

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you . . . love never fails.

Penelope Lapham, the older and somewhat plain daughter of Silas Lapham, was paging back over a book she had just read when the maid told her Tom Corey was in the drawing room downstairs. Tom, the handsome son of a highbrow Boston family, had decided to break with family custom and work for a living. Consequently he became an employee of Penelope's father, a man of poor origin and bad grammar who like many an enterprising farm boy of the 1880's had made a fortune – in his case, in the paint business. Silas was impressed by Tom's enthusiasm and not only placed him at a desk outside his office but often brought him home to discuss business. On these occasions Penelope and her beautiful younger sister Irene conversed with him. Before long it seemed evident that Tom was smitten by Irene and Penelope encouraged Irene's hopes.

So now, after weeks of such encounters, here was Tom downstairs waiting to speak to Silas about an incident at the office – and no one but Penelope was at home. Naturally they began to engage in chitchat. He asked her what she had been reading. She told him. Then they admired the autumn trees through the window. She played with her fan. He noted how seldom they had time together like this. She looked at the clock and remarked how sorry her mother and Irene would be to miss his visit. He stood up. She stood up. "I didn't mean to send you away," she said. He replied, "Oh, I'm not going. I wanted to say . . . To say I – There is something I want to say to you . . . You must know . . . I love you!"

At this point in his novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* William Dean Howells writes: "She freed her hand from both of those he had closed upon it, and went back from him across the room with a sinuous spring." "Me!" she said. And he replied, "Yes, *you*. Who else?"

I had an experience like that once. It wasn't in the context of a romantic novel but in a large classroom in Rome where a little French Jesuit was lecturing on St. Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. Until then I had seen myself as a mere face in a crowd as far as God was concerned. I felt that way because I had been taught to view God as remote, an immense watchful observer of my conduct, not so much stern but neutral of countenance – before whom I had to work very hard to raise even the faintest of smiles. But St. Paul revealed so much more when he said: "I am convinced there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights and depths – nothing in all creation that can separate us from God's love for us as manifest in Christ Jesus our Lord." God is grace, graceful, gracious, nothing less.

"Me!" cried Penelope to Tom Corey's "I love you." "Me!" cry you and I to God's so much more profound declaration of love! To which God replies as though it were the most obvious thing in the world: "Yes, *you*! Who else?"

Before then I knew partially; since then I know fully, as I am fully known.

Geoff Wood