

**THE STILLWATER  
TRAGEDY.  
[BOSTON-1880]**

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The Stillwater Tragedy. [Boston-1880] by T. B. Aldrich

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**T. B. ALDRICH**

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STILLWATER TRAGEDY.

BY

T. B. ALDRICH,

AUTHOR OF "MARJORIE DAW," "THE QUEEN OF SHEBA,"  
"FLOWER AND THORN," ETC.

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## THE STILLWATER TRAGEDY.

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### I.

It is close upon daybreak. The great wall of pines and hemlocks that keep off the east 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 from 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 till 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 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 beads 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 verberna 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.