey had so confused and obliterated the outlines that now it was impossible accurately to measure them. A half-burned match was found under the sink,–evidently thrown there by the burglars. It was of a kind known as the safety-match, which can be ignited only by friction on a strip of chemically prepared paper glued to the box. As no box of this description was discovered, and as all the other matches in the house were of a different make, the charred splinter was preserved. The most minute examination failed to show more than this. The last time Mr. Shackford had been seen alive was at six o'clock the previous evening.

Who had done the deed?

Tramps! answered Stillwater, with one voice, though Stillwater lay somewhat out of the natural highway, and the tramp–that bitter blossom of civilization whose seed was blown to us from over seas–was not then so common by the New England roadsides as he became five or six years later. But it was intolerable not to have a theory; it was that or none, for conjecture turned to no one in the village. To be sure, Mr. Shackford had been in litigation with several of the corporations, and had had legal quarrels with more than one of his neighbors; but Mr. Shackford had never been victorious in any of these contests, and the incentive of revenge was wanting to explain the crime. Besides, it was so clearly robbery.

Though the gathering around the Shackford house had reduced itself to half a dozen idlers, and the less frequented streets had resumed their normal aspect of dullness, there was a strange, electric quality in the atmosphere. The community was in that state of suppressed agitation and suspicion which no word adequately describes. The slightest circumstance would have swayed it to the belief in any man's guilt; and, indeed, there were men in Stillwater quite capable of disposing of a fellow-creature for a much smaller reward than Mr. Shackford had held out. In spite of the tramp theory, a harmless tin-peddler, who had not passed through the place for weeks, was dragged from his glittering cart that afternoon, as he drove smilingly into town, and would have been roughly handled if Mr. Richard Shackford, a cousin of the deceased, had not interfered.

As the day wore on, the excitement deepened in intensity, though the expression of it became nearly reticent. It was noticed that the lamps throughout the village were lighted an hour earlier than usual. A sense of insecurity settled upon Stillwater with the falling twilight,–that nameless apprehension which is possibly more trying to the nerves than tangible danger. When a man is smitten inexplicably, as if by a bodiless hand stretched out of a cloud,–when the red slayer vanishes like a mist and leaves no faintest trace of his identity,–the mystery shrouding the deed presently becomes more appalling than the deed itself. There is something paralyzing in the thought of an invisible hand somewhere ready to strike at your life, or at some life dearer than your own. Whose hand, and where is it? Perhaps it passes you your coffee at breakfast; perhaps you have hired it to shovel the snow off your sidewalk; perhaps it has brushed against you in the crowd; or may be you have dropped a coin into the fearful palm at a street corner. Ah, the terrible unseen hand that stabs your imagination,–this immortal part of you which is a hundred times more sensitive than your poor perishable body!

In the midst of situations the most solemn and tragic there often falls a light purely farcical in its incongruity. Such a gleam was unconsciously projected upon the present crisis by Mr. Bodge, better known in the village as Father Bodge. Mr. Bodge was stone deaf, naturally stupid, and had been nearly moribund for thirty years with asthma. Just before night-fall he had crawled, in his bewildered, wheezy fashion, down to the tavern, where he found a somber crowd in the bar-room. Mr. Bodge ordered his mug of beer, and sat sipping it, glancing meditatively from time to time over the pewter rim at the mute assembly. Suddenly he broke out: "S'pose you've heerd that old Shackford's ben murdered."

So the sun went down on Stillwater. Again the great wall of pines and hemlocks made a gloom against the sky. The moon rose from behind the tree-tops, frosting their ragged edges, and then

sweeping up to the zenith hung serenely above the world, as if there were never a crime, or a tear, or a heart-break in it all.

III

On the afternoon of the following day Mr. Shackford was duly buried. The funeral, under the direction of Mr. Richard Shackford, who acted as chief mourner and was sole mourner by right of kinship, took place in profound silence. The carpenters, who had lost a day on Bishop's new stables, intermitted their sawing and hammering while the services were in progress; the steam was shut off in the iron-mills, and no clinking of the chisel was heard in the marble yard for an hour, during which many of the shops had their shutters up. Then, when all was over, the imprisoned fiend in the boilers gave a piercing shriek; the leather bands slipped on the revolving drums, the spindles leaped into life again, and the old order of things was reinstated,–outwardly, but not in effect.

In general, when the grave closes over a man his career is ended. But Mr. Shackford was never so much alive as after they had buried him. Never before had he filled so large a place in the public eye. Though invisible, he sat at every fireside. Until the manner of his death had been made clear, his ubiquitous presence was not to be exorcised. On the morning of the memorable day a reward of one hundred dollars–afterwards increased to five hundred, at the insistence of Mr. Shackford's cousin–had been offered by the board of selectmen for the arrest and conviction of the guilty party. Beyond this and the unsatisfactory inquest, the authorities had done nothing, and were plainly not equal to the situation.

When it was stated, the night of the funeral, that a professional person was coming to Stillwater to look into the case, the announcement was received with a breath of relief.

The person thus vaguely described appeared on the spot the next morning. To mention the name of Edward Taggett is to mention a name well known to the detective force of the great city lying sixty miles southwest of Stillwater. Mr. Taggett's arrival sent such a thrill of expectancy through the village that Mr. Leonard Tappleton, whose obsequies occurred this day, made his exit nearly unobserved. Yet there was little in Mr. Taggett's physical aspect calculated to stir either expectation or enthusiasm: a slender man of about twenty-six, but not looking it, with overhanging brown mustache, sparse side-whiskers, eyes of no definite color, and faintly accentuated eyebrows. He spoke precisely, and with a certain unembarrassed hesitation, as persons do who have two thoughts to one word,–if there are such persons. You might have taken him for a physician, or a journalist, or the secretary of an insurance company; but you would never have supposed him the man who had disentangled the complicated threads of the great Barnabee Bank defalcation.

Stillwater's confidence, which had risen into the nineties, fell to zero at sight of him. "Is *that* Taggett?" they asked. That was Taggett; and presently his influence began to be felt like a sea-turn. The three Dogberrys of the watch were dispatched on secret missions, and within an hour it was ferreted out that a man in a cart had been seen driving furiously up the turnpike the morning after the murder. This was an agricultural district, the road led to a market town, and teams going by in the early dawn were the rule and not the exception; but on that especial morning a furiously driven cart was significant. Jonathan Beers, who farmed the Jenks land, had heard the wheels and caught an indistinct glimpse of the vehicle as he was feeding the cattle, but with a reticence purely rustic had not been moved to mention the circumstance before.

"Taggett has got a clew," said Stillwater under its breath.

By noon Taggett had got the man, cart and all. But it was only Blufton's son Tom, of South Millville, who had started in hot haste that particular morning to secure medical service for his wife, of which she had sorely stood in need, as two tiny girls in a willow cradle in South Millville now bore testimony.

"I haven't been cutting down the population *much,"* said Blufton, with his wholesome laugh.

Thomas Blufton was well known and esteemed in Stillwater, but if the crime had fastened itself upon him it would have given something like popular satisfaction.

In the course of the ensuing forty-eight hours four or five tramps were overhauled as having been in the neighborhood at the time of the tragedy; but they each had a clean story, and were let go. Then one Durgin, a workman at Slocum's Yard, was called upon to explain some half-washed-out red stains on his overalls, which he did. He had tightened the hoops on a salt-pork barrel for Mr. Shackford several days previous; the red paint on the head of the barrel was fresh, and had come off on his clothes. Dr. Weld examined the spots under a microscope, and pronounced them paint. It was manifest that Mr. Taggett meant to go to the bottom of things.

The bar-room of the Stillwater hotel was a center of interest these nights; not only the bar-room proper, but the adjoining apartment, where the more exclusive guests took their seltzer-water and looked over the metropolitan newspapers. Twice a week a social club met here, having among its members Mr. Craggie, the postmaster, who was supposed to have a great political future, Mr. Pinkham, Lawyer Perkins, Mr. Whidden, and other respectable persons. The room was at all times in some sense private, with a separate entrance from the street, though another door, which usually stood open, connected it with the main salon. In this was a long mahogany counter, one section of which was covered with a sheet of zinc perforated like a sieve, and kept constantly bright by restless caravans of lager-beer glasses. Directly behind that end of the counter stood a Gothic brass-mounted beer-pump, at whose faucets Mr. Snelling, the landlord, flooded you five or six mugs in the twinkling of an eye, and raised the vague expectation that he was about to grind out some popular operatic air. At the left of the pump stretched a narrow mirror, reflecting he gaily-colored wine-glasses and decanters which stood on each other's shoulders, and held up lemons, and performed various acrobatic feats on a shelf in front of it.

The fourth night after the funeral of Mr. Shackford, a dismal southeast storm caused an unusual influx of idlers in both rooms. With the rain splashing against the casements and the wind slamming the blinds, the respective groups sat discussing in a desultory way the only topic which could be discussed at present. There had been a general strike among the workmen a fortnight before; but even that had grown cold as a topic.

"That was hard on Tom Blufton," said Stevens, emptying the ashes out of his long-stemmed clay pipe, and refilling the bowl with cut cavendish from a jar on a shelf over his head.

Michael Hennessey sat down his beer-mug with an air of argumentative disgust, and drew one sleeve across his glistening beard.

"Stevens, you've as many minds as a weather-cock, jist! Didn't ye say yerself it looked mighty black for the lad when he was took?"

"I might have said something of the sort," Stevens admitted reluctantly, after a pause. "His driving round at daybreak with an empty cart did have an ugly look at first."

"Indade, then."

"Not to anybody who knew Tom Blufton," interrupted Samuel Piggott, Blufton's brother-in-law. "The boy hasn't a bad streak in him. It was an outrage. Might as well have suspected Parson Langly or Father O'Meara."

"If this kind of thing goes on," remarked a man in the corner with a patch over one eye, "both of them reverend gents will be hauled up, I shouldn't wonder."

"That's so, Mr. Peters," responded Durgin. "If my respectability didn't save me, who's safe?"

"Durgin is talking about his respectability! He's joking."

"Look here, Dexter," said Durgin, turning quickly on the speaker, "when I want to joke, I talk about your intelligence."

"What kind of man is Taggett, anyhow?" asked Piggott. "You saw him, Durgin."

"I believe he was at Justice Beemis's office the day Blufton and I was there; but I didn't make him out in the crowd. Shouldn't know him from Adam."

"Stillwater's a healthy place for tramps jest about this time," suggested somebody. "Three on 'em snaked in to-day."

"I think, gentlemen, that Mr. Taggett is on the right track there," observed Mr. Snelling, in the act of mixing another Old Holland for Mr. Peters. "Not too sweet, you said? I feel it in my bones that it was a tramp, and that Mr. Taggett will bring him yet."

"He won't find him on the highway yonder," said a tall, swarthy man named Torrini, an Italian. Nationalities clash in Stillwater. "That tramp is a thousand miles from here."

"So he is if he has any brains under his hat," returned Snelling. "But they're on the lookout for him. The minute he pawns anything, he's gone."

"Can't put up greenbacks or gold, can he? He didn't take nothing else," interposed Bishop, the veterinary surgeon.

"Now jewelry nor nothing?"

"There wasn't none, as I understand it," said Bishop, "except a silver watch. That was all snug under the old man's piller."

"Wanter know!" ejaculated Jonathan Beers.

"I opine, Mr. Craggie," said the school-master, standing in the inner room with a rolled-up file of the Daily Advertiser in his hand, "that the person who–who removed our worthy townsman will never be discovered."

"I shouldn't like to go quite so far as that, sir," answered Mr. Craggie, with that diplomatic suavity which leads to postmasterships and seats in the General Court, and has even been known to oil a dull fellow's way into Congress. "I cannot take quite so hopeless a view of it. There are difficulties, but they must be overcome, Mr. Pinkham, and I think they will be."

"Indeed, I hope so," returned the school-master. "But there are cases–are there not?–in which the–the problem, if I may so designate it, has never been elucidated, and the persons who undertook it have been obliged to go to the foot, so to speak."

"Ah, yes, there are such cases, certainly. There was the Burdell mystery in New York, and, later, the Nathan affair–By the way, I've satisfactory theories of my own touching both. The police were baffled, and remain so. But, my *dear* sir, observe for a moment the difference."

Mr. Pinkham rested one finger on the edge of a little round table, and leaned forward in a respectful attitude to observe the difference.

"Those crimes were committed in a vast metropolis affording a thousand chances for escape, as well as offering a thousand temptations to the lawless. But we are a limited community. We have no professional murderers among us. The deed which has stirred society to its utmost depths was plainly done by some wayfaring amateur. Remorse has already arrived upon him, if the police haven't. For the time being he escapes; but he is bound to betray himself sooner or later. If the right steps are taken,–and I have myself the greatest confidence in Mr. Taggett,–the guilty party can scarcely fail to be brought to the bar of justice, if he doesn't bring himself there."

"Indeed, indeed, I hope so," repeated Mr. Pinkham.

"The investigation is being carried on very closely."

"Too closely," suggested the school-master.

"Oh dear, no," murmured Mr. Craggie. "The strictest secrecy is necessary in affairs of this delicate nature. If Tom, Dick, and Harry were taken behind the scenes," he added, with the air of one wishing to say too much, "the bottom would drop out of everything."

Mr. Pinkham shrunk from commenting on a disaster like that, and relapsed into silence. Mr. Craggie, with his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat, and his legs crossed in an easy, senatorial fashion, leaned back in the chair and smiled blandly.

"I don't suppose there's nothing new, boys!" exclaimed a fat, florid man, bustling in good-naturedly at the public entrance, and leaving a straight wet trail on the sanded floor from the threshold to the polished mahogany counter. Mr. Wilson was a local humorist of the Falstaffian stripe, though not so much witty in himself as the cause of wit in others.

"No, Jimmy, there isn't anything new," responded Dexter.

"I suppose you didn't hear that the ole man done somethin' handsome for me in his last will and testyment."

"No, Jemmy, I don't think he has made any provision whatever for an almshouse."

"Sorry to hear that, Dexter," said Willson, absorbedly chasing a bit of lemon peel in his glass with the spoon handle, "for there isn't room for us all up at the town-farm. How's your grandmother? Finds it tol'rably comfortable?"

They are a primitive, candid people in their hours of unlaced social intercourse in Stillwater. This delicate *tu quoque* was so far from wounding Dexter that he replied carelessly,–

"Well, only so so. The old woman complains of too much chicken-sallid, and hot-house grapes all the year round."

"Mr. Shackford must have left a large property," observed Mr. Ward, of the firm of Ward & Lock, glancing up from the columns of the Stillwater Gazette. The remark was addressed to Lawyer Perkins, who had just joined the group in the reading-room.

"Fairly large," replied that gentleman crisply.

"Any public bequests?"

"None to speak of."

Mr. Craggie smiled vaguely.

"You see," said Lawyer Perkins, "there's a will and no will,–that is to say, the fragments of what is supposed to be a will were found, and we are trying to put the pieces together. It is doubtful if we can do it; it is doubtful if we can decipher it after we have done it; and if we decipher it it is a question whether the document is valid or not."

"That is a masterly exposition of the dilemma, Mr. Perkins," said the school-master warmly.

Mr. Perkins had spoken in his court-room tone of voice, with one hand thrust into his frilled shirt-bosom. He removed this hand for a second, as he gravely bowed to Mr. Pinkham.

"Nothing could be clearer," said Mr. Ward. "In case the paper is worthless, what then? I am not asking you in your professional capacity," he added hastily; for Lawyer Perkins had been known to send in a bill on as slight a provocation as Mr. Ward's.

"That's a point. The next of kin has his claims."

"My friend Shackford, of course," broke in Mr. Craggie. "Admirable young man!–one of my warmest supporters."

"He is the only heir at law so far as we know," said Mr. Perkins.

"Oh," said Mr. Craggie, reflecting. "The late Mr. Shackford might have had a family in Timbuctoo or the Sandwich Islands."

"That's another point."

"The fact would be a deuced unpleasant point for young Shackford to run against," said Mr. Ward.

"Exactly."

"If Mr. Lemuel Shackford," remarked Coroner Whidden, softly joining the conversation to which he had been listening in his timorous, apologetic manner, "had chanced, in the course of his early sea-faring days, to form any ties of an unhappy complexion"–

"Complexion is good," murmured Mr. Craggie. "Some Hawaiian lady!"

–-"perhaps that would be a branch of the case worth investigating in connection with the homicide. A discarded wife, or a disowned son, burning with a sense of wrong"–

"Really, Mr. Whidden!" interrupted Lawyer Perkins witheringly, "it is bad enough for my client to lose his life, without having his reputation filched away from him."

"I–I will explain! I was merely supposing"–

"The law never supposes, sir!"

This threw Mr. Whidden into great mental confusion. As coroner was he not an integral part of the law, and when, in his official character, he supposed anything was not that a legal supposition?

But was he in his official character now, sitting with a glass of lemonade at his elbow in the reading-room of the Stillwater hotel? Was he, or was he not, a coroner all the time? Mr. Whidden stroked an isolated tuft of hair growing low on the middle of his forehead, and glared mildly at Mr. Perkins.

"Young Shackford has gone to New York, I understand," said Mr. Ward, breaking the silence.

Mr. Perkins nodded. "Went this morning to look after the real-estate interests there. It will probably keep him a couple of weeks,–the longer the better. He was of no use here. Lemuel's death was a great shock to him, or rather the manner of it was."

"That shocked every one. They were first cousin's weren't they?" Mr. Ward was a comparatively new resident in Stillwater.

"First cousins," replied Lawyer Perkins; "but they were never very intimate, you know."

"I imagine nobody was ever very intimate with Mr. Shackford."

"My client was somewhat peculiar in his friendships."

This was stating it charitably, for Mr. Perkins knew, and every one present knew, that Lemuel Shackford had not had the shadow of a friend in Stillwater, unless it was his cousin Richard.

A cloud of mist and rain was blown into the bar-room as the street door stood open for a second to admit a dripping figure from the outside darkness.

"What's blowed down?" asked Durgin, turning round on his stool and sending up a ring of smoke which uncurled itself with difficulty in the dense atmosphere.

"It's only some of Jeff Stavers's nonsense."

"No nonsense at all," said the new-comer, as he shook the heavy beads of rain from his felt hat. "I was passing by Welch's Court–it's as black as pitch out, fellows–when slap went something against my shoulder; something like wet wings. Well, I was scared. It's a bat, says I. But the thing didn't fly off; it was still clawing at my shoulder. I put up my hand, and I'll be shot if it wasn't the foremast, jib-sheet and all, of the old weather-cock on the north gable of the Shackford house! Here you are!" and the speaker tossed the broken mast, with the mimic sails dangling from it, into Durgin's lap.

A dead silence followed, for there was felt to be something weirdly significant in the incident.

"That's kinder omernous," said Mr. Peters, interrogatively.

"Ominous of what?" asked Durgin, lifting the wet mass from his knees and dropping it on the floor.

"Well, sorter queer, then."

"Where does the queer come in?" inquired Stevens, gravelly. "I don't know; but I'm hit by it."

"Come, boys, don't crowd a feller," said Mr. Peters, getting restive. "I don't take the contract to explain the thing. But it does seem some way droll that the old schooner should be wrecked so soon after what has happened to the old skipper. If you don't see it, or sense it, I don't insist. What's yours, Denyven?"

The person addressed as Denyven promptly replied, with a fine sonorous English accent, "a mug of 'alf an' 'alf,–with a head on it, Snelling."

At the same moment Mr. Craggie, in the inner room was saying to the school-master,–

"I must really take issue with you there, Mr. Pinkham. I admit there's a good deal in spiritualism which we haven't got at yet; the science is in its infancy; it is still attached to the bosom of speculation. It is a beautiful science, that of psychological phenomena, and the spiritualists will yet become an influential class of"–Mr. Craggie was going to say voters, but glided over it–"persons. I believe in clairvoyance myself to a large extent. Before my appointment to the post-office I had it very strong. I've no doubt that in the far future this mysterious factor will be made great use of in criminal cases; but at present I should resort to it only in the last extremity,–the very last extremity, Mr. Pinkham!"

"Oh, of course," said the school-master deprecatingly. "I threw it out only as the merest suggestion. I shouldn't think of–of–you understand me?"

"Is it beyond the dreams of probability," said Mr. Craggie, appealing to Lawyer Perkins, "that clairvoyants may eventually be introduced into cases in our courts?"

"They are now," said Mr. Perkins, with a snort,–"the police bring 'em it."

Mr. Craggie finished the remainder of his glass of sherry in silence, and presently rose to go. Coroner Whidden and Mr. Ward had already gone. The guests in the public room were thinning out; a gloom, indefinable and shapeless like the night, seemed to have fallen upon the few that lingered. At a somewhat earlier hour than usual the gas was shut off in the Stillwater hotel.

In the lonely house in Welch's Court a light was still burning.

IV

A sorely perplexed man sat there, bending over his papers by the lamp-light. Mr. Taggett had established himself at the Shackford house on his arrival, preferring it to the hotel, where he would have been subjected to the curiosity of the guests and to endless annoyances. Up to this moment, perhaps not a dozen persons in the place had had more than a passing glimpse of him. He was a very busy man, working at his desk from morning until night, and then taking only a brief walk, for exercise in some unfrequented street. His meals were sent in from the hotel to the Shackford house, where the constables reported to him, and where he held protracted conferences with Justice Beemis, Coroner Whidden, Lawyer Perkins, and a few others, and declined to be interviewed by the local editor.

To the outside eye that weather-stained, faded old house appeared a throbbing seat of esoteric intelligence. It was as if a hundred invisible magnetic threads converged to a focus under that roof and incessantly clicked out the most startling information,–information which was never by any chance allowed to pass beyond the charmed circle. The pile of letters which the mail brought to Mr. Taggett every morning–chiefly anonymous suggestions, and offers of assistance from lunatics in remote cities–was enough in itself to exasperate a community.

Covertly at first, and then openly, Stillwater began seriously to question Mr. Taggett's method of working up the case. The Gazette, in a double-leaded leader, went so far as to compare him to a bird with fine feathers and no song, and to suggest that perhaps the bird might have sung if the inducement offered had been more substantial. A singer of Mr. Taggett's plumage was not to be taught by such chaff as five hundred dollars. Having killed his man, the editor proceeded to remark that he would suspend judgment until next week.

As if to make perfect the bird comparison, Mr. Taggett, after keeping the public in suspense for six days and nights, abruptly flew away, with all the little shreds and straws of evidence he had picked up, to build his speculative nest elsewhere.

The defection of Mr. Taggett caused a mild panic among a certain portion of the inhabitants, who were not reassured by the statement in the Gazette that the case would now be placed in the proper hands,–the hand so the county constabulary. "Within a few days," said the editor in conclusion, "the matter will undoubtedly be cleared up. At present we cannot say more;" and it would have puzzled him very much to do so.

A week passed, and no fresh light was thrown upon the catastrophe, nor did anything occur to rattle the usual surface of life in the village. A man–it was Torrini, the Italian–got hurt in Dana's iron foundry; one of Blufton's twin girls died; and Mr. Slocum took on a new hand from out of town. That was all. Stillwater was the Stillwater of a year ago, with always the exception of that shadow lying upon it, and the fact that small boys who had kindling to get in were careful to get it in before nightfall. It would appear that the late Mr. Shackford had acquired a habit of lingering around wood-piles after dark, and also of stealing into bed-chambers, where little children were obliged to draw the sheets over their heads in order not to see him.

The action of the county constabulary had proved quite as mysterious and quite as barren of result as Mr. Taggett's had been. They had worn his mantle of secrecy, and arrested the tramps over again.

Another week dragged by, and the editorial prediction seemed as far as ever from fulfillment. But on the afternoon which closed that fortnight a very singular thing did happen. Mr. Slocum was sitting alone in his office, which occupied the whole of a small building at the right of the main gate to the marble works. When the door behind him softly opened and a young man, whose dress covered with stone-dust indicated his vocation, appeared on the threshold. He hesitated a second, and then stepped into the room. Mr. Slocum turned round with a swift, apprehensive air.

"You gave me a start! I believe I haven't any nerves left. Well?"

"Mr. Slocum, I have found the man."

The proprietor of the marble yard half rose from the desk in his agitation.

"Who is it?" he asked beneath his breath.

The same doubt or irresolution which had checked the workman at the threshold seemed again to have taken possession of him. It was fully a moment before he gained the mastery over himself; but the mastery was complete; for he leaned forward gravely, almost coldly, and pronounced two words. A quick pallor overspread Mr. Slocum's features.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, sinking back into the chair. "Are you mad?"

V

The humblest painter of real life, if he could have his desire, would select a picturesque background for his figures; but events have an inexorable fashion for choosing their own landscape. In the present instance it is reluctantly conceded that there are few uglier or more commonplace towns in New England than Stillwater,–a straggling, overgrown village, with whose rural aspects are curiously blended something of the grimness and squalor of certain shabby city neighborhoods. Being of comparatively recent date, the place has none of those colonial associations which, like sprigs of lavender in an old chest of drawers, are a saving grace to other quite as dreary nooks and corners.

Here and there at what is termed the West End is a neat brick mansion with garden attached, where nature asserts herself in dahlias and china-asters; but the houses are mostly frame houses that have taken a prevailing dingy tint from the breath of the tall chimneys which dominate the village. The sidewalks in the more aristocratic quarter are covered with a thin, elastic paste of asphalt, worn down to the gravel in patches, and emitting in the heat of the day an astringent, bituminous odor. The population is chiefly of the rougher sort, such as breeds in the shadow of foundries and factories, and if the Protestant pastor and the fatherly Catholic priest, whose respective lots are cast there, have sometimes the sense of being missionaries dropped in the midst of a purely savage community, the delusion is not wholly unreasonable.

The irregular heaps of scoria that have accumulated in the vicinity of the iron works give the place an illusive air of antiquity; bit it is neither ancient nor picturesque. The oldest and most pictorial thing in Stillwater is probably the marble yard, around three sides of which the village may be said to have sprouted up rankly, bearing here and there an industrial blossom in the shape of an iron-mill or a cardigan-jacket manufactory. Rowland Slocum, a man of considerable refinement, great kindness of heart, and no force, inherited the yard from his father, and a the period this narrative opens (the summer of 187-) was its sole proprietor and nominal manager, the actual manager being Richard Shackford, a prospective partner in the business and the betrothed of Mr. Slocum's daughter Margaret.

Forty years ago every tenth person in Stillwater was either a Shackford or a Slocum. Twenty years later both names were nearly extinct there. That fatality which seems to attend certain New England families had stripped every leaf but two from the Shackford branch. These were Lemuel Shackford, then about forty-six, and Richard Shackford, aged four. Lemuel Shackford had laid up a competency as ship-master in the New York and Calcutta trade, and in 1852 had returned to his native village, where he found his name and stock represented only by little Dick, a very cheerful orphan, who stared complacently with big blue eyes at fate, and made mud-pies in the lane whenever he could elude the vigilance of the kindly old woman who had taken him under her roof. This atom of humanity, by some strange miscalculation of nature, was his cousin.

The strict devotion to his personal interests which had enabled Mr. Shackford to acquire a fortune thus early caused him to look askance at a penniless young kinsman with stockings down at heel, and a straw hat three sizes too large for him set on the back of his head. But Mr. Shackford was ashamed to leave little Dick a burden upon the hands of a poor woman of no relationship whatever to the child; so little Dick was transferred to that dejected house which has already been described, and was then known as the Sloper house.

Here, for three of four years, Dick grew up, as neglected as a weed, and every inch as happy. It should be mentioned that for the first year or so a shock-headed Cicely from the town-farm had apparently been hired not to take care of him. But Dick asked nothing better than to be left to his own devices, which, moreover, were innocent enough. He would sit all day in the lane at the front gate pottering with a bit of twig or a case-knife in the soft clay. From time to time passers-by observed that the child was not making mud-pies, but tracing figures, comic or grotesque as might happen,

and always quite wonderful for their lack of resemblance to anything human. That patch of reddish-brown clay was his sole resource, his slate, his drawing-book, and woe to anybody who chanced to walk over little Dick's arabesques. Patient and gentle in his acceptance of the world's rebuffs, this he would not endure. He was afraid of Mr. Shackford, yet one day, when the preoccupied man happened to trample on a newly executed hieroglyphic, the child rose to his feet white with rage, his fingers clenched, and such a blue fire flashing in the eyes that Mr. Shackford drew back aghast.

"Why, it's a little devil!"

While Shackford junior was amusing himself with his primitive bas-reliefs, Shackford senior amused himself with his lawsuits. From the hour when he returned to the town until the end of his days Mr. Shackford was up to his neck in legal difficulties. Now he resisted a betterment assessment, and fought the town; now he secured an injunction on the Miantowona Iron Works, and fought the corporation. He was understood to have a perpetual case in equity before the Marine Court in New York, to which city he made frequent and unannounced journeys. His immediate neighbors stood in terror of him. He was like a duelist, on the alert to twist the slightest thing into a *casus belli*. The law was his rapier, his recreation, and he was willing to bleed for it.

Meanwhile that fairy world of which every baby becomes a Columbus so soon as it is able to walk remained an undiscovered continent to little Dick. Grim life looked in upon him as he lay in the cradle. The common joys of childhood were a sealed volume to him. A single incident of those years lights up the whole situation. A vague rumor had been blown to Dick of a practice of hanging up stockings at Christmas. It struck his materialistic mind as a rather senseless thing to do; but nevertheless he resolved to try it one Christmas Eve. He lay awake a long while in the frosty darkness, skeptically waiting for something remarkable to happen; once he crawled out of the cot-bed and groped his way to the chimney place. The next morning he was scarcely disappointed at finding nothing in the piteous little stocking, except the original holes.

The years that stole silently over the heads of the old man and the young child in Welch's Court brought a period of wild prosperity to Stillwater. The breath of war blew the forges to a white heat, and the baffling problem of the mediæval alchemists was solved. The baser metals were transmuted into gold. A disastrous, prosperous time, with the air rent periodically by the cries of newsboys as battles were fought, and by the roll of the drum in the busy streets as fresh recruits were wanted. Glory and death to the Southward, and at the North pale women in black.

All which interested Dick mighty little. After he had learned to read at the district school, he escaped into another world. Two lights were now generally seen burning of a night in the Shackford house: one on the ground-floor where Mr. Shackford sat mouthing his contracts and mortgages, and weaving his webs like a great, lean, gray spider; and the other in the north gable, where Dick hung over a tattered copy of Robinson Crusoe by the flicker of the candle-ends which he had captured during the day.

Little Dick was little Dick no more: a tall, heavily built blond boy, with a quiet, sweet disposition, that at first offered temptations to the despots of the playground; but a sudden flaring up once or twice of that unexpected spirit which had broken out in his babyhood brought him immunity from serious persecution.

The boy's home life at this time would have seemed pathetic to an observer,–the more pathetic, perhaps, in that Dick himself was not aware of its exceptional barrenness. The holidays that bring new brightness to the eyes of happier children were to him simply days when he did not go to school, and was expected to provide an extra quantity of kindling wood. He was housed, and fed, and clothed, after a fashion, but not loved. Mr. Shackford did not ill-treat the lad, in the sense of beating him; he merely neglected him. Every year the man became more absorbed in his law cases and his money, which accumulated magically. He dwelt in a cloud of calculations. Though all his interests attached him to the material world, his dry, attenuated body seemed scarcely a part of it.

"Shackford, what are you going to do with that scapegrace of yours?"

It was Mr. Leonard Tappleton who ventured the question. Few persons dared to interrogate Mr. Shackford on his private affairs.

"I am going to make a lawyer of him," said Mr. Shackford, crackling his finger-joints like stiff parchment.

"You couldn't do better. You *ought* to have an attorney in the family."

"Just so," assented Mr. Shackford, dryly. "I could throw a bit of business in his way now and then,–eh?"

"You could make his fortune, Shackford. I don't see but you might employ him all the time. When he was not fighting the corporations, you might keep him at it suing you for his fees."

"Very good, very good indeed," responded Mr. Shackford, with a smile in which his eyes took no share, it was merely a momentary curling up of crisp wrinkles. He did not usually smile at other people's pleasantries; but when a person worth three or four hundred thousand dollars condescends to indulge a joke, it is not to be passed over like that of a poor relation. "Yes, yes," muttered the old man, as he stooped and picked up a pin, adding it to a row of similarly acquired pins which gave the left lapel of his threadbare coat the appearance of a miniature harp, "I shall make a lawyer of him."

It had long been settled in Mr. Shackford's mind that Richard, so soon as he had finished his studies, should enter the law-office of Blandmann & Sharpe, a firm of rather sinister reputation in South Millville.

At fourteen Richard's eyes had begun to open on the situation; at fifteen he saw very clearly; and one day, without much preliminary formulating of his plan, he decided on a step that had been taken by every male Shackford as far back as tradition preserves the record of his family.

A friendship had sprung up between Richard and one William Durgin, a school-mate. This Durgin was a sallow, brooding boy, a year older than himself. The two lads were antipodal in disposition, intelligence, and social standing; for though Richard went poorly clad, the reflection of his cousin's wealth gilded him. Durgin was the son of a washerwoman. An intimacy between the two would perhaps have been unlikely but for one fact: it was Durgin's mother who had given little Dick a shelter at the period of his parents' death. Though the circumstance did not lie within the pale of Richard's personal memory, he acknowledged the debt by rather insisting on Durgin's friendship. It was William Durgin, therefore, who was elected to wait upon Mr. Shackford on a certain morning which found that gentleman greatly disturbed by an unprecedented occurrence,–Richard had slept out of the house the previous night.

Durgin was the bearer of a note which Mr. Shackford received in some astonishment, and read deliberately, blinking with weak eyes behind the glasses. Having torn off the blank page and laid it aside for his own more economical correspondence (the rascal had actually used a whole sheet to write ten words!), Mr. Shackford turned, and with the absorbed air of a naturalist studying some abnormal bug gazed over the steel bow of his spectacles at Durgin.

"Skit!"

Durgin hastily retreated.

"There's a poor lawyer saved," muttered the old man, taking down his overcoat from a peg behind the door, and snapping off a shred of lint on the collar with his lean forefinger. Then his face relaxed, and an odd grin diffused a kind of wintry glow over it.

Richard had run away to sea.

VI

After a lapse of four years, during which he had as completely vanished out of the memory of Stillwater as if he had been lying all the while in the crowded family tomb behind the South Church, Richard Shackford reappeared one summer morning at the door of his cousin's house in Welch's Court. Mr. Shackford was absent at the moment, and Mrs. Morganson, an elderly deaf woman, who came in for a few hours every day to do the house-work, was busy in the extension. Without announcing himself, Richard stalked up-stairs to the chamber in the gable, and went directly to a little shelf in one corner, upon which lay the dog's-eared copy of Robinson Crusoe just as he had left it, save the four years' accumulation of dust. Richard took the book fiercely in both hands, and with a single mighty tug tore it from top to bottom, and threw the fragments into the fire-place.

A moment later, on the way down-stairs, he encountered his kinsman ascending.

"Ah, you have come back!" was Mr. Shackford's grim greeting after a moment's hesitation.

"Yes," said Richard, with embarrassment, though he had made up his mind not to be embarrassed by his cousin.

"I can't say I was looking for you. You might have dropped me a line; you were politer when you left. Why do you come back, and why did you go away?" demanded the old man, with abrupt fierceness. The last four years had bleached him and bent him and made him look very old.

"I didn't like the idea of Blandmann & Sharpe, for one thing," said Richard, "and I thought I liked the sea."

"And did you?"

"No, sir! I enjoyed seeing foreign parts, and all that."

"Quite the young gentleman on his travels. But the sea didn't agree with you, and now you like the idea of Blandmann & Sharpe?"

"Not the least in the world, I assure you!" cried Richard. "I take to it as little as ever I did."

"Perhaps that is fortunate. But it's going to be rather difficult to suit your tastes. What *do* you like?"

"I like you, cousin Lemuel; you have always been kind to me–in your way," said poor Richard, yearning for a glimmer of human warmth and sympathy, and forgetting all the dreariness of his uncared-for childhood. He had been out in the world, and had found it even harder-hearted than his own home, which now he idealized in the first flush of returning to it. Again he saw himself, a blond-headed little fellow with stocking down at heel, climbing the steep staircase, or digging in the clay at the front gate with the air full of the breath of lilacs. That same penetrating perfume, blown through the open hall-door as he spoke, nearly brought the tears to his eyes. He had looked forward for years to this coming back to Stillwater. Many a time, as he wandered along the streets of some foreign sea-port, the rich architecture and the bright costumes had faded out before him, and given place to the fat gray belfry and slim red chimneys of the humble New England village where he was born. He had learned to love it after losing it; and now he had struggled back through countless trials and disasters to find no welcome.

"Cousin Lemuel," said Richard gently, "only just us two are left, and we ought to be good friends, at least."

"We are good enough friends," mumbled Mr. Shackford, who could not evade taking the hand which Richard had forlornly reached out to him, "but that needn't prevent us understanding each other like rational creatures. I don't care for a great deal of fine sentiment in people who run away without so much as thank you."

"I was all wrong!"

"That's what folks always say, with the delusion that it makes everything all right."

"Surely it help,–to admit it."

"That depends; it generally doesn't. What do you propose to do?"

"I hardly know at the moment; my plans are quite in the air."

"In the air!" repeated Mr. Shackford. "I fancy that describes them. Your father's plans were always in the air, too, and he never got any of them down."

"I intend to get mine down."

"Have you saved by anything?"

"Not a cent."

"I thought as much."

"I had a couple of hundred dollars in my sea-chest; but I was shipwrecked, and lost it. I barely saved myself. When Robinson Crusoe"–

"Damn Robinson Crusoe!" snapped Mr. Shackford.

"That's what I say," returned Richard gravely. "When Robinson Crusoe was cast on an uninhabited island, shrimps and soft-shell crabs and all sorts of delicious mollusks–readily boiled, I've no doubt–crawled up on the beach, and begged him to eat them; but *I* nearly starved to death."

"Of course. You will always be shipwrecked, and always be starved to death; you are one of that kind. I don't believe you are a Shackford at all. When they were not anything else they were good sailors. If you only had a drop of *his* blood in your veins!" and Mr. Shackford waved his head towards a faded portrait of a youngish, florid gentleman with banged hair and high coat-collar, which hung against the wall half-way up the stair-case. This was the counterfeit presentment of Lemuel Shackford's father seated with his back at an open window, through which was seen a ship under full canvas with the union-jack standing out straight in the wrong direction. "But what are you going to do for yourself? You can't start a subscription paper, and play with shipwrecked mariner, you know."

"No, I hardly care to do that," said Richard, with a good-natured laugh, "though no poor devil ever had a better outfit for the character."

"What *are* you calculated for?"

Richard was painfully conscious of his unfitness for many things; but he felt there was nothing in life to which he was so ill adapted as his present position. Yet, until he could look about him, he must needs eat his kinsman's reluctant bread, or starve. The world was younger and more unsophisticated when manna dropped from the clouds.

Mr. Shackford stood with his neck craned over the frayed edge of his satin stock and one hand resting indecisively on the banister, and Richard on the step above, leaning his back against the blighted flowers of the wall-paper. From an oval window at the head of the stairs the summer sunshine streamed upon them, and illuminated the high-shouldered clock which, ensconced in an alcove, seemed top be listening to the conversation.

"There's no chance for you in the law," said Mr. Shackford, after a long pause. "Sharpe's nephew has the berth. A while ago I might have got you into the Miantowona Iron Works; but the rascally directors are trying to ruin me now. There's the Union Store, if they happen to want a clerk. I suppose you would be about as handy behind a counter as a hippopotamus. I have no business of my own to train you to. You are not good for the sea, and the sea has probably spoiled you for anything else. A drop of salt water just poisons a landsman. I am sure I don't know what to do with you."

"Don't bother yourself about it at all," said Richard, cheerfully. "You are going back on the whole family, ancestors and posterity, by suggesting that I can't make my own living. I only want a little time to take breath, don't you see, and a crust and a bed for a few days, such as you might give any wayfarer. Meanwhile, I will look after things around the place. I fancy I was never an idler here since the day I learnt to split kindling."

"There's your old bed in the north chamber," said Mr. Shackford, wrinkling his forehead helplessly. "According to my notion, it is not so good as a bunk, or a hammock slung in a tidy forecastle, but it's at your service, and Mrs. Morganson, I dare say, can lay an extra plate at table."

With which gracious acceptance of Richard's proposition, Mr. Shackford resumed his way upstairs, and the young man thoughtfully descended to the hall-door and thence into the street, to take a general survey of the commercial capabilities of Stillwater.

The outlook was not inspiring. A machinist, or a mechanic, or a day laborer might have found a foot-hold. A man without handicraft was not in request in Stillwater. "What is your trade?" was the staggering question that met Richard at the threshold. He went from workshop to workshop, confidently and cheerfully at first, whistling softly between whiles; but at every turn the question confronted him. In some places, where he was recognized with thinly veiled surprise as that boy of Shackford's, he was kindly put off; in others he received only a stare or a brutal No.

By noon he had exhausted the leading shops and offices in the village, and was so disheartened that he began to dread the thought of returning home to dinner. Clearly, he was a superfluous person in Stillwater. A mortar-splashed hod-carrier, who had seated himself on a pile of brick and was eating his noonday rations from a tin can just brought to him by a slatternly girl, gave Richard a spasm of envy. Here was a man who had found his place, and was establishing–what Richard did not seem able to establish in his own case–a right to exist.

At supper Mr. Shackford refrained from examining Richard on his day's employment, for which reserve, or indifference, the boy was grateful. When the silent meal was over the old man went to his papers, and Richard withdrew to his room in the gable. He had neglected to provide himself with a candle. However, there was nothing to read, for in destroying Robinson Crusoe he had destroyed his entire library; so he sat and brooded in the moonlight, casting a look of disgust now and then at the mutilated volume on the hearth. That lying romance! It had been, indirectly, the cause of all his woe, filling his boyish brain with visions of picturesque adventure, and sending him off to sea, where he had lost four precious years of his life.

"If I had stuck to my studies," reflected Richard while undressing, "I might have made something of myself. He's a great friend, Robinson Crusoe."

Richard fell asleep with as much bitterness in his bosom against DeFoe's ingenious hero as if Robinson had been a living person instead of a living fiction, and out of this animosity grew a dream so fantastic and comical that Richard awoke himself with a bewildered laugh just as the sunrise reddened the panes of the chamber window. In this dream somebody came to Richard and asked him if he had heard of that dreadful thing about young Crusoe.

"No, confound him!" said Richard, "what is it?"

"It has been ascertained," said somebody, who seemed to Richard at once an intimate friend and an utter stranger,–"it has been ascertained beyond a doubt that the man Friday was not a man Friday at all, but a light-minded young princess from one of the neighboring islands who had fallen in love with Robinson. Her real name was Saturday."

"Why, that's scandalous!" cried Richard with heat. "Think of the admiration and sympathy the world has been lavishing on this precious pair; Robinson Crusoe and his girl Saturday! That puts a different face on it."

"Another great moral character exploded," murmured the shadowy shape, mixing itself up with the motes of a sunbeam and drifting out through the window. Then Richard fell to laughing in his sleep, and so awoke. He was still confused with the dream as he sat on the edge of his bed, pulling himself together in the broad daylight.

"Well," he muttered at length, "I shouldn't wonder! There's nothing too bad to be believed of that man."

VII

Richard made an early start that morning in search of employment, and duplicated the failure of the previous day. Nobody wanted him. If nobody wanted him in the village where he was born and bred, a village of counting-rooms and workshops, was any other place likely to need him? He had only one hope, if it could be called a hope; at any rate, he had treated it tenderly as such and kept it for the last. He would apply to Rowland Slocum. Long ago, when Richard was an urchin making pot-hooks in the lane, the man used occasionally to pat him on the head and give him pennies. This was not a foundation on which to rear a very lofty castle; but this was all he had.

It was noon when Richard approached the marble yard, and the men were pouring out into the street through the wide gate in the rough deal fence which inclosed the works,–heavy, brawny men, covered with fine white dust, who shouldered each other like cattle, and took the sidewalk to themselves. Richard stepped aside to let them pass, eying them curiously as possible comrades. Suddenly a slim dark fellow, who had retained his paper cap and leather apron, halted and thrust forth a horny hand. The others went on.

"Hullo, Dick Shackford!"

"What, is that you, Will? *You* here?"

"Been here two years now. One of Slocum's apprentices," added Durgin, with an air of easy grandeur.

"Two years? How time flies–when it doesn't crawl! Do you like it?"

"My time will be out next–Oh, the work? Well, yes; it's not bad, and there's a jolly set in the yard. But how about you? I heard last night you'd got home. Been everywhere and come back wealthy? The boys used to say you was off pirating."

"No such luck," answered Richard, with a smile. "I didn't prey on the high seas,–quite the contrary. The high sea captured my kit and four years' savings. I will tell you about it some day. If I have a limb to my name and a breath left to my body, it is no thanks to the Indian Ocean. That is all I have got, Will, and I am looking around for bread and butter,–literally bread and butter."

"No? and the old gentleman so rich!"

Durgin said this with sincere indignation, and was perhaps unconscious himself of experiencing that nameless, shadowy satisfaction which Rochefoucauld says we find in the adversity of our best friends. Certainly Richard looked very seedy in his suit of slop-shop clothes.

"I was on my way to Mr. Slocum's to see if I could do anything with him," Richard continued.

"To get a job, do you mean?"

"Yes, to get work,–to learn *how* to work; to master a trade, in short."

"You can't be an apprentice, you know," said Durgin.

"Why not?"

"Slocum has two."

"Suppose he should happen to want another? He might."

"The Association wouldn't allow it."

"What Association?"

"The Marble Workers' Association, of course."

"They wouldn't allow it! How is that?"

"This the way of it. Slocum is free to take on two apprentices every year, but no more. That prevents workmen increasing too fast, and so keeps up wages. The Marble Workers' Association is a very neat thing, I can tell you."

"But doesn't Mr. Slocum own the yard? I thought he did."

"Yes, he owns the yard."

"If he wished to extend the business, couldn't he employ more hands?"

"As many as he could get,–skilled workmen; but not apprentices."

"And Mr. Slocum agrees to that?" inquired Richard.

"He does."

"And likes it?"

"Not he,–he hates it; but he can't help himself."

"Upon my soul, I don't see what prevents him taking on as many apprentices as he wants to."

"Why, the Association, to be sure," returned Durgin, glancing at the town clock, which marked seven minutes past the hour.

"But how could they stop him?"

"In plenty of ways. Suppose Slocum has a lot of unfinished contracts on hand,–he always has fat contracts,–and the men was to knock off work. That would be kind of awkward, wouldn't it?"

"For a day or two, yes. He could send out of town for hands," suggested Richard.

"And they wouldn't come, if the Association said 'Stay where you are.' They are mostly in the ring. Some outsiders might come, though."

"Then what?"

"Why, then the boys would make it pretty hot for them in Stillwater. Don't you notice?"

"I notice there is not much chance for me," said Richard, despondingly. "Isn't that so?"

"Can't say. Better talk with Slocum. But I must get along; I have to be back sharp at one. I want to hear about your knocking around the worst kind. Can't we meet somewhere tonight,–at the tavern?"

"The tavern? That didn't used to be a quiet place."

"It isn't quiet now, but there's nowhere else to go of a night. It's a comfortable den, and there's always some capital fellows dropping in. A glass of lager with a mate is not a bad thing after a hard day's work."

"Both are good things when they are of the right sort."

"That's like saying I'm not the right sort, isn't it?"

"I meant nothing of the kind. But I don't take to the tavern. Not that I'm squeamish; I have lived four years among sailors, and have been in rougher places than you ever dreamed of; but all the same I am afraid of the tavern. I've seen many a brave fellow wrecked on that reef."

"You always was a bit stuck up," said Durgin candidly.

"Not an inch. I never had much reason to be; and less now than ever, when I can scarcely afford to drink water, let alone beer. I will drop round to your mother's some evening–I hope she's well,–and tell you of my ups and downs. That will be pleasanter for all hands."

"Oh, as you like."

"Now for Mr. Slocum, though you have taken the wind out of me."

The two separated, Durgin with a half smile on his lip, and Richard in a melancholy frame of mind. He passed from the grass-fringed street into the deserted marble yard, where it seemed as if the green summer had suddenly turned into white winter, and threading his way between the huge drifts of snowy stone, knocked at the door of Mr. Slocum's private office.

William Durgin had summed up the case fairly enough as it stood between the Marble Workers' Association and Rowland Slocum. The system of this branch of the trades-union kept trained workmen comparatively scarce, and enabled them to command regular and even advanced prices at periods when other trades were depressed. The older hands looked upon a fresh apprentice in the yard with much the same favor as workingmen of the era of Jacquard looked upon the introduction of a new piece of machinery. Unless the apprentice had exceptional tact, he underwent a rough novitiate. In any case he served a term of social ostracism before he was admitted to full comradeship. Mr. Slocum could easily have found openings each year for a dozen learners, had the matter been under his control; but it was not. "I am the master of each man individually," he declared, "but collectively they are my master." So his business, instead of naturally spreading and becoming a benefit to the many,

was kept carefully pruned down to the benefit of the few. He was often forced to decline important contracts, the filling of which would have resulted to the advantage of every person in the village.

Mr. Slocum recognized Richard at once, and listened kindly to his story. It was Mr. Slocum's way to listen kindly to every one; but he was impressed with Richard's intelligence and manner, and became desirous, for several reasons, to assist him. In the first place, there was room in the shops for another apprentice; experienced hands were on jobs that could have been as well done by beginners; and, in the second place, Mr. Slocum had an intuition that Lemuel Shackford was not treating the lad fairly, though Richard had said nothing to this effect. Now, Mr. Slocum and Mr. Shackford were just then at swords' points.

"I don't suppose I could annoy Shackford more," was Mr. Slocum's reflection, "than by doing something for this boy, whom he has always shamelessly neglected."

The motive was not a high one; but Richard would have been well satisfied with it, if he could have divined it. He did divine that Mr. Slocum was favorably inclined towards him, and stood watching that gentleman's face with hopeful anxiety.

"I have my regulation number of young men, Richard," said Mr. Slocum, "and there will be no vacancy until autumn. If you could wait a few months."

Richard's head drooped.

"Can't do that? You write a good hand, you say. Perhaps you could assist the book-keeper until there's a chance for you in the yard."

"I think I could, sir," said Richard eagerly.

"If you were only a draughtsman, now, I could do something much better for you. I intend to set up a shop for ornamental carving, and I want some one to draw patterns. If you had a knack at designing, if you could draw at all"–

Richard's face lighted up.

"Perhaps you *have* a turn that way. I remember the queer things you used to scratch in the mud in the court, when you were a little shaver. Can you draw?"

"Why, that is the one thing I can do!" cried Richard,–"in a rough fashion, of course," he added, fearing he had overstated it.

"It is a rough fashion that will serve. You must let me see some of your sketches."

"I haven't any, sir. I had a hundred in my sea-chest, but that was lost,–pencillings of old archways, cathedral spires, bits of frieze, and such odds and ends as took my fancy in the ports we touched at. I recollect one bit. I think I could do it for you now. Shall I?"

Mr. Slocum nodded assent, smiling at the young fellow's enthusiasm, and only partially suspecting his necessity. Richard picked up a pen and began scratching on a letter sheet which lay on the desk. He was five or six minutes at the work, during which the elder man watched him with an amused expression.

"It's a section of cornice on the façade of the Hindoo College at Calcutta," said Richard, handing him the paper,–"no, it's the custom-house. I forget which; but it doesn't matter."

The amused look gradually passed out of Mr. Slocum's countenance as he examined the sketch. It was roughly but clearly drawn, and full of facility. "Why, that's very clever!" he said, holding it at arms'-length; and then, with great gravity, "I hope you are not a genius, Richard; that would be too much of a fine thing. If you are not, you can be of service to me in my plans."

Richard laughingly made haste to declare that to the best of his knowledge and belief he was not a genius, and it was decided on the spot that Richard should assist Mr. Simms, the bookkeeper, and presently try his hand at designing ornamental patterns for the carvers, Mr. Slocum allowing him apprentice wages until the quality of his work should be ascertained.

"It is very little," said Mr. Slocum, "but it will pay your board, if you do not live at home."

"I shall not remain at my cousin's," Richard replied, "if you call that home."

"I can imagine it is not much of a home. Your cousin, not to put too fine a point on it, is a wretch."

"I am sorry to hear you say that, sir; he's my only living kinsman."

"You are fortunate in having but one, then. However, I am wrong to abuse him to you; but I cannot speak of him with moderation, he has just played me such a despicable trick. Look here."

Mr. Slocum led Richard to the door, and pointing to a row of new workshops which extended the entire length of one side of the marble yard, said,–

"I built these last spring. After the shingles were on we discovered that the rear partition, for a distance of seventy-five feet, overlapped two inches on Shackford's meadow. I was ready to drop when I saw it, your cousin is such an unmanageable old fiend. Of course I went to him immediately, and what do you think? He demanded five hundred dollars for that strip of land! Five hundred dollars for a few inches of swamp meadow not worth ten dollars the acre! 'Then take your disreputable old mill off my property!' says Shackford,–he called it a disreputable old mill! I was hasty, perhaps, and I told him to go to the devil. He said he would, and he did; for he went to Blandmann. When the lawyers got hold of it, they bothered the life out of me; so I just moved the building forward two inches, at an expense of seven hundred dollars. Then what does the demon do but board up all my windows opening on the meadow! Richard, I make it a condition that you shall not lodge at Shackford's."

"Nothing could induce me to live another day in the same house with him, sir," answered Richard, suppressing an inclination to smile; and then seriously, "His bread is bitter."

Richard went back with a light heart to Welch's Court. At the gate of the marble yard he met William Durgin returning to work. The steam-whistle had sounded the call, and there was no time for exchange of words; so Richard gave his comrade a bright nod and passed by. Durgin turned and stared after him.

"Looks as if Slocum had taken him on; but it never can be as apprentice; he wouldn't dare do it."

Mr. Shackford had nearly finished his frugal dinner when Richard entered. "If you can't hit it to be in at your meals," said Mr. Shackford, helping himself absently to the remaining chop, "perhaps you had better stop away altogether."

"I can do that now, cousin," replied Richard sunnily. "I have engaged with Slocum."

The old man laid down his knife and fork.

"With Slocum! A Shackford a miserable marble-chipper!"

There was so little hint of the aristocrat in Lemuel Shackford's sordid life and person that no one suspected him of even self-esteem. He went as meanly dressed as a tramp, and as careless of contemporary criticism; yet clear down in his liver, or somewhere in his anatomy, he nourished an odd abstract pride in the family Shackford. Heaven knows why! To be sure, it dated far back; its women had always been virtuous, and its men, if not always virtuous, had always been ship-captains. But beyond this the family had never amounted to anything, and now there was so very little left of it. For Richard as Richard Lemuel cared nothing; for Richard as a Shackford he had a chaotic feeling that defied analysis and had never before risen to the surface. It was therefore with a disgust entirely apart from the hatred of Slocum or regard for Richard that the old man exclaimed, "A Shackford a miserable marble-chipper!"

"That is better than hanging around the village with my hands in my pockets. Isn't it?"

"I don't know that anybody has demanded that you should hang around the village."

"I ought to go away, you mean? But I have found work here, and I might not find it elsewhere."

"Stillwater is not the place to begin life in. It's the place to go away from, and come back to."

"Well, I have come back."

"And how? With one shirt and a lot of bad sailor habits."

"My one shirt is my only very bad habit," said Richard, with a laugh,–he could laugh now,–"and I mean to get rid of that."

Mr. Shackford snapped his fingers disdainfully.

"You ought to have stuck to the sea; that's respectable. In ten years you might have risen to be master of a bark; that would have been honorable. You might have gone down in a gale,–you probably would,–and that would have been fortunate. But a stone-cutter! You can understand," growled Mr. Shackford, reaching out for his straw hat, which he put on and crushed over his brows, "I don't keep a boarding-house for Slocum's hands."

"Oh, I'm far from asking it!" cried Richard. "I am thankful for the two nights' shelter I have had."

"That's some of your sarcasm, I suppose," said Mr. Shackford, half turning, with his hands on the door-knob.

"No, it is some of my sincerity. I am really obliged to you. You weren't very cordial, to be sure, but I did not deserve cordiality."

"You have figured that out correctly."

"I want to begin over again, you see, and start fair."

"Then begin by dropping Slocum."

"You have not given me a chance to tell you what the arrangement is. However, it's irrevocable."

"I don't want to hear. I don't care a curse, so long as it is an arrangement," and Mr. Shackford hurried out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Then Richard, quite undisturbed by his cousin's unreasonableness, sat himself down to eat the last meal he was ever to eat under that roof,–a feat which his cousin's appetite had rendered comparatively easy.

While engaged in this, Richard resolved in his mind several questions as to his future abode. He could not reconcile his thought to any of the workingmen's boarding-houses, of which there were five or six in the slums of the village, where the doorways were greasy, and women flitted about in the hottest weather with thick woolen shawls over their heads. Yet his finances did not permit him to aspire to lodgings much more decent. If he could only secure a small room somewhere in a quiet neighborhood. Possibly Mrs. Durgin would let him have a chamber in her cottage. He was beginning life over again, and it struck him as nearly an ideal plan to begin it on the identical spot where he had, in a manner, made his first start. Besides, there was William Durgin for company, when the long nights of the New England winter set in. The idea smiled so pleasantly in Richard's fancy that he pushed the plate away from him impatiently, and picked up his hat which lay on the floor beside the chair.

That evening he moved from the Shackford house to Mrs. Durgin's cottage in Cross Street. It was not an imposing ceremony. With a small brown-paper parcel under his arm, he walked from one threshold to the other, and the thing was done.

VIII

The six months which followed Richard's installment in the office at Slocum's Yard were so crowded with novel experience that he scarcely noted their flight. The room at the Durgins, as will presently appear, turned out an unfortunate arrangement; but everything else had prospered. Richard proved an efficient aid to Mr. Simms, who quietly shifted the pay-roll to the younger man's shoulders. This was a very complicated account to keep, involving as it did a separate record of each employee's time and special work. An ancient bookkeeper parts lightly with such trifles when he has a capable assistant. It also fell to Richard's lot to pay the hands on Saturdays. William Durgin blinked his surprise on the first occasion, as he filed in with the others and saw Richard posted at the desk, with the pay-roll in his hand and the pile of greenbacks lying in front of him.

"I suppose you'll be proprietor next," remarked Durgin, that evening, at the supper table.

"When I am, Will," answered Richard cheerily, "you will be on the road to foreman of the finishing shop."

"Thank you," said Durgin, not too graciously. It grated on him to play the part of foreman, even in imagination, with Dick Shackford as proprietor. Durgin could not disconnect his friend from that seedy, half-crestfallen figure to whom, a few months earlier, he had given elementary instruction on the Marble Workers' Association.

Richard did not find his old schoolmate so companionable as memory and anticipation had painted him. The two young men moved on different levels. Richard's sea life, now that he had got at a sufficient distance from it, was a perspective full of pleasant color; he had a taste for reading, a thirst to know things, and his world was not wholly shut in by the Stillwater horizon. It was still a pitifully narrow world, but wide compared with Durgin's, which extended no appreciable distance in any direction from the Stillwater hotel. He spent his evenings chiefly there, returning home late at night, and often in so noisy a mood as to disturb Richard, who slept in an adjoining apartment. This was an annoyance; and it was an annoyance to have Mrs. Durgin coming to him with complaints of William. Other matters irritated Richard. He had contrived to replenish his wardrobe, and the sunburn was disappearing from his hands, which the nature of his occupation left soft and unscarred. Durgin was disposed at times to be sarcastic on these changes, but always stopped short of actual offense; for he remembered that Shackford when a boy, amiable and patient as he was, had had a tiger's temper at bottom. Durgin had seen it roused once or twice, and even received a chance sweep of the paw. Richard liked Durgin's rough wit as little as Durgin relished Richard's good-natured bluntness. It was a mistake, that trying to pick up the dropped thread of old acquaintance.

As soon as the permanency of his position was assured, and his means warranted the step, Richard transported himself and his effects to a comfortable chamber in the same house with Mr. Pinkham, the school-master, the perpetual falsetto of whose flute was positively soothing after four months of William Durgin's bass. Mr. Pinkham having but one lung, and that defective, played on the flute.

"You see what you've gone and done, William," remarked Mrs. Durgin plaintively, "with your ways. There goes the quietest young man in Stillwater, and four dollars a week!"

"There goes a swell, you'd better say. He was always a proud beggar; nobody was ever good enough for him."

"You shouldn't say that, William. I could cry, to lose him and his cheerfulness out of the house," and Mrs. Durgin began to whimper.

"Wait till he's out of luck again, and he'll come back to us fast enough. That's when his kind remembers their friends. Blast him! he can't even take a drop of beer with a chum at the tavern."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.