THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH

THE STILLWATER TRAGEDY

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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.

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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

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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.