The Custom Of The Country Vol.I

By Edith Wharton

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I

"Undine Spragg how can you?" her mother wailed, raising a prematurely-wrinkled hand heavy with rings to defend the note which a languid "bell-boy" had just brought in.

But her defence was as feeble as her protest, and she continued to smile on her visitor while Miss Spragg, with a turn of her quick young fingers, possessed herself of the missive and withdrew to the window to read it.

"I guess it's meant for me," she merely threw over her shoulder at her mother.

"Did you EVER, Mrs. Heeny?" Mrs. Spragg murmured with deprecating pride.

Mrs. Heeny, a stout professional-looking person in a waterproof, her rusty veil thrown back, and a shabby alligator bag at her feet, followed the mother's glance with good-humoured approval.

"I never met with a lovelier form," she agreed, answering the spirit rather than the letter of her hostess's enquiry.

Mrs. Spragg and her visitor were enthroned in two heavy gilt armchairs in one of the private drawing-rooms of the Hotel Stentorian. The Spragg rooms were known as one of the Looey suites, and the drawing-room walls, above their

wainscoting of highly-varnished mahogany, were hung with salmon-pink damask and adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette and the Princess de Lamballe. In the centre of the florid carpet a gilt table with a top of Mexican onyx sustained a palm in a gilt basket tied with a pink bow. But for this ornament, and a copy of "The Hound of the Baskervilles" which lay beside it, the room showed no traces of human use, and Mrs. Spragg herself wore as complete an air of detachment as if she had been a wax figure in a show-window. Her attire was fashionable enough to justify such a post, and her pale soft-cheeked face, with puffy eye-lids and drooping mouth, suggested a partially-melted wax figure which had run to double-chin.

Mrs. Heeny, in comparison, had a reassuring look of solidity and reality. The planting of her firm black bulk in its chair, and the grasp of her broad red hands on the gilt arms, bespoke an organized and self-reliant activity, accounted for by the fact that Mrs. Heeny was a "society" manicure and masseuse. Toward Mrs. Spragg and her daughter she filled the double role of manipulator and friend; and it was in the latter capacity that, her day's task ended, she had dropped in for a moment to "cheer up" the lonely ladies of the Stentorian.

The young girl whose "form" had won Mrs. Heeny's professional commendation suddenly shifted its lovely lines as she turned back from the window.

"Here you can have it after all," she said, crumpling the note and tossing it with a contemptuous gesture into her mother's lap.

"Why isn't it from Mr. Popple?" Mrs. Spragg exclaimed unguardedly.

"No it isn't. What made you think I thought it was?" snapped her daughter; but the next instant she added, with an outbreak of childish disappointment: "It's only from Mr. Marvell's sister at least she says she's his sister."

Mrs. Spragg, with a puzzled frown, groped for her eye-glass among the jet fringes of her tightly-girded front.

Mrs. Heeny's small blue eyes shot out sparks of curiosity.
"Marvell what Marvell is that?"
The girl explained languidly: "A little fellow I think Mr. Popple said his name was Ralph"; while her mother continued: "Undine met them both last night at that party downstairs. And from something Mr. Popple said to her about going to one of the new plays, she thought "

"How on earth do you know what I thought?" Undine flashed back, her grey eyes darting warnings at her mother under their straight black brows.

"Why, you SAID you thought " Mrs. Spragg began reproachfully; but Mrs. Heeny, heedless of their bickerings, was pursuing her own train of thought.

"What Popple? Claud Walsingham Popple the portrait painter?"

"Yes I suppose so. He said he'd like to paint me. Mabel Lipscomb introduced him. I don't care if I never see him again," the girl said, bathed in angry pink.

"Do you know him, Mrs. Heeny?" Mrs. Spragg enquired.

"I should say I did. I manicured him for his first society portrait a full-length of Mrs. Harmon B. Driscoll." Mrs. Heeny smiled indulgently on her hearers. "I know everybody. If they don't know ME they ain't in it, and Claud Walsingham Popple's in it. But he ain't nearly AS in it," she continued judicially, "as Ralph Marvell the little fellow, as you call him."

Undine Spragg, at the word, swept round on the speaker with one of the quick turns that revealed her youthful flexibility. She was always doubling and twisting on herself, and every movement she made seemed to start at the nape of her neck, just below the lifted roll of reddish-gold hair, and flow without a break through her whole slim length to the tips of her fingers and the points of her slender restless feet.

"Why, do you know the Marvells? Are THEY stylish?" she asked.

Mrs. Heeny gave the discouraged gesture of a pedagogue who has vainly striven to implant the rudiments of knowledge in a rebellious mind.

"Why, Undine Spragg, I've told you all about them time and again!
His mother was a Dagonet. They live with old Urban Dagonet down in Washington Square."
To Mrs. Spragg this conveyed even less than to her daughter, "'way down there? Why do they live with somebody else? Haven't they got the means to have a home of their own?"

Undine's perceptions were more rapid, and she fixed her eyes searchingly on Mrs. Heeny.

"Do you mean to say Mr. Marvell's as swell as Mr. Popple?"

"As swell? Why, Claud Walsingham Popple ain't in the same class with him!"

The girl was upon her mother with a spring, snatching and smoothing out the crumpled note.

"Laura Fairford is that the sister's name?"

"Mrs. Henley Fairford; yes. What does she write about?"

Undine's face lit up as if a shaft of sunset had struck it through the triple-curtained windows of the Stentorian.

"She says she wants me to dine with her next Wednesday. Isn't it queer? Why does SHE want me? She's never seen me!" Her tone implied that she had long been accustomed to being "wanted" by those who had.

Mrs. Heeny laughed. "HE saw you, didn't he?"

"Who? Ralph Marvell? Why, of course he did Mr. Popple brought him to the party here last night."

"Well, there you are… When a young man in society wants to meet a girl again, he gets his sister to ask her."

Undine stared at her incredulously. "How queer! But they haven't all got sisters, have they? It must be fearfully poky for the ones that haven't."

"They get their mothers or their married friends," said Mrs. Heeny omnisciently.

"Married gentlemen?" enquired Mrs. Spragg, slightly shocked, but genuinely desirous of mastering her lesson.

"Mercy, no! Married ladies."

"But are there never any gentlemen present?" pursued Mrs. Spragg, feeling that if this were the case Undine would certainly be disappointed.

"Present where? At their dinners? Of course Mrs. Fairford gives the smartest little dinners in town. There was an account of one she gave last week in this morning's TOWN TALK: I guess it's right here among my clippings." Mrs. Heeny, swooping down on her bag, drew from it a handful of newspaper cuttings, which she spread on her ample lap and proceeded to sort with a moistened forefinger. "Here," she said, holding one of the slips at arm's length; and throwing back her head she read, in a slow unpunctuated chant: '"Mrs. Henley Fairford gave another of her natty little dinners last Wednesday as usual it was smart small and exclusive and there was much gnashing of teeth among the left-outs as Madame Olga Loukowska gave some of her new steppe dances after dinner' that's the French for new dance steps," Mrs. Heeny concluded, thrusting the documents back into her bag.

"Do you know Mrs. Fairford too?" Undine asked eagerly; while Mrs.

Spragg, impressed, but anxious for facts, pursued: "Does she reside on Fifth Avenue?"
"No, she has a little house in Thirty-eighth Street, down beyond Park Avenue."
The ladies' faces drooped again, and the masseuse went on promptly: "But they're glad enough to have her in the big houses! Why, yes, I know her," she said, addressing herself to Undine. "I mass'd her for a sprained ankle a couple of years ago. She's got a lovely manner, but NO conversation. Some of my patients converse exquisitely," Mrs. Heeny added with discrimination.

Undine was brooding over the note. "It IS written to mother Mrs. Abner E. Spragg I never saw anything so funny! 'Will you ALLOW your daughter to dine with me?' Allow! Is Mrs. Fairford peculiar?"

"No you are," said Mrs. Heeny bluntly. "Don't you know it's the thing in the best society to pretend that girls can't do anything without their mothers' permission? You just remember that. Undine. You mustn't accept invitations from gentlemen without you say you've got to ask your mother first."

"Mercy! But how'll mother know what to say?"

"Why, she'll say what you tell her to, of course. You'd better tell her you want to dine with Mrs. Fairford," Mrs. Heeny added humorously, as she gathered her waterproof together and stooped for her bag.

"Have I got to write the note, then?" Mrs. Spragg asked with rising agitation.

Mrs. Heeny reflected. "Why, no. I guess Undine can write it as if it was from you. Mrs. Fairford don't know your writing."

This was an evident relief to Mrs. Spragg, and as Undine swept to her room with the note her mother sank back, murmuring plaintively: "Oh, don't go yet, Mrs. Heeny. I haven't seen a human being all day, and I can't seem to find anything to say to that French maid."

Mrs. Heeny looked at her hostess with friendly compassion. She was well aware that she was the only bright spot on Mrs. Spragg's horizon. Since the Spraggs, some two years previously, had moved from Apex City to New York, they had made little progress in establishing relations with their new environment; and when, about four months earlier, Mrs. Spragg's doctor had called in Mrs. Heeny to minister professionally to his patient, he had done more for her spirit than for her body. Mrs. Heeny had had such "cases" before: she knew the rich helpless family, stranded in lonely splendour in a sumptuous West Side hotel, with a father compelled to seek a semblance of social life at the hotel bar, and a mother deprived of even this contact with her kind, and

reduced to illness by boredom and inactivity. Poor Mrs. Spragg had done her own washing in her youth, but since her rising fortunes had made this occupation unsuitable she had sunk into the relative inertia which the ladies of Apex City regarded as one of the prerogatives of affluence. At Apex, however, she had belonged to a social club, and, until they moved to the Mealey House, had been kept busy by the incessant struggle with domestic cares; whereas New York seemed to offer no field for any form of lady-like activity. She therefore took her exercise vicariously, with Mrs. Heeny's help; and Mrs. Heeny knew how to manipulate her imagination as well as her muscles. It was Mrs. Heeny who peopled the solitude of the long ghostly days with lively anecdotes of the Van Degens, the Driscolls, the Chauncey Ellings and the other social potentates whose least doings Mrs. Spragg and Undine had followed from afar in the Apex papers, and who had come to seem so much more remote since only the width of the Central Park divided mother and daughter from their Olympian portals.

Mrs. Spragg had no ambition for herself she seemed to have transferred her whole personality to her child but she was passionately resolved that Undine should have what she wanted, and she sometimes fancied that Mrs. Heeny, who crossed those sacred thresholds so familiarly, might some day gain admission for Undine.

"Well I'll stay a little mite longer if you want; and supposing I was to rub up your nails while we're talking? It'll be more sociable," the masseuse suggested, lifting her bag to the table and covering its shiny onyx surface with bottles and polishers.

Mrs. Spragg consentingly slipped the rings from her small mottled hands. It was soothing to feel herself in Mrs. Heeny's grasp, and though she knew the attention would cost her three dollars she was secure in the sense that Abner wouldn't mind. It had been clear to Mrs. Spragg, ever since their rather precipitate departure from Apex City, that Abner was resolved not to mind resolved at any cost to "see through" the New York adventure. It seemed likely now that the cost would be considerable. They had lived in New York for two years without any social benefit to their daughter; and it was of course for that purpose that they had come. If, at the time, there had been other and more pressing reasons, they were such as Mrs. Spragg and her husband never touched on, even in the gilded privacy of their bedroom at the Stentorian; and so completely had silence closed in on the subject that to Mrs. Spragg it had become non-existent: she really believed that, as Abner put it, they had left Apex because Undine was too big for the place.

She seemed as yet poor child! too small for New York: actually imperceptible to its heedless multitudes; and her mother trembled for the day when her

invisibility should be borne in on her. Mrs. Spragg did not mind the long delay for herself she had stores of lymphatic patience. But she had noticed lately that Undine was beginning to be nervous, and there was nothing that Undine's parents dreaded so much as her being nervous. Mrs. Spragg's maternal apprehensions unconsciously escaped in her next words.

"I do hope she'll quiet down now," she murmured, feeling quieter herself as her hand sank into Mrs. Heeny's roomy palm.

"Who's that? Undine?"

"Yes. She seemed so set on that Mr. Popple's coming round. From the way he acted last night she thought he'd be sure to come round this morning. She's so lonesome, poor child I can't say as I blame her."

"Oh, he'll come round. Things don't happen as quick as that in New York," said Mrs. Heeny, driving her nail-polisher cheeringly.
Mrs. Spragg sighed again. "They don't appear to. They say New Yorkers are always in a hurry; but I can't say as they've hurried much to make our acquaintance."

Mrs. Heeny drew back to study the effect of her work. "You wait, Mrs. Spragg, you wait. If you go too fast you sometimes have to rip out the whole seam."

"Oh, that's so that's SO!" Mrs. Spragg exclaimed, with a tragic emphasis that made the masseuse glance up at her.

"Of course it's so. And it's more so in New York than anywhere. The wrong set's like fly-paper: once you're in it you can pull and pull, but you'll never get out of it again."

Undine's mother heaved another and more helpless sigh. "I wish YOU'D tell Undine that, Mrs. Heeny."

"Oh, I guess Undine's all right. A girl like her can afford to wait. And if young Marvell's really taken with her she'll have the run of the place in no time."

This solacing thought enabled Mrs. Spragg to yield herself unreservedly to Mrs. Heeny's ministrations, which were prolonged for a happy confidential hour; and she had just bidden the masseuse good-bye, and was restoring the rings to her fingers, when the door opened to admit her husband.

Mr. Spragg came in silently, setting his high hat down on the centre-table, and laying his overcoat across one of the gilt chairs. He was tallish, grey-bearded and somewhat stooping, with the slack figure of the sedentary man who would

be stout if he were not dyspeptic; and his cautious grey eyes with pouch-like underlids had straight black brows like his daughter's. His thin hair was worn a little too long over his coat collar, and a Masonic emblem dangled from the heavy gold chain which crossed his crumpled black waistcoat.

He stood still in the middle of the room, casting a slow pioneering glance about its gilded void; then he said gently: "Well, mother?"

Mrs. Spragg remained seated, but her eyes dwelt on him affectionately.
"Undine's been asked out to a dinner-party; and Mrs. Heeny says it's to one of the first families. It's the sister of one of the gentlemen that Mabel Lipscomb introduced her to last night."
There was a mild triumph in her tone, for it was owing to her insistence and Undine's that Mr. Spragg had been induced to give up the house they had bought in West End Avenue, and move with his family to the Stentorian. Undine had early decided that they could not hope to get on while they "kept house" all the fashionable people she knew either boarded or lived in hotels. Mrs. Spragg was easily induced to take the same view, but Mr. Spragg had resisted, being at the moment unable either to sell his house or to let it as advantageously as he had hoped. After the move was made it seemed for a time as though he had been right, and the first social steps would be as difficult to make in a hotel as in one's own house; and Mrs. Spragg was therefore eager to have him know that Undine really owed her first invitation to a meeting under the roof of the Stentorian.

"You see we were right to come here, Abner," she added, and he absently rejoined: "I guess you two always manage to be right."

But his face remained unsmiling, and instead of seating himself and lighting his cigar, as he usually did before dinner, he took two or three aimless turns about the room, and then paused in front of his wife.

"What's the matter anything wrong down town?" she asked, her eyes reflecting his anxiety.

Mrs. Spragg's knowledge of what went on "down town" was of the most elementary kind, but her husband's face was the barometer in which she had long been accustomed to read the leave to go on unrestrictedly, or the warning to pause and abstain till the coming storm should be weathered.

He shook his head. "N no. Nothing worse than what I can see to, if you and Undine will go steady for a while." He paused and looked across the room at his daughter's door. "Where is she out?"

"I guess she's in her room, going over her dresses with that French maid. I

don't know as she's got anything fit to wear to that dinner," Mrs. Spragg added in a tentative murmur.

Mr. Spragg smiled at last. "Well I guess she WILL have," he said prophetically.

He glanced again at his daughter's door, as if to make sure of its being shut; then, standing close before his wife, he lowered his voice to say: "I saw Elmer Moffatt down town to-day."

"Oh, Abner!" A wave of almost physical apprehension passed over Mrs. Spragg. Her jewelled hands trembled in her black brocade lap, and the pulpy curves of her face collapsed as if it were a pricked balloon.

"Oh, Abner," she moaned again, her eyes also on her daughter's door. Mr. Spragg's black eyebrows gathered in an angry frown, but it was evident that his anger was not against his wife.

"What's the good of Oh Abner-ing? Elmer Moffatt's nothing to us no more'n if we never laid eyes on him."

"No I know it; but what's he doing here? Did you speak to him?" she faltered.

He slipped his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets. "No I guess Elmer and I are pretty well talked out."
Mrs. Spragg took up her moan. "Don't you tell her you saw him, Abner."

"I'll do as you say; but she may meet him herself."

"Oh, I guess not not in this new set she's going with! Don't tell her ANYHOW."
He turned away, feeling for one of the cigars which he always carried loose in his pocket; and his wife, rising, stole after him, and laid her hand on his arm.

"He can't do anything to her, can he?"

"Do anything to her?" He swung about furiously. "I'd like to see him touch her that's all!"

II

Undine's white and gold bedroom, with sea-green panels and old rose carpet, looked along Seventy-second Street toward the leafless tree-tops of the Central Park.

She went to the window, and drawing back its many layers of lace gazed

eastward down the long brownstone perspective. Beyond the Park lay Fifth Avenue and Fifth Avenue was where she wanted to be!

She turned back into the room, and going to her writing-table laid Mrs. Fairford's note before her, and began to study it minutely. She had read in the "Boudoir Chat" of one of the Sunday papers that the smartest women were using the new pigeon-blood notepaper with white ink; and rather against her mother's advice she had ordered a large supply, with her monogram in silver. It was a disappointment, therefore, to find that Mrs. Fairford wrote on the old-fashioned white sheet, without even a monogram simply her address and telephone number. It gave Undine rather a poor opinion of Mrs. Fairford's social standing, and for a moment she thought with considerable satisfaction of answering the note on her pigeon-blood paper. Then she remembered Mrs. Heeny's emphatic commendation of Mrs. Fairford, and her pen wavered. What if white paper were really newer than pigeon blood? It might be more stylish, anyhow. Well, she didn't care if Mrs. Fairford didn't like red paper SHE did! And she wasn't going to truckle to any woman who lived in a small house down beyond Park Avenue…

Undine was fiercely independent and yet passionately imitative. She wanted to surprise every one by her dash and originality, but she could not help modelling herself on the last person she met, and the confusion of ideals thus produced caused her much perturbation when she had to choose between two courses. She hesitated a moment longer, and then took from the drawer a plain sheet with the hotel address.

It was amusing to write the note in her mother's name she giggled as she formed the phrase "I shall be happy to permit my daughter to take dinner with you" ("take dinner" seemed more elegant than Mrs. Fairford's "dine") but when she came to the signature she was met by a new difficulty. Mrs. Fairford had signed herself "Laura Fairford" just as one school-girl would write to another. But could this be a proper model for Mrs. Spragg? Undine could not tolerate the thought of her mother's abasing herself to a denizen of regions beyond Park Avenue, and she resolutely formed the signature: "Sincerely, Mrs. Abner E. Spragg." Then uncertainty overcame her, and she re-wrote her note and copied Mrs. Fairford's formula: "Yours sincerely, Leota B. Spragg." But this struck her as an odd juxtaposition of formality and freedom, and she made a third attempt: "Yours with love, Leota B. Spragg." This, however, seemed excessive, as the ladies had never met; and after several other experiments she finally decided on a compromise, and ended the note: "Yours sincerely, Mrs. Leota B. Spragg." That might be conventional. Undine reflected, but it was certainly correct. This point settled, she flung open her door, calling imperiously down the passage: "Celeste!" and adding, as the French maid

appeared: "I want to look over all my dinner-dresses."

Considering the extent of Miss Spragg's wardrobe her dinner-dresses were not many. She had ordered a number the year before but, vexed at her lack of use for them, had tossed them over impatiently to the maid. Since then, indeed, she and Mrs. Spragg had succumbed to the abstract pleasure of buying two or three more, simply because they were too exquisite and Undine looked too lovely in them; but she had grown tired of these also tired of seeing them hang unworn in her wardrobe, like so many derisive points of interrogation. And now, as Celeste spread them out on the bed, they seemed disgustingly common-place, and as familiar as if she had danced them to shreds. Nevertheless, she yielded to the maid's persuasions and tried them on.

The first and second did not gain by prolonged inspection: they looked old-fashioned already. "It's something about the sleeves," Undine grumbled as she threw them aside.

The third was certainly the prettiest; but then it was the one she had worn at the hotel dance the night before and the impossibility of wearing it again within the week was too obvious for discussion. Yet she enjoyed looking at herself in it, for it reminded her of her sparkling passages with Claud Walsingham Popple, and her quieter but more fruitful talk with his little friend the young man she had hardly noticed.

"You can go, Celeste I'll take off the dress myself," she said: and when Celeste had passed out, laden with discarded finery. Undine bolted her door, dragged the tall pier-glass forward and, rummaging in a drawer for fan and gloves, swept to a seat before the mirror with the air of a lady arriving at an evening party. Celeste, before leaving, had drawn down the blinds and turned on the electric light, and the white and gold room, with its blazing wall-brackets, formed a sufficiently brilliant background to carry out the illusion. So untempered a glare would have been destructive to all half-tones and subtleties of modelling; but Undine's beauty was as vivid, and almost as crude, as the brightness suffusing it. Her black brows, her reddish-tawny hair and the pure red and white of her complexion defied the searching decomposing radiance: she might have been some fabled creature whose home was in a beam of light.

Undine, as a child, had taken but a lukewarm interest in the diversions of her playmates. Even in the early days when she had lived with her parents in a ragged outskirt of Apex, and hung on the fence with Indiana Frusk, the freckled daughter of the plumber "across the way," she had cared little for dolls or skipping-ropes, and still less for the riotous games in which the loud Indiana played Atalanta to all the boyhood of the quarter. Already Undine's chief delight was to "dress up" in her mother's Sunday skirt and "play lady"

before the wardrobe mirror. The taste had outlasted childhood, and she still practised the same secret pantomime, gliding in, settling her skirts, swaying her fan, moving her lips in soundless talk and laughter; but lately she had shrunk from everything that reminded her of her baffled social yearnings. Now, however, she could yield without afterthought to the joy of dramatizing her beauty. Within a few days she would be enacting the scene she was now mimicking; and it amused her to see in advance just what impression she would produce on Mrs. Fairford's guests.

For a while she carried on her chat with an imaginary circle of admirers, twisting this way and that, fanning, fidgeting, twitching at her draperies, as she did in real life when people were noticing her. Her incessant movements were not the result of shyness: she thought it the correct thing to be animated in society, and noise and restlessness were her only notion of vivacity. She therefore watched herself approvingly, admiring the light on her hair, the flash of teeth between her smiling lips, the pure shadows of her throat and shoulders as she passed from one attitude to another. Only one fact disturbed her: there was a hint of too much fulness in the curves of her neck and in the spring of her hips. She was tall enough to carry off a little extra weight, but excessive slimness was the fashion, and she shuddered at the thought that she might some day deviate from the perpendicular.

Presently she ceased to twist and sparkle at her image, and sinking into her chair gave herself up to retrospection. She was vexed, in looking back, to think how little notice she had taken of young Marvell, who turned out to be so much less negligible than his brilliant friend. She remembered thinking him rather shy, less accustomed to society; and though in his quiet deprecating way he had said one or two droll things he lacked Mr. Popple's masterly manner, his domineering yet caressing address. When Mr. Popple had fixed his black eyes on Undine, and murmured something "artistic" about the colour of her hair, she had thrilled to the depths of her being. Even now it seemed incredible that he should not turn out to be more distinguished than young Marvell: he seemed so much more in the key of the world she read about in the Sunday papers the dazzling auriferous world of the Van Degens, the Driscolls and their peers.

She was roused by the sound in the hall of her mother's last words to Mrs. Heeny. Undine waited till their adieux were over; then, opening her door, she seized the astonished masseuse and dragged her into the room. Mrs. Heeny gazed in admiration at the luminous apparition in whose hold she found herself.

"Mercy, Undine you do look stunning! Are you trying on your dress for Mrs. Fairford's?"

"Yes no this is only an old thing." The girl's eyes glittered under their black brows. "Mrs. Heeny, you've got to tell me the truth ARE they as swell as you said?"

"Who? The Fairfords and Marvells? If they ain't swell enough for you.
Undine Spragg, you'd better go right over to the court of England!"
Undine straightened herself. "I want the best. Are they as swell as the
Driscolls and Van Degens?"
Mrs. Heeny sounded a scornful laugh. "Look at here, now, you unbelieving girl! As sure as I'm standing here before you, I've seen Mrs. Harmon B. Driscoll of Fifth Avenue laying in her pink velvet bed with Honiton lace sheets on it, and crying her eyes out because she couldn't get asked to one of Mrs. Paul Marvell's musicals. She'd never 'a dreamt of being asked to a dinner there! Not all of her money couldn't 'a bought her that and she knows it!"

Undine stood for a moment with bright cheeks and parted lips; then she flung her soft arms about the masseuse. "Oh Mrs. Heeny you're lovely to me!" she breathed, her lips on Mrs. Heeny's rusty veil; while the latter, freeing herself with a good-natured laugh, said as she turned away: "Go steady. Undine, and you'll get anywheres."

GO STEADY, UNDINE! Yes, that was the advice she needed. Sometimes, in her dark moods, she blamed her parents for not having given it to her. She was so young… and they had told her so little! As she looked back she shuddered at some of her escapes. Even since they had come to New York she had been on the verge of one or two perilous adventures, and there had been a moment during their first winter when she had actually engaged herself to the handsome Austrian riding-master who accompanied her in the Park. He had carelessly shown her a card-case with a coronet, and had confided in her that he had been forced to resign from a crack cavalry regiment for fighting a duel about a Countess; and as a result of these confidences she had pledged herself to him, and bestowed on him her pink pearl ring in exchange for one of twisted silver, which he said the Countess had given him on her deathbed with the request that he should never take it off till he met a woman more beautiful than herself.

Soon afterward, luckily. Undine had run across Mabel Lipscomb, whom she had known at a middle western boarding-school as Mabel Blitch. Miss Blitch occupied a position of distinction as the only New York girl at the school, and for a time there had been sharp rivalry for her favour between Undine and Indiana Frusk, whose parents had somehow contrived for one term to obtain her admission to the same establishment. In spite of Indiana's unscrupulous methods, and of a certain violent way she had of capturing attention, the victory remained with Undine, whom Mabel pronounced more refined; and

the discomfited Indiana, denouncing her schoolmates as a "bunch of mushes," had disappeared forever from the scene of her defeat.

Since then Mabel had returned to New York and married a stock-broker; and Undine's first steps in social enlightenment dated from the day when she had met Mrs. Harry Lipscomb, and been again taken under her wing.

Harry Lipscomb had insisted on investigating the riding-master's record, and had found that his real name was Aaronson, and that he had left Cracow under a charge of swindling servant-girls out of their savings; in the light of which discoveries Undine noticed for the first time that his lips were too red and that his hair was pommaded. That was one of the episodes that sickened her as she looked back, and made her resolve once more to trust less to her impulses especially in the matter of giving away rings. In the interval, however, she felt she had learned a good deal, especially since, by Mabel Lipscomb's advice, the Spraggs had moved to the Stentorian, where that lady was herself established.

There was nothing of the monopolist about Mabel, and she lost no time in making Undine free of the Stentorian group and its affiliated branches: a society addicted to "days," and linked together by membership in countless clubs, mundane, cultural or "earnest." Mabel took Undine to the days, and introduced her as a "guest" to the club-meetings, where she was supported by the presence of many other guests "my friend Miss Stager, of Phalanx, Georgia," or (if the lady were literary) simply "my friend Ora Prance Chettle of Nebraska you know what Mrs. Chettle stands for."

Some of these reunions took place in the lofty hotels moored like a sonorously named fleet of battle-ships along the upper reaches of the West Side: the Olympian, the Incandescent, the Ormolu; while others, perhaps the more exclusive, were held in the equally lofty but more romantically styled apartment-houses: the Parthenon, the Tintern Abbey or the Lido.

Undine's preference was for the worldly parties, at which games were played, and she returned home laden with prizes in Dutch silver; but she was duly impressed by the debating clubs, where ladies of local distinction addressed the company from an improvised platform, or the members argued on subjects of such imperishable interest as: "What is charm?" or "The Problem-Novel" after which pink lemonade and rainbow sandwiches were consumed amid heated discussion of the "ethical aspect" of the question.

It was all very novel and interesting, and at first Undine envied Mabel Lipscomb for having made herself a place in such circles; but in time she began to despise her for being content to remain there. For it did not take Undine long to learn that introduction to Mabel's "set" had brought her no

nearer to Fifth Avenue. Even in Apex, Undine's tender imagination had been nurtured on the feats and gestures of Fifth Avenue. She knew all of New York's golden aristocracy by name, and the lineaments of its most distinguished scions had been made familiar by passionate poring over the daily press. In Mabel's world she sought in vain for the originals, and only now and then caught a tantalizing glimpse of one of their familiars: as when Claud Walsingham Popple, engaged on the portrait of a lady whom the Lipscombs described as "the wife of a Steel Magnet," felt it his duty to attend one of his client's teas, where it became Mabel's privilege to make his acquaintance and to name to him her friend Miss Spragg.

Unsuspected social gradations were thus revealed to the attentive Undine, but she was beginning to think that her sad proficiency had been acquired in vain when her hopes were revived by the appearance of Mr. Popple and his friend at the Stentorian dance. She thought she had learned enough to be safe from any risk of repeating the hideous Aaronson mistake; yet she now saw she had blundered again in distinguishing Claud Walsingham Popple while she almost snubbed his more retiring companion. It was all very puzzling, and her perplexity had been farther increased by Mrs. Heeny's tale of the great Mrs. Harmon B. Driscoll's despair.

Hitherto Undine had imagined that the Driscoll and Van Degen clans and their allies held undisputed suzerainty over New York society. Mabel Lipscomb thought so too, and was given to bragging of her acquaintance with a Mrs. Spoff, who was merely a second cousin of Mrs. Harmon B. Driscoll's. Yet here was she. Undine Spragg of Apex, about to be introduced into an inner circle to which Driscolls and Van Degens had laid siege in vain! It was enough to make her feel a little dizzy with her triumph to work her up into that state of perilous self-confidence in which all her worst follies had been committed.

She stood up and, going close to the glass, examined the reflection of her bright eyes and glowing cheeks. This time her fears were superfluous: there were to be no more mistakes and no more follies now! She was going to know the right people at last she was going to get what she wanted!

As she stood there, smiling at her happy image, she heard her father's voice in the room beyond, and instantly began to tear off her dress, strip the long gloves from her arms and unpin the rose in her hair. Tossing the fallen finery aside, she slipped on a dressing-gown and opened the door into the drawing-room.

Mr. Spragg was standing near her mother, who sat in a drooping attitude, her head sunk on her breast, as she did when she had one of her "turns." He looked up abruptly as Undine entered.

"Father has mother told you? Mrs. Fairford has asked me to dine. She's Mrs. Paul Marvell's daughter Mrs. Marvell was a Dagonet and they're sweller than anybody; they WON'T KNOW the Driscolls and Van Degens!"

Mr. Spragg surveyed her with humorous fondness.

"That so? What do they want to know you for, I wonder?" he jeered.

"Can't imagine unless they think I'll introduce YOU!" she jeered back in the same key, her arms around his stooping shoulders, her shining hair against his cheek.

"Well and are you going to? Have you accepted?" he took up her joke as she held him pinioned; while Mrs. Spragg, behind them, stirred in her seat with a little moan.

Undine threw back her head, plunging her eyes in his, and pressing so close that to his tired elderly sight her face was a mere bright blur.

"I want to awfully," she declared, "but I haven't got a single thing to wear."

Mrs. Spragg, at this, moaned more audibly. "Undine, I wouldn't ask father to buy any more clothes right on top of those last bills."

"I ain't on top of those last bills yet I'm way down under them," Mr. Spragg interrupted, raising his hands to imprison his daughter's slender wrists.

"Oh, well if you want me to look like a scarecrow, and not get asked again, I've got a dress that'll do PERFECTLY," Undine threatened, in a tone between banter and vexation.

Mr. Spragg held her away at arm's length, a smile drawing up the loose wrinkles about his eyes.

"Well, that kind of dress might come in mighty handy on SOME occasions; so I guess you'd better hold on to it for future use, and go and select another for this Fairford dinner," he said; and before he could finish he was in her arms again, and she was smothering his last word in little cries and kisses.

III

Though she would not for the world have owned it to her parents, Undine was disappointed in the Fairford dinner.

The house, to begin with, was small and rather shabby. There was no gilding,

no lavish diffusion of light: the room they sat in after dinner, with its green-shaded lamps making faint pools of brightness, and its rows of books from floor to ceiling, reminded Undine of the old circulating library at Apex, before the new marble building was put up. Then, instead of a gas-log, or a polished grate with electric bulbs behind ruby glass, there was an old-fashioned wood-fire, like pictures of "Back to the farm for Christmas"; and when the logs fell forward Mrs. Pairford or her brother had to jump up to push them in place, and the ashes scattered over the hearth untidily.

The dinner too was disappointing. Undine was too young to take note of culinary details, but she had expected to view the company through a bower of orchids and eat pretty-coloured entrees in ruffled papers. Instead, there was only a low centre-dish of ferns, and plain roasted and broiled meat that one could recognize as if they'd been dyspeptics on a diet! With all the hints in the Sunday papers, she thought it dull of Mrs. Fairford not to have picked up something newer; and as the evening progressed she began to suspect that it wasn't a real "dinner party," and that they had just asked her in to share what they had when they were alone.

But a glance about the table convinced her that Mrs. Fairford could not have meant to treat her other guests so lightly. They were only eight in number, but one was no less a person than young Mrs. Peter Van Degen the one who had been a Dagonet and the consideration which this young lady, herself one of the choicest ornaments of the Society Column, displayed toward the rest of the company, convinced Undine that they must be more important than they looked. She liked Mrs. Fairford, a small incisive woman, with a big nose and good teeth revealed by frequent smiles. In her dowdy black and antiquated ornaments she was not what Undine would have called "stylish"; but she had a droll kind way which reminded the girl of her father's manner when he was not tired or worried about money. One of the other ladies, having white hair, did not long arrest Undine's attention; and the fourth, a girl like herself, who was introduced as Miss Harriet Ray, she dismissed at a glance as plain and wearing a last year's "model."

The men, too, were less striking than she had hoped. She had not expected much of Mr. Fairford, since married men were intrinsically uninteresting, and his baldness and grey moustache seemed naturally to relegate him to the background; but she had looked for some brilliant youths of her own age in her inmost heart she had looked for Mr. Popple. He was not there, however, and of the other men one, whom they called Mr. Bowen, was hopelessly elderly she supposed he was the husband of the white-haired lady and the other two, who seemed to be friends of young Marvell's, were both lacking in Claud Walsingham's dash.

Undine sat between Mr. Bowen and young Marvell, who struck her as very "sweet" (it was her word for friendliness), but even shyer than at the hotel dance. Yet she was not sure if he were shy, or if his quietness were only a new kind of self-possession which expressed itself negatively instead of aggressively. Small, well-knit, fair, he sat stroking his slight blond moustache and looking at her with kindly, almost tender eyes; but he left it to his sister and the others to draw her out and fit her into the pattern.

Mrs. Fairford talked so well that the girl wondered why Mrs. Heeny had found her lacking in conversation. But though Undine thought silent people awkward she was not easily impressed by verbal fluency. All the ladies in Apex City were more voluble than Mrs. Fairford, and had a larger vocabulary: the difference was that with Mrs. Fairford conversation seemed to be a concert and not a solo. She kept drawing in the others, giving each a turn, beating time for them with her smile, and somehow harmonizing and linking together what they said. She took particular pains to give Undine her due part in the performance; but the girl's expansive impulses were always balanced by odd reactions of mistrust, and to-night the latter prevailed. She meant to watch and listen without letting herself go, and she sat very straight and pink, answering promptly but briefly, with the nervous laugh that punctuated all her phrases saying "I don't care if I do" when her host asked her to try some grapes, and "I wouldn't wonder" when she thought any one was trying to astonish her.

This state of lucidity enabled her to take note of all that was being said. The talk ran more on general questions, and less on people, than she was used to; but though the allusions to pictures and books escaped her, she caught and stored up every personal reference, and the pink in her cheeks deepened at a random mention of Mr. Popple.

"Yes he's doing me," Mrs. Peter Van Degen was saying, in her slightly drawling voice. "He's doing everybody this year, you know "

"As if that were a reason!" Undine heard Mrs. Fairford breathe to Mr. Bowen; who replied, at the same pitch: "It's a Van Degen reason, isn't it?" to which Mrs. Fairford shrugged assentingly.

"That delightful Popple he paints so exactly as he talks!" the white-haired lady took it up. "All his portraits seem to proclaim what a gentleman he is, and how he fascinates women! They're not pictures of Mrs. or Miss So-and-so, but simply of the impression Popple thinks he's made on them."

Mrs. Fairford smiled. "I've sometimes thought," she mused, "that Mr. Popple must be the only gentleman I know; at least he's the only man who has ever told me he was a gentleman and Mr. Popple never fails to mention it."

Undine's ear was too well attuned to the national note of irony for her not to perceive that her companions were making sport of the painter. She winced at their banter as if it had been at her own expense, yet it gave her a dizzy sense of being at last in the very stronghold of fashion. Her attention was diverted by hearing Mrs. Van Degen, under cover of the general laugh, say in a low tone to young Marvell: "I thought you liked his things, or I wouldn't have had him paint me."

Something in her tone made all Undine's perceptions bristle, and she strained her ears for the answer.

"I think he'll do you capitally you must let me come and see some day soon." Marvell's tone was always so light, so unemphasized, that she could not be sure of its being as indifferent as it sounded. She looked down at the fruit on her plate and shot a side-glance through her lashes at Mrs. Peter Van Degen.

Mrs. Van Degen was neither beautiful nor imposing: just a dark girlish-looking creature with plaintive eyes and a fidgety frequent laugh. But she was more elaborately dressed and jewelled than the other ladies, and her elegance and her restlessness made her seem less alien to Undine. She had turned on Marvell a gaze at once pleading and possessive; but whether betokening merely an inherited intimacy (Undine had noticed that they were all more or less cousins) or a more personal feeling, her observer was unable to decide; just as the tone of the young man's reply might have expressed the open avowal of good-fellowship or the disguise of a different sentiment. All was blurred and puzzling to the girl in this world of half-lights, half-tones, eliminations and abbreviations; and she felt a violent longing to brush away the cobwebs and assert herself as the dominant figure of the scene.

Yet in the drawing-room, with the ladies, where Mrs. Fairford came and sat by her, the spirit of caution once more prevailed. She wanted to be noticed but she dreaded to be patronized, and here again her hostess's gradations of tone were confusing. Mrs. Fairford made no tactless allusions to her being a newcomer in New York there was nothing as bitter to the girl as that but her questions as to what pictures had interested Undine at the various exhibitions of the moment, and which of the new books she had read, were almost as open to suspicion, since they had to be answered in the negative. Undine did not even know that there were any pictures to be seen, much less that "people" went to see them; and she had read no new book but "When The Kissing Had to Stop," of which Mrs. Fairford seemed not to have heard. On the theatre they were equally at odds, for while Undine had seen "Oolaloo" fourteen times, and was "wild" about Ned Norris in "The Soda-Water Fountain," she had not heard of the famous Berlin comedians who were performing Shakespeare at the German Theatre, and knew only by name the clever American actress who

was trying to give "repertory" plays with a good stock company. The conversation was revived for a moment by her recalling that she had seen Sarah Bernhard in a play she called "Leg-long," and another which she pronounced "Fade"; but even this did not carry them far, as she had forgotten what both plays were about and had found the actress a good deal older than she expected.

Matters were not improved by the return of the men from the smoking-room. Henley Fairford replaced his wife at Undine's side; and since it was unheard-of at Apex for a married man to force his society on a young girl, she inferred that the others didn't care to talk to her, and that her host and hostess were in league to take her off their hands. This discovery resulted in her holding her vivid head very high, and answering "I couldn't really say," or "Is that so?" to all Mr. Fairford's ventures; and as these were neither numerous nor striking it was a relief to both when the rising of the elderly lady gave the signal for departure.

In the hall, where young Marvell had managed to precede her. Undine found Mrs. Van Degen putting on her cloak. As she gathered it about her she laid her hand on Marvell's arm.

"Ralphie, dear, you'll come to the opera with me on Friday? We'll dine together first Peter's got a club dinner." They exchanged what seemed a smile of intelligence, and Undine heard the young man accept. Then Mrs. Van Degen turned to her.

"Good-bye, Miss Spragg. I hope you'll come "

" TO DINE WITH ME TOO?" That must be what she was going to say, and Undine's heart gave a bound.
" to see me some afternoon," Mrs. Van Degen ended, going down the steps to her motor, at the door of which a much-furred footman waited with more furs on his arm.

Undine's face burned as she turned to receive her cloak. When she had drawn it on with haughty deliberation she found Marvell at her side, in hat and overcoat, and her heart gave a higher bound. He was going to "escort" her home, of course! This brilliant youth she felt now that he WAS brilliant who dined alone with married women, whom the "Van Degen set" called "Ralphie, dear," had really no eyes for any one but herself; and at the thought her lost self-complacency flowed back warm through her veins.

The street was coated with ice, and she had a delicious moment descending the steps on Marvell's arm, and holding it fast while they waited for her cab to come up; but when he had helped her in he closed the door and held his hand

out over the lowered window.

"Good-bye," he said, smiling; and she could not help the break of pride in her voice, as she faltered out stupidly, from the depths of her disillusionment: "Oh good-bye."

IV

"Father, you've got to take a box for me at the opera next Friday."

From the tone of her voice Undine's parents knew at once that she was "nervous."

They had counted a great deal on the Fairford dinner as a means of tranquillization, and it was a blow to detect signs of the opposite result when, late the next morning, their daughter came dawdling into the sodden splendour of the Stentorian breakfast-room.

The symptoms of Undine's nervousness were unmistakable to Mr. and Mrs. Spragg. They could read the approaching storm in the darkening of her eyes from limpid grey to slate-colour, and in the way her straight black brows met above them and the red curves of her lips narrowed to a parallel line below.

Mr. Spragg, having finished the last course of his heterogeneous meal, was adjusting his gold eye-glasses for a glance at the paper when Undine trailed down the sumptuous stuffy room, where coffee-fumes hung perpetually under the emblazoned ceiling and the spongy carpet might have absorbed a year's crumbs without a sweeping.

About them sat other pallid families, richly dressed, and silently eating their way through a bill-of-fare which seemed to have ransacked the globe for gastronomic incompatibilities; and in the middle of the room a knot of equally pallid waiters, engaged in languid conversation, turned their backs by common consent on the persons they were supposed to serve.

Undine, who rose too late to share the family breakfast, usually had her chocolate brought to her in bed by Celeste, after the manner described in the articles on "A Society Woman's Day" which were appearing in Boudoir Chat. Her mere appearance in the restaurant therefore prepared her parents for those symptoms of excessive tension which a nearer inspection confirmed, and Mr. Spragg folded his paper and hooked his glasses to his waistcoat with the air of a man who prefers to know the worst and have it over.

"An opera box!" faltered Mrs. Spragg, pushing aside the bananas and cream with which she had been trying to tempt an appetite too languid for fried liver

or crab mayonnaise.

"A parterre box," Undine corrected, ignoring the exclamation, and continuing to address herself to her father. "Friday's the stylish night, and that new tenor's going to sing again in 'Cavaleeria,'" she condescended to explain.

"That so?" Mr. Spragg thrust his hands into his waistcoat pockets, and began to tilt his chair till he remembered there was no wall to meet it. He regained his balance and said: "Wouldn't a couple of good orchestra seats do you?"

"No; they wouldn't," Undine answered with a darkening brow. He looked at her humorously. "You invited the whole dinner-party, I suppose?"

"No no one."

"Going all alone in a box?" She was disdainfully silent. "I don't s'pose you're thinking of taking mother and me?"

This was so obviously comic that they all laughed even Mrs. Spragg and Undine went on more mildly: "I want to do something for Mabel Lipscomb: make some return. She's always taking me 'round, and I've never done a thing for her not a single thing."

This appeal to the national belief in the duty of reciprocal "treating" could not fail of its effect, and Mrs. Spragg murmured: "She never HAS, Abner," but Mr. Spragg's brow remained unrelenting.

"Do you know what a box costs?"

"No; but I s'pose you do," Undine returned with unconscious flippancy.

"I do. That's the trouble. WHY won't seats do you?"

"Mabel could buy seats for herself."

"That's so," interpolated Mrs. Spragg always the first to succumb to her daughter's arguments.

"Well, I guess I can't buy a box for her."

Undine's face gloomed more deeply. She sat silent, her chocolate thickening in the cup, while one hand, almost as much beringed as her mother's, drummed on the crumpled table-cloth.

"We might as well go straight back to Apex," she breathed at last between her teeth.

Mrs. Spragg cast a frightened glance at her husband. These struggles between two resolute wills always brought on her palpitations, and she wished she had her phial of digitalis with her.

"A parterre box costs a hundred and twenty-five dollars a night," said
Mr. Spragg, transferring a toothpick to his waistcoat pocket.
"I only want it once."

He looked at her with a quizzical puckering of his crows'-feet. "You only want most things once. Undine."

It was an observation they had made in her earliest youth Undine never wanted anything long, but she wanted it "right off." And until she got it the house was uninhabitable.

"I'd a good deal rather have a box for the season," she rejoined, and he saw the opening he had given her. She had two ways of getting things out of him against his principles; the tender wheedling way, and the harsh-lipped and cold and he did not know which he dreaded most. As a child they had admired her assertiveness, had made Apex ring with their boasts of it; but it had long since cowed Mrs. Spragg, and it was beginning to frighten her husband.

"Fact is, Undie," he said, weakening, "I'm a little mite strapped just this month."

Her eyes grew absent-minded, as they always did when he alluded to business. THAT was man's province; and what did men go "down town" for but to bring back the spoils to their women? She rose abruptly, leaving her parents seated, and said, more to herself than the others: "Think I'll go for a ride."

"Oh, Undine!" fluttered Mrs. Spragg. She always had palpitations when Undine rode, and since the Aaronson episode her fears were not confined to what the horse might do.

"Why don't you take your mother out shopping a little?" Mr. Spragg suggested, conscious of the limitation of his resources.

Undine made no answer, but swept down the room, and out of the door ahead of her mother, with scorn and anger in every line of her arrogant young back. Mrs. Spragg tottered meekly after her, and Mr. Spragg lounged out into the marble hall to buy a cigar before taking the Subway to his office.

Undine went for a ride, not because she felt particularly disposed for the exercise, but because she wished to discipline her mother. She was almost sure she would get her opera box, but she did not see why she should have to

struggle for her rights, and she was especially annoyed with Mrs. Spragg for seconding her so half-heartedly. If she and her mother did not hold together in such crises she would have twice the work to do.

Undine hated "scenes": she was essentially peace-loving, and would have preferred to live on terms of unbroken harmony with her parents. But she could not help it if they were unreasonable. Ever since she could remember there had been "fusses" about money; yet she and her mother had always got what they wanted, apparently without lasting detriment to the family fortunes. It was therefore natural to conclude that there were ample funds to draw upon, and that Mr. Spragg's occasional resistances were merely due to an imperfect understanding of what constituted the necessities of life.

When she returned from her ride Mrs. Spragg received her as if she had come back from the dead. It was absurd, of course; but Undine was inured to the absurdity of parents.

"Has father telephoned?" was her first brief question.

"No, he hasn't yet."

Undine's lips tightened, but she proceeded deliberately with the removal of her habit.

"You'd think I'd asked him to buy me the Opera House, the way he's acting over a single box," she muttered, flinging aside her smartly-fitting coat. Mrs. Spragg received the flying garment and smoothed it out on the bed. Neither of the ladies could "bear" to have their maid about when they were at their toilet, and Mrs. Spragg had always performed these ancillary services for Undine.

"You know, Undie, father hasn't always got the money in his pocket, and the bills have been pretty heavy lately. Father was a rich man for Apex, but that's different from being rich in New York."

She stood before her daughter, looking down on her appealingly.

Undine, who had seated herself while she detached her stock and waistcoat, raised her head with an impatient jerk. "Why on earth did we ever leave Apex, then?" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Spragg's eyes usually dropped before her daughter's inclement gaze; but on this occasion they held their own with a kind of awe-struck courage, till Undine's lids sank above her flushing cheeks.

She sprang up, tugging at the waistband of her habit, while Mrs. Spragg, relapsing from temerity to meekness, hovered about her with obstructive zeal.

"If you'd only just let go of my skirt, mother I can unhook it twice as quick myself."

Mrs. Spragg drew back, understanding that her presence was no longer wanted. But on the threshold she paused, as if overruled by a stronger influence, and said, with a last look at her daughter: "You didn't meet anybody when you were out, did you, Undie?"

Undine's brows drew together: she was struggling with her long patent-leather boot.

"Meet anybody? Do you mean anybody I know? I don't KNOW anybody I never shall, if father can't afford to let me go round with people!"

The boot was off with a wrench, and she flung it violently across the old-rose carpet, while Mrs. Spragg, turning away to hide a look of inexpressible relief, slipped discreetly from the room.

The day wore on. Undine had meant to go down and tell Mabel Lipscomb about the Fairford dinner, but its aftertaste was flat on her lips. What would it lead to? Nothing, as far as she could see. Ralph Marvell had not even asked when he might call; and she was ashamed to confess to Mabel that he had not driven home with her.

Suddenly she decided that she would go and see the pictures of which Mrs. Fairford had spoken. Perhaps she might meet some of the people she had seen at dinner from their talk one might have imagined that they spent their lives in picture-galleries.

The thought reanimated her, and she put on her handsomest furs, and a hat for which she had not yet dared present the bill to her father. It was the fashionable hour in Fifth Avenue, but Undine knew none of the ladies who were bowing to each other from interlocked motors. She had to content herself with the gaze of admiration which she left in her wake along the pavement; but she was used to the homage of the streets and her vanity craved a choicer fare.

When she reached the art gallery which Mrs. Fairford had named she found it even more crowded than Fifth Avenue; and some of the ladies and gentlemen wedged before the pictures had the "look" which signified social consecration. As Undine made her way among them, she was aware of attracting almost as much notice as in the street, and she flung herself into rapt attitudes before the canvases, scribbling notes in the catalogue in imitation of a tall girl in sables, while ripples of self-consciousness played up and down her watchful back.

Presently her attention was drawn to a lady in black who was examining the pictures through a tortoise-shell eye-glass adorned with diamonds and hanging from a long pearl chain. Undine was instantly struck by the opportunities which this toy presented for graceful wrist movements and supercilious turns of the head. It seemed suddenly plebeian and promiscuous to look at the world with a naked eye, and all her floating desires were merged in the wish for a jewelled eye-glass and chain. So violent was this wish that, drawn on in the wake of the owner of the eye-glass, she found herself inadvertently bumping against a stout tight-coated young man whose impact knocked her catalogue from her hand.

As the young man picked the catalogue up and held it out to her she noticed that his bulging eyes and queer retreating face were suffused with a glow of admiration. He was so unpleasant-looking that she would have resented his homage had not his odd physiognomy called up some vaguely agreeable association of ideas. Where had she seen before this grotesque saurian head, with eye-lids as thick as lips and lips as thick as ear-lobes? It fled before her down a perspective of innumerable newspaper portraits, all, like the original before her, tightly coated, with a huge pearl transfixing a silken tie….

"Oh, thank you," she murmured, all gleams and graces, while he stood hat in hand, saying sociably:

"The crowd's simply awful, isn't it?"

At the same moment the lady of the eye-glass drifted closer, and with a tap of her wand, and a careless "Peter, look at this," swept him to the other side of the gallery.

Undine's heart was beating excitedly, for as he turned away she had identified him. Peter Van Degen who could he be but young Peter Van Degen, the son of the great banker, Thurber Van Degen, the husband of Ralph Marvell's cousin, the hero of "Sunday Supplements," the captor of Blue Ribbons at Horse-Shows, of Gold Cups at Motor Races, the owner of winning race-horses and "crack" sloops: the supreme exponent, in short, of those crowning arts that made all life seem stale and unprofitable outside the magic ring of the Society Column? Undine smiled as she recalled the look with which his pale protruding eyes had rested on her it almost consoled her for his wife's indifference!

When she reached home she found that she could not remember anything about the pictures she had seen…

There was no message from her father, and a reaction of disgust set in. Of

what good were such encounters if they were to have no sequel? She would probably never meet Peter Van Degen again or, if she DID run across him in the same accidental way, she knew they could not continue their conversation without being "introduced." What was the use of being beautiful and attracting attention if one were perpetually doomed to relapse again into the obscure mass of the Uninvited?

Her gloom was not lightened by finding Ralph Marvell's card on the drawing-room table. She thought it unflattering and almost impolite of him to call without making an appointment: it seemed to show that he did not wish to continue their acquaintance. But as she tossed the card aside her mother said: "He was real sorry not to see you. Undine he sat here nearly an hour."

Undine's attention was roused. "Sat here all alone? Didn't you tell him
I was out?"
"Yes but he came up all the same. He asked for me."

"Asked for YOU?"

The social order seemed to be falling in ruins at Undine's feet. A visitor who asked for a girl's mother! she stared at Mrs. Spragg with cold incredulity. "What makes you think he did?"

"Why, they told me so. I telephoned down that you were out, and they said he'd asked for me." Mrs. Spragg let the fact speak for itself it was too much out of the range of her experience to admit of even a hypothetical explanation.

Undine shrugged her shoulders. "It was a mistake, of course. Why on earth did you let him come up?"

"I thought maybe he had a message for you, Undie."

This plea struck her daughter as not without weight. "Well, did he?" she asked, drawing out her hat-pins and tossing down her hat on the onyx table.

"Why, no he just conversed. He was lovely to me, but I couldn't make out what he was after," Mrs. Spragg was obliged to own.

Her daughter looked at her with a kind of chill commiseration. "You never CAN," she murmured, turning away.

She stretched herself out moodily on one of the pink and gold sofas, and lay there brooding, an unread novel on her knee. Mrs. Spragg timidly slipped a cushion under her daughter's head, and then dissembled herself behind the lace window-curtains and sat watching the lights spring out down the long street and spread their glittering net across the Park. It was one of Mrs. Spragg's

chief occupations to watch the nightly lighting of New York.

Undine lay silent, her hands clasped behind her head. She was plunged in one of the moods of bitter retrospection when all her past seemed like a long struggle for something she could not have, from a trip to Europe to an opera-box; and when she felt sure that, as the past had been, so the future would be. And yet, as she had often told her parents, all she sought for was improvement: she honestly wanted the best.

Her first struggle after she had ceased to scream for candy, or sulk for a new toy had been to get away from Apex in summer. Her summers, as she looked back on them, seemed to typify all that was dreariest and most exasperating in her life. The earliest had been spent in the yellow "frame" cottage where she had hung on the fence, kicking her toes against the broken palings and exchanging moist chewing-gum and half-eaten apples with Indiana Frusk. Later on, she had returned from her boarding-school to the comparative gentility of summer vacations at the Mealey House, whither her parents, forsaking their squalid suburb, had moved in the first flush of their rising fortunes. The tessellated floors, the plush parlours and organ-like radiators of the Mealey House had, aside from their intrinsic elegance, the immense advantage of lifting the Spraggs high above the Frusks, and making it possible for Undine, when she met Indiana in the street or at school, to chill her advances by a careless allusion to the splendours of hotel life. But even in such a setting, and in spite of the social superiority it implied, the long months of the middle western summer, fly-blown, torrid, exhaling stale odours, soon became as insufferable as they had been in the little yellow house. At school Undine met other girls whose parents took them to the Great Lakes for August; some even went to California, others oh bliss ineffable! went "east."

Pale and listless under the stifling boredom of the Mealey House routine, Undine secretly sucked lemons, nibbled slate-pencils and drank pints of bitter coffee to aggravate her look of ill-health; and when she learned that even Indiana Frusk was to go on a month's visit to Buffalo it needed no artificial aids to emphasize the ravages of envy. Her parents, alarmed by her appearance, were at last convinced of the necessity of change, and timidly, tentatively, they transferred themselves for a month to a staring hotel on a glaring lake.

There Undine enjoyed the satisfaction of sending ironic post-cards to Indiana, and discovering that she could more than hold her own against the youth and beauty of the other visitors. Then she made the acquaintance of a pretty woman from Richmond, whose husband, a mining engineer, had brought her west with him while he inspected the newly developed Eubaw mines; and the southern visitor's dismay, her repugnances, her recoil from the faces, the food,

the amusements, the general bareness and stridency of the scene, were a terrible initiation to Undine. There was something still better beyond, then more luxurious, more exciting, more worthy of her! She once said to herself, afterward, that it was always her fate to find out just too late about the "something beyond." But in this case it was not too late and obstinately, inflexibly, she set herself to the task of forcing her parents to take her "east" the next summer.

Yielding to the inevitable, they suffered themselves to be impelled to a Virginia "resort," where Undine had her first glimpse of more romantic possibilities leafy moonlight rides and drives, picnics in mountain glades, and an atmosphere of Christmas-chromo sentimentality that tempered her hard edges a little, and gave her glimpses of a more delicate kind of pleasure. But here again everything was spoiled by a peep through another door. Undine, after a first mustering of the other girls in the hotel, had, as usual, found herself easily first till the arrival, from Washington, of Mr. and Mrs. Wincher and their daughter. Undine was much handsomer than Miss Wincher, but she saw at a glance that she did not know how to use her beauty as the other used her plainness. She was exasperated too, by the discovery that Miss Wincher seemed not only unconscious of any possible rivalry between them, but actually unaware of her existence. Listless, long-faced, supercilious, the young lady from Washington sat apart reading novels or playing solitaire with her parents, as though the huge hotel's loud life of gossip and flirtation were invisible and inaudible to her. Undine never even succeeded in catching her eye: she always lowered it to her book when the Apex beauty trailed or rattled past her secluded corner. But one day an acquaintance of the Winchers' turned up a lady from Boston, who had come to Virginia on a botanizing tour; and from scraps of Miss Wincher's conversation with the newcomer, Undine, straining her ears behind a column of the long veranda, obtained a new glimpse into the unimagined.

The Winchers, it appeared, found themselves at Potash Springs merely because a severe illness of Mrs. Wincher's had made it impossible, at the last moment, to move her farther from Washington. They had let their house on the North Shore, and as soon as they could leave "this dreadful hole" were going to Europe for the autumn. Miss Wincher simply didn't know how she got through the days; though no doubt it was as good as a rest-cure after the rush of the winter. Of course they would have preferred to hire a house, but the "hole," if one could believe it, didn't offer one; so they had simply shut themselves off as best they could from the "hotel crew" had her friend, Miss Wincher parenthetically asked, happened to notice the Sunday young men? They were queerer even than the "belles" they came for and had escaped the promiscuity of the dinner-hour by turning one of their rooms into a dining-

room, and picnicking there with the Persimmon House standards, one couldn't describe it in any other way! But luckily the awful place was doing mamma good, and now they had nearly served their term…

Undine turned sick as she listened. Only the evening before she had gone on a "buggy-ride" with a young gentleman from Deposit a dentist's assistant and had let him kiss her, and given him the flower from her hair. She loathed the thought of him now: she loathed all the people about her, and most of all the disdainful Miss Wincher. It enraged her to think that the Winchers classed her with the "hotel crew" with the "belles" who awaited their Sunday young men. The place was forever blighted for her, and the next week she dragged her amazed but thankful parents back to Apex.

But Miss Wincher's depreciatory talk had opened ampler vistas, and the pioneer blood in Undine would not let her rest. She had heard the call of the Atlantic seaboard, and the next summer found the Spraggs at Skog Harbour, Maine. Even now Undine felt a shiver of boredom as she recalled it. That summer had been the worst of all. The bare wind-beaten inn, all shingles without and blueberry pie within, was "exclusive," parochial, Bostonian; and the Spraggs wore through the interminable weeks in blank unmitigated isolation. The incomprehensible part of it was that every other woman in the hotel was plain, dowdy or elderly and most of them all three. If there had been any competition on ordinary lines Undine would have won, as Van Degen said, "hands down." But there wasn't the other "guests" simply formed a cold impenetrable group who walked, boated, played golf, and discussed Christian Science and the Subliminal, unaware of the tremulous organism drifting helplessly against their rock-bound circle.

It was on the day the Spraggs left Skog Harbour that Undine vowed to herself with set lips: "I'll never try anything again till I try New York." Now she had gained her point and tried New York, and so far, it seemed, with no better success. From small things to great, everything went against her. In such hours of self-searching she was ready enough to acknowledge her own mistakes, but they exasperated her less than the blunders of her parents. She was sure, for instance, that she was on what Mrs. Heeny called "the right tack" at last: yet just at the moment when her luck seemed about to turn she was to be thwarted by her father's stupid obstinacy about the opera-box…

She lay brooding over these things till long after Mrs. Spragg had gone away to dress for dinner, and it was nearly eight o'clock when she heard her father's dragging tread in the hall.

She kept her eyes fixed on her book while he entered the room and moved about behind her, laying aside his hat and overcoat; then his steps came close

and a small parcel dropped on the pages of her book.

"Oh, father!" She sprang up, all alight, the novel on the floor, her fingers twitching for the tickets. But a substantial packet emerged, like nothing she had ever seen. She looked at it, hoping, fearing she beamed blissful interrogation on her father while his sallow smile continued to tantalize her. Then she closed on him with a rush, smothering his words against her hair.

"It's for more than one night why, it's for every other Friday! Oh, you darling, you darling!" she exulted.

Mr. Spragg, through the glittering meshes, feigned dismay. "That so? They must have given me the wrong !" Then, convicted by her radiant eyes as she swung round on him: "I knew you only wanted it ONCE for yourself. Undine; but I thought maybe, off nights, you'd like to send it to your friends."

Mrs. Spragg, who from her doorway had assisted with moist eyes at this closing pleasantry, came forward as Undine hurried away to dress.

"Abner can you really manage it all right?"

He answered her with one of his awkward brief caresses. "Don't you fret about that, Leota. I'm bound to have her go round with these people she knows. I want her to be with them all she can."

A pause fell between them, while Mrs. Spragg looked anxiously into his fagged eyes.

"You seen Elmer again?"

"No. Once was enough," he returned, with a scowl like Undine's.

"Why you SAID he couldn't come after her, Abner!"

"No more he can. But what if she was to get nervous and lonesome, and want to go after him?"

Mrs. Spragg shuddered away from the suggestion. "How'd he look? Just the same?" she whispered.

"No. Spruced up. That's what scared me."

It scared her too, to the point of blanching her habitually lifeless cheek. She continued to scrutinize her husband broodingly. "You look fairly sick, Abner. You better let me get you some of those stomach drops right off," she proposed.

But he parried this with his unfailing humour. "I guess I'm too sick to risk that." He passed his hand through her arm with the conjugal gesture familiar to Apex City. "Come along down to dinner, mother I guess Undine won't mind if I don't rig up to-night."

V

She had looked down at them, enviously, from the balcony she had looked up at them, reverentially, from the stalls; but now at last she was on a line with them, among them, she was part of the sacred semicircle whose privilege it is, between the acts, to make the mere public forget that the curtain has fallen.

As she swept to the left-hand seat of their crimson niche, waving Mabel Lipscomb to the opposite corner with a gesture learned during her apprenticeship in the stalls, Undine felt that quickening of the faculties that comes in the high moments of life. Her consciousness seemed to take in at once the whole bright curve of the auditorium, from the unbroken lines of spectators below her to the culminating blaze of the central chandelier; and she herself was the core of that vast illumination, the sentient throbbing surface which gathered all the shafts of light into a centre.

It was almost a relief when, a moment later, the lights sank, the curtain rose, and the focus of illumination was shifted. The music, the scenery, and the movement on the stage, were like a rich mist tempering the radiance that shot on her from every side, and giving her time to subside, draw breath, adjust herself to this new clear medium which made her feel so oddly brittle and transparent.

When the curtain fell on the first act she began to be aware of a subtle change in the house. In all the boxes cross-currents of movement had set in: groups were coalescing and breaking up, fans waving and heads twinkling, black coats emerging among white shoulders, late comers dropping their furs and laces in the red penumbra of the background. Undine, for the moment unconscious of herself, swept the house with her opera-glass, searching for familiar faces. Some she knew without being able to name them fixed figure-heads of the social prow others she recognized from their portraits in the papers; but of the few from whom she could herself claim recognition not one was visible, and as she pursued her investigations the whole scene grew blank and featureless.

Almost all the boxes were full now, but one, just opposite, tantalized her by its continued emptiness. How queer to have an opera-box and not use it! What on earth could the people be doing what rarer delight could they be tasting? Undine remembered that the numbers of the boxes and the names of their

owners were given on the back of the programme, and after a rapid computation she turned to consult the list. Mondays and Fridays, Mrs. Peter Van Degen. That was it: the box was empty because Mrs. Van Degen was dining alone with Ralph Marvell! "PETER WILL BE AT ONE OF HIS DINNERS." Undine had a sharp vision of the Van Degen dining-room she pictured it as oak-carved and sumptuous with gilding with a small table in the centre, and rosy lights and flowers, and Ralph Marvell, across the hot-house grapes and champagne, leaning to take a light from his hostess's cigarette. Undine had seen such scenes on the stage, she had come upon them in the glowing pages of fiction, and it seemed to her that every detail was before her now, from the glitter of jewels on Mrs. Van Degen's bare shoulders to the way young Marvell stroked his slight blond moustache while he smiled and listened.

Undine blushed with anger at her own simplicity in fancying that he had been "taken" by her that she could ever really count among these happy self-absorbed people! They all had their friends, their ties, their delightful crowding obligations: why should they make room for an intruder in a circle so packed with the initiated?

As her imagination developed the details of the scene in the Van Degen dining-room it became clear to her that fashionable society was horribly immoral and that she could never really be happy in such a poisoned atmosphere. She remembered that an eminent divine was preaching a series of sermons against Social Corruption, and she determined to go and hear him on the following Sunday.

This train of thought was interrupted by the feeling that she was being intently observed from the neighbouring box. She turned around with a feint of speaking to Mrs. Lipscomb, and met the bulging stare of Peter Van Degen. He was standing behind the lady of the eye-glass, who had replaced her tortoise-shell implement by one of closely-set brilliants, which, at word from her companion, she critically bent on Undine.

"No I don't remember," she said; and the girl reddened, divining herself unidentified after this protracted scrutiny.

But there was no doubt as to young Van Degen's remembering her. She was even conscious that he was trying to provoke in her some reciprocal sign of recognition; and the attempt drove her to the haughty study of her programme.

"Why, there's Mr. Popple over there!" exclaimed Mabel Lipscomb, making large signs across the house with fan and play-bill.

Undine had already become aware that Mabel, planted, blond and brimming,

too near the edge of the box, was somehow out of scale and out of drawing; and the freedom of her demonstrations increased the effect of disproportion. No one else was wagging and waving in that way: a gestureless mute telegraphy seemed to pass between the other boxes. Still, Undine could not help following Mrs. Lipscomb's glance, and there in fact was Claud Popple, taller and more dominant than ever, and bending easily over what she felt must be the back of a brilliant woman.

He replied by a discreet salute to Mrs. Lipscomb's intemperate motions, and Undine saw the brilliant woman's opera-glass turn in their direction, and said to herself that in a moment Mr. Popple would be "round." But the entr'acte wore on, and no one turned the handle of their door, or disturbed the peaceful somnolence of Harry Lipscomb, who, not being (as he put it) "onto" grand opera, had abandoned the struggle and withdrawn to the seclusion of the inner box. Undine jealously watched Mr. Popple's progress from box to box, from brilliant woman to brilliant woman; but just as it seemed about to carry him to their door he reappeared at his original post across the house.

"Undie, do look there's Mr. Marvell!" Mabel began again, with another conspicuous outbreak of signalling; and this time Undine flushed to the nape as Mrs. Peter Van Degen appeared in the opposite box with Ralph Marvell behind her. The two seemed to be alone in the box as they had doubtless been alone all the evening! and Undine furtively turned to see if Mr. Van Degen shared her disapproval. But Mr. Van Degen had disappeared, and Undine, leaning forward, nervously touched Mabel's arm.

"What's the matter. Undine? Don't you see Mr. Marvell over there? Is that his sister he's with?"

"No. I wouldn't beckon like that," Undine whispered between her teeth.

"Why not? Don't you want him to know you're here?"

"Yes but the other people are not beckoning."

Mabel looked about unabashed. "Perhaps they've all found each other. Shall I send Harry over to tell him?" she shouted above the blare of the wind instruments.

"NO!" gasped Undine as the curtain rose.

She was no longer capable of following the action on the stage. Two presences possessed her imagination: that of Ralph Marvell, small, unattainable, remote, and that of Mabel Lipscomb, near-by, immense and irrepressible.

It had become clear to Undine that Mabel Lipscomb was ridiculous. That was the reason why Popple did not come to the box. No one would care to be seen talking to her while Mabel was at her side: Mabel, monumental and moulded while the fashionable were flexible and diaphanous, Mabel strident and explicit while they were subdued and allusive. At the Stentorian she was the centre of her group here she revealed herself as unknown and unknowing. Why, she didn't even know that Mrs. Peter Van Degen was not Ralph Marvell's sister! And she had a way of trumpeting out her ignorances that jarred on Undine's subtler methods. It was precisely at this point that there dawned on Undine what was to be one of the guiding principles of her career: "IT'S BETTER TO WATCH THAN TO ASK QUESTIONS."

The curtain fell again, and Undine's eyes flew back to the Van Degen box. Several men were entering it together, and a moment later she saw Ralph Marvell rise from his seat and pass out. Half-unconsciously she placed herself in such a way as to have an eye on the door of the box. But its handle remained unturned, and Harry Lipscomb, leaning back on the sofa, his head against the opera cloaks, continued to breathe stentorously through his open mouth and stretched his legs a little farther across the threshold…

The entr'acte was nearly over when the door opened and two gentlemen stumbled over Mr. Lipscomb's legs. The foremost was Claud Walsingham Popple; and above his shoulder shone the batrachian countenance of Peter Van Degen. A brief murmur from Mr. Popple made his companion known to the two ladies, and Mr. Van Degen promptly seated himself behind Undine, relegating the painter to Mrs. Lipscomb's elbow.

"Queer go I happened to see your friend there waving to old Popp across the house. So I bolted over and collared him: told him he'd got to introduce me before he was a minute older. I tried to find out who you were the other day at the Motor Show no, where was it? Oh, those pictures at Goldmark's. What d'you think of 'em, by the way? You ought to be painted yourself no, I mean it, you know you ought to get old Popp to do you. He'd do your hair ripplingly. You must let me come and talk to you about it… About the picture or your hair? Well, your hair if you don't mind. Where'd you say you were staying? Oh, you LIVE here, do you? I say, that's first rate!"

Undine sat well forward, curving toward him a little, as she had seen the other women do, but holding back sufficiently to let it be visible to the house that she was conversing with no less a person than Mr. Peter Van Degen. Mr. Popple's talk was certainly more brilliant and purposeful, and she saw him cast longing glances at her from behind Mrs. Lipscomb's shoulder; but she remembered how lightly he had been treated at the Fairford dinner, and she wanted oh, how she wanted! to have Ralph Marvell see her talking to Van

Degen.

She poured out her heart to him, improvising an opinion on the pictures and an opinion on the music, falling in gaily with his suggestion of a jolly little dinner some night soon, at the Café Martin, and strengthening her position, as she thought, by an easy allusion to her acquaintance with Mrs. Van Degen. But at the word her companion's eye clouded, and a shade of constraint dimmed his enterprising smile.

"My wife ? Oh, SHE doesn't go to restaurants she moves on too high a plane. But we'll get old Popp, and Mrs. , Mrs. , what'd you say your fat friend's name was? Just a select little crowd of four and some kind of a cheerful show afterward… Jove! There's the curtain, and I must skip."

As the door closed on him Undine's cheeks burned with resentment. If Mrs. Van Degen didn't go to restaurants, why had he supposed that SHE would? and to have to drag Mabel in her wake! The leaden sense of failure overcame her again. Here was the evening nearly over, and what had it led to? Looking up from the stalls, she had fancied that to sit in a box was to be in society now she saw it might but emphasize one's exclusion. And she was burdened with the box for the rest of the season! It was really stupid of her father to have exceeded his instructions: why had he not done as she told him?… Undine felt helpless and tired… hateful memories of Apex crowded back on her. Was it going to be as dreary here as there?

She felt Lipscomb's loud whisper in her back: "Say, you girls, I guess I'll cut this and come back for you when the show busts up." They heard him shuffle out of the box, and Mabel settled back to undisturbed enjoyment of the stage.

When the last entr'acte began Undine stood up, resolved to stay no longer. Mabel, lost in the study of the audience, had not noticed her movement, and as she passed alone into the back of the box the door opened and Ralph Marvell came in.

Undine stood with one arm listlessly raised to detach her cloak from the wall. Her attitude showed the long slimness of her figure and the fresh curve of the throat below her bent-back head. Her face was paler and softer than usual, and the eyes she rested on Marvell's face looked deep and starry under their fixed brows.

"Oh you're not going?" he exclaimed.

"I thought you weren't coming," she answered simply.

"I waited till now on purpose to dodge your other visitors."

She laughed with pleasure. "Oh, we hadn't so many!"

Some intuition had already told her that frankness was the tone to take with him. They sat down together on the red damask sofa, against the hanging cloaks. As Undine leaned back her hair caught in the spangles of the wrap behind her, and she had to sit motionless while the young man freed the captive mesh. Then they settled themselves again, laughing a little at the incident.

A glance had made the situation clear to Mrs. Lipscomb, and they saw her return to her rapt inspection of the boxes. In their mirror-hung recess the light was subdued to a rosy dimness and the hum of the audience came to them through half-drawn silken curtains. Undine noticed the delicacy and finish of her companion's features as his head detached itself against the red silk walls. The hand with which he stroked his small moustache was finely-finished too, but sinewy and not effeminate. She had always associated finish and refinement entirely with her own sex, but she began to think they might be even more agreeable in a man. Marvell's eyes were grey, like her own, with chestnut eyebrows and darker lashes; and his skin was as clear as a woman's, but pleasantly reddish, like his hands.

As he sat talking in a low tone, questioning her about the music, asking her what she had been doing since he had last seen her, she was aware that he looked at her less than usual, and she also glanced away; but when she turned her eyes suddenly they always met his gaze.

His talk remained impersonal. She was a little disappointed that he did not compliment her on her dress or her hair Undine was accustomed to hearing a great deal about her hair, and the episode of the spangles had opened the way to a graceful allusion but the instinct of sex told her that, under his quiet words, he was throbbing with the sense of her proximity. And his self-restraint sobered her, made her refrain from the flashing and fidgeting which were the only way she knew of taking part in the immemorial love-dance. She talked simply and frankly of herself, of her parents, of how few people they knew in New York, and of how, at times, she was almost sorry she had persuaded them to give up Apex.

"You see, they did it entirely on my account; they're awfully lonesome here; and I don't believe I shall ever learn New York ways either," she confessed, turning on him the eyes of youth and truthfulness. "Of course I know a few people; but they're not not the way I expected New York people to be." She risked what seemed an involuntary glance at Mabel. "I've seen girls here to-night that I just LONG to know they look so lovely and refined but I don't

suppose I ever shall. New York's not very friendly to strange girls, is it? I suppose you've got so many of your own already and they're all so fascinating you don't care!" As she spoke she let her eyes rest on his, half-laughing, half-wistful, and then dropped her lashes while the pink stole slowly up to them.

When he left her he asked if he might hope to find her at home the next day.

The night was fine, and Marvell, having put his cousin into her motor, started to walk home to Washington Square. At the corner he was joined by Mr. Popple. "Hallo, Ralph, old man did you run across our auburn beauty of the Stentorian? Who'd have thought old Harry Lipscomb'd have put us onto anything as good as that? Peter Van Degen was fairly taken off his feet pulled me out of Mrs. Monty Thurber's box and dragged me 'round by the collar to introduce him. Planning a dinner at Martin's already. Gad, young Peter must have what he wants WHEN he wants it! I put in a word for you told him you and I ought to be let in on the ground floor. Funny the luck some girls have about getting started. I believe this one'll take if she can manage to shake the Lipscombs. I think I'll ask to paint her; might be a good thing for the spring show. She'd show up splendidly as a PENDANT to my Mrs. Van Degen Blonde and Brunette… Night and Morning… Of course I prefer Mrs. Van Degen's type personally, I MUST have breeding but as a mere bit of flesh and blood… hallo, ain't you coming into the club?"

Marvell was not coming into the club, and he drew a long breath of relief as his companion left him.

Was it possible that he had ever thought leniently of the egregious Popple? The tone of social omniscience which he had once found so comic was now as offensive to him as a coarse physical touch. And the worst of it was that Popple, with the slight exaggeration of a caricature, really expressed the ideals of the world he frequented. As he spoke of Miss Spragg, so others at any rate would think of her: almost every one in Ralph's set would agree that it was luck for a girl from Apex to be started by Peter Van Degen at a Café Martin dinner…

Ralph Marvell, mounting his grandfather's doorstep, looked up at the symmetrical old red house-front, with its frugal marble ornament, as he might have looked into a familiar human face.

"They're right, after all, in some ways they're right," he murmured, slipping his key into the door.

"They" were his mother and old Mr. Urban Dagonet, both, from Ralph's earliest memories, so closely identified with the old house in Washington

Square that they might have passed for its inner consciousness as it might have stood for their outward form; and the question as to which the house now seemed to affirm their intrinsic rightness was that of the social disintegration expressed by widely-different architectural physiognomies at the other end of Fifth Avenue. As Ralph pushed the bolts behind him, and passed into the hall, with its dark mahogany doors and the quiet "Dutch interior" effect of its black and white marble paving, he said to himself that what Popple called society was really just like the houses it lived in: a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin steel shell of utility. The steel shell was built up in Wall Street, the social trimmings were hastily added in Fifth Avenue; and the union between them was as monstrous and factitious, as unlike the gradual homogeneous growth which flowers into what other countries know as society, as that between the Blois gargoyles on Peter Van Degen's roof and the skeleton walls supporting them.

That was what "they" had always said; what, at least, the Dagonet attitude, the Dagonet view of life, the very lines of the furniture in the old Dagonet house expressed. Ralph sometimes called his mother and grandfather the Aborigines, and likened them to those vanishing denizens of the American continent doomed to rapid extinction with the advance of the invading race. He was fond of describing Washington Square as the "Reservation," and of prophesying that before long its inhabitants would be exhibited at ethnological shows, pathetically engaged in the exercise of their primitive industries.

Small, cautious, middle-class, had been the ideals of aboriginal New York; but it suddenly struck the young man that they were singularly coherent and respectable as contrasted with the chaos of indiscriminate appetites which made up its modern tendencies. He too had wanted to be "modern," had revolted, half-humorously, against the restrictions and exclusions of the old code; and it must have been by one of the ironic reversions of heredity that, at this precise point, he began to see what there was to be said on the other side his side, as he now felt it to be.

VI

Upstairs, in his brown firelit room, he threw himself into an armchair, and remembered… Harvard first then Oxford; then a year of wandering and rich initiation. Returning to New York, he had read law, and now had his desk in the office of the respectable firm in whose charge the Dagonet estate had mouldered for several generations. But his profession was the least real thing in his life. The realities lay about him now: the books jamming his old college bookcases and overflowing on chairs and tables; sketches too he could do charming things, if only he had known how to finish them! and, on the

writing-table at his elbow, scattered sheets of prose and verse; charming things also, but, like the sketches, unfinished.

Nothing in the Dagonet and Marvell tradition was opposed to this desultory dabbling with life. For four or five generations it had been the rule of both houses that a young fellow should go to Columbia or Harvard, read law, and then lapse into more or less cultivated inaction. The only essential was that he should live "like a gentleman" that is, with a tranquil disdain for mere money-getting, a passive openness to the finer sensations, one or two fixed principles as to the quality of wine, and an archaic probity that had not yet learned to distinguish between private and "business" honour.

No equipment could more thoroughly have unfitted the modern youth for getting on: it hardly needed the scribbled pages on the desk to complete the hopelessness of Ralph Marvell's case. He had accepted the fact with a humorous fatalism. Material resources were limited on both sides of the house, but there would always be enough for his frugal wants enough to buy books (not "editions"), and pay now and then for a holiday dash to the great centres of art and ideas. And meanwhile there was the world of wonders within him. As a boy at the sea-side, Ralph, between tides, had once come on a cave a secret inaccessible place with glaucous lights, mysterious murmurs, and a single shaft of communication with the sky. He had kept his find from the other boys, not churlishly, for he was always an outspoken lad, but because he felt there were things about the cave that the others, good fellows as they all were, couldn't be expected to understand, and that, anyhow, it would never be quite his cave again after he had let his thick-set freckled cousins play smuggler and pirate in it.

And so with his inner world. Though so coloured by outer impressions, it wove a secret curtain about him, and he came and went in it with the same joy of furtive possession. One day, of course, some one would discover it and reign there with him no, reign over it and him. Once or twice already a light foot had reached the threshold. His cousin Clare Dagonet, for instance: there had been a summer when her voice had sounded far down the windings… but he had run over to Spain for the autumn, and when he came back she was engaged to Peter Van Degen, and for a while it looked black in the cave. That was long ago, as time is reckoned under thirty; and for three years now he had felt for her only a half-contemptuous pity. To have stood at the mouth of his cave, and have turned from it to the Van Degen lair !

Poor Clare repented, indeed she wanted it clearly but she repented in the Van Degen diamonds, and the Van Degen motor bore her broken heart from opera to ball. She had been subdued to what she worked in, and she could never again find her way to the enchanted cave… Ralph, since then, had reached the

point of deciding that he would never marry; reached it not suddenly or dramatically, but with such sober advisedness as is urged on those about to take the opposite step. What he most wanted, now that the first flutter of being was over, was to learn and to do to know what the great people had thought, think about their thinking, and then launch his own boat: write some good verse if possible; if not, then critical prose. A dramatic poem lay among the stuff at his elbow; but the prose critic was at his elbow too, and not to be satisfied about the poem; and poet and critic passed the nights in hot if unproductive debate. On the whole, it seemed likely that the critic would win the day, and the essay on "The Rhythmical Structures of Walt Whitman" take shape before "The Banished God." Yet if the light in the cave was less supernaturally blue, the chant of its tides less laden with unimaginable music, it was still a thronged and echoing place when Undine Spragg appeared on its threshold…

His mother and sister of course wanted him to marry. They had the usual theory that he was "made" for conjugal bliss: women always thought that of a fellow who didn't get drunk and have low tastes. Ralph smiled at the idea as he sat crouched among his secret treasures. Marry but whom, in the name of light and freedom? The daughters of his own race sold themselves to the Invaders; the daughters of the Invaders bought their husbands as they bought an opera-box. It ought all to have been transacted on the Stock Exchange. His mother, he knew, had no such ambitions for him: she would have liked him to fancy a "nice girl" like Harriet Ray.

Harriet Ray was neither vulgar nor ambitious. She regarded Washington Square as the birthplace of Society, knew by heart all the cousinships of early New York, hated motor-cars, could not make herself understood on the telephone, and was determined, if she married, never to receive a divorced woman. As Mrs. Marvell often said, such girls as Harriet were growing rare. Ralph was not sure about this. He was inclined to think that, certain modifications allowed for, there would always be plenty of Harriet Rays for unworldly mothers to commend to their sons; and he had no desire to diminish their number by removing one from the ranks of the marriageable. He had no desire to marry at all that had been the whole truth of it till he met Undine Spragg. And now ? He lit a cigar, and began to recall his hour's conversation with Mrs. Spragg.

Ralph had never taken his mother's social faiths very seriously. Surveying the march of civilization from a loftier angle, he had early mingled with the Invaders, and curiously observed their rites and customs. But most of those he had met had already been modified by contact with the indigenous: they spoke the same language as his, though on their lips it had often so different a

meaning. Ralph had never seen them actually in the making, before they had acquired the speech of the conquered race. But Mrs. Spragg still used the dialect of her people, and before the end of the visit Ralph had ceased to regret that her daughter was out. He felt obscurely that in the girl's presence frank and simple as he thought her he should have learned less of life in early Apex.

Mrs. Spragg, once reconciled or at least resigned to the mysterious necessity of having to "entertain" a friend of Undine's, had yielded to the first touch on the weak springs of her garrulity. She had not seen Mrs. Heeny for two days, and this friendly young man with the gentle manner was almost as easy to talk to as the masseuse. And then she could tell him things that Mrs. Heeny already knew, and Mrs. Spragg liked to repeat her stories. To do so gave her almost her sole sense of permanence among the shifting scenes of life. So that, after she had lengthily deplored the untoward accident of Undine's absence, and her visitor, with a smile, and echoes of divers et ondoyant in his brain, had repeated her daughter's name after her, saying: "It's a wonderful find how could you tell it would be such a fit?" it came to her quite easily to answer: "Why, we called her after a hair-waver father put on the market the week she was born " and then to explain, as he remained struck and silent: "It's from UNdoolay, you know, the French for crimping; father always thought the name made it take. He was quite a scholar, and had the greatest knack for finding names. I remember the time he invented his Goliath Glue he sat up all night over the Bible to get the name… No, father didn't start IN as a druggist," she went on, expanding with the signs of Marvell's interest; "he was educated for an undertaker, and built up a first-class business; but he was always a beautiful speaker, and after a while he sorter drifted into the ministry. Of course it didn't pay him anything like as well, so finally he opened a drug-store, and he did first-rate at that too, though his heart was always in the pulpit. But after he made such a success with his hair-waver he got speculating in land out at Apex, and somehow everything went though Mr. Spragg did all he COULD ." Mrs. Spragg, when she found herself embarked on a long sentence, always ballasted it by italicizing the last word.

Her husband, she continued, could not, at the time, do much for his father-in-law. Mr. Spragg had come to Apex as a poor boy, and their early married life had been a protracted struggle, darkened by domestic affliction. Two of their three children had died of typhoid in the epidemic which devastated Apex before the new water-works were built; and this calamity, by causing Mr. Spragg to resolve that thereafter Apex should drink pure water, had led directly to the founding of his fortunes.

"He had taken over some of poor father's land for a bad debt, and when he got up the Pure Water move the company voted to buy the land and build the new

reservoir up there: and after that we began to be better off, and it DID seem as if it had come out so to comfort us some about the children."

Mr. Spragg, thereafter, had begun to be a power in Apex, and fat years had followed on the lean. Ralph Marvell was too little versed in affairs to read between the lines of Mrs. Spragg's untutored narrative, and he understood no more than she the occult connection between Mr. Spragg's domestic misfortunes and his business triumph. Mr. Spragg had "helped out" his ruined father-in-law, and had vowed on his children's graves that no Apex child should ever again drink poisoned water and out of those two disinterested impulses, by some impressive law of compensation, material prosperity had come. What Ralph understood and appreciated was Mrs. Spragg's unaffected frankness in talking of her early life. Here was no retrospective pretense of an opulent past, such as the other Invaders were given to parading before the bland but undeceived subject race. The Spraggs had been "plain people" and had not yet learned to be ashamed of it. The fact drew them much closer to the Dagonet ideals than any sham elegance in the past tense. Ralph felt that his mother, who shuddered away from Mrs. Harmon B. Driscoll, would understand and esteem Mrs. Spragg.

But how long would their virgin innocence last? Popple's vulgar hands were on it already Popple's and the unspeakable Van Degen's! Once they and theirs had begun the process of initiating Undine, there was no knowing or rather there was too easy knowing how it would end! It was incredible that she too should be destined to swell the ranks of the cheaply fashionable; yet were not her very freshness, her malleability, the mark of her fate? She was still at the age when the flexible soul offers itself to the first grasp. That the grasp should chance to be Van Degen's that was what made Ralph's temples buzz, and swept away all his plans for his own future like a beaver's dam in a spring flood. To save her from Van Degen and Van Degenism: was that really to be his mission the "call" for which his life had obscurely waited? It was not in the least what he had meant to do with the fugitive flash of consciousness he called self; but all that he had purposed for that transitory being sank into insignificance under the pressure of Undine's claims.

Ralph Marvell's notion of women had been formed on the experiences common to good-looking young men of his kind. Women were drawn to him as much by his winning appealing quality, by the sense of a youthful warmth behind his light ironic exterior, as by his charms of face and mind. Except during Clare Dagonet's brief reign the depths in him had not been stirred; but in taking what each sentimental episode had to give he had preserved, through all his minor adventures, his faith in the great adventure to come. It was this faith that made him so easy a victim when love had at last appeared clad in the

attributes of romance: the imaginative man's indestructible dream of a rounded passion.

The clearness with which he judged the girl and himself seemed the surest proof that his feeling was more than a surface thrill. He was not blind to her crudity and her limitations, but they were a part of her grace and her persuasion. Diverse et ondoyante so he had seen her from the first. But was not that merely the sign of a quicker response to the world's manifold appeal? There was Harriet Ray, sealed up tight in the vacuum of inherited opinion, where not a breath of fresh sensation could get at her: there could be no call to rescue young ladies so secured from the perils of reality! Undine had no such traditional safeguards Ralph guessed Mrs. Spragg's opinions to be as fluid as her daughter's and the girl's very sensitiveness to new impressions, combined with her obvious lack of any sense of relative values, would make her an easy prey to the powers of folly. He seemed to see her as he sat there, pressing his fists into his temples he seemed to see her like a lovely rock-bound Andromeda, with the devouring monster Society careering up to make a mouthful of her; and himself whirling down on his winged horse just Pegasus turned Rosinante for the nonce to cut her bonds, snatch her up, and whirl her back into the blue…

VII

Some two months later than the date of young Marvell's midnight vigil, Mrs. Heeny, seated on a low chair at Undine's knee, gave the girl's left hand an approving pat as she laid aside her lapful of polishers.

"There! I guess you can put your ring on again," she said with a laugh of jovial significance; and Undine, echoing the laugh in a murmur of complacency, slipped on the fourth finger of her recovered hand a band of sapphires in an intricate setting.

Mrs. Heeny took up the hand again. "Them's old stones, Undine they've got a different look," she said, examining the ring while she rubbed her cushioned palm over the girl's brilliant finger-tips. "And the setting's quaint I wouldn't wonder but what it was one of old Gran'ma Dagonet's."

Mrs. Spragg, hovering near in fond beatitude, looked up quickly.

"Why, don't you s'pose he BOUGHT it for her, Mrs. Heeny? It came in a Tiff'ny box."

The manicure laughed again. "Of course he's had Tiff'ny rub it up. Ain't you ever heard of ancestral jewels, Mrs. Spragg? In the Eu-ropean aristocracy they never go out and BUY engagement-rings; and Undine's marrying into our

aristocracy."

Mrs. Spragg looked relieved. "Oh, I thought maybe they were trying to scrimp on the ring "

Mrs. Heeny, shrugging away this explanation, rose from her seat and rolled back her shiny black sleeves.

"Look at here, Undine, if you really want me to do your hair it's time we got to work."

The girl swung about in her seat so that she faced the mirror on the dressing-table. Her shoulders shone through transparencies of lace and muslin which slipped back as she lifted her arms to draw the tortoise-shell pins from her hair.

"Of course you've got to do it I want to look perfectly lovely!"

"Well I dunno's my hand's in nowadays," said Mrs. Heeny in a tone that belied the doubt she cast on her own ability.

"Oh, you're an ARTIST, Mrs. Heeny and I just couldn't have had that French maid 'round to-night," sighed Mrs. Spragg, sinking into a chair near the dressing-table.

Undine, with a backward toss of her head, scattered her loose locks about her. As they spread and sparkled under Mrs. Heeny's touch, Mrs. Spragg leaned back, drinking in through half-closed lids her daughter's loveliness. Some new quality seemed added to Undine's beauty: it had a milder bloom, a kind of melting grace, which might have been lent to it by the moisture in her mother's eyes.

"So you're to see the old gentleman for the first time at this dinner?" Mrs. Heeny pursued, sweeping the live strands up into a loosely woven crown.

"Yes. I'm frightened to death!" Undine, laughing confidently, took up a hand-glass and scrutinized the small brown mole above the curve of her upper lip.

"I guess she'll know how to talk to him," Mrs. Spragg averred with a kind of quavering triumph.

"She'll know how to LOOK at him, anyhow," said Mrs. Heeny; and Undine smiled at her own image.

"I hope he won't think I'm too awful!"

Mrs. Heeny laughed. "Did you read the description of yourself in the

Radiator this morning? I wish't I'd 'a had time to cut it out. I guess
I'll have to start a separate bag for YOUR clippings soon."
Undine stretched her arms luxuriously above her head and gazed through lowered lids at the foreshortened reflection of her face.

"Mercy! Don't jerk about like that. Am I to put in this rose? There you ARE lovely!" Mrs. Heeny sighed, as the pink petals sank into the hair above the girl's forehead. Undine pushed her chair back, and sat supporting her chin on her clasped hands while she studied the result of Mrs. Heeny's manipulations.

"Yes that's the way Mrs. Peter Van Degen's flower was put in the other night; only hers was a camellia. Do you think I'd look better with a camellia?"

"I guess if Mrs. Van Degen looked like a rose she'd 'a worn a rose,"
Mrs. Heeny rejoined poetically. "Sit still a minute longer," she added.
"Your hair's so heavy I'd feel easier if I was to put in another pin."
Undine remained motionless, and the manicure, suddenly laying both hands on the girl's shoulders, and bending over to peer at her reflection, said playfully:
"Ever been engaged before, Undine?"

A blush rose to the face in the mirror, spreading from chin to brow, and running rosily over the white shoulders from which their covering had slipped down.

"My! If he could see you now!" Mrs. Heeny jested.

Mrs. Spragg, rising noiselessly, glided across the room and became lost in a minute examination of the dress laid out on the bed.

With a supple twist Undine slipped from Mrs. Heeny's hold.

"Engaged? Mercy, yes! Didn't you know? To the Prince of Wales. I broke it off because I wouldn't live in the Tower."

Mrs. Spragg, lifting the dress cautiously over her arm, advanced with a reassured smile.

"I s'pose Undie'll go to Europe now," she said to Mrs. Heeny.

"I guess Undie WILL!" the young lady herself declared. "We're going to sail right afterward. Here, mother, do be careful of my hair!" She ducked gracefully to slip into the lacy fabric which her mother held above her head. As she rose Venus-like above its folds there was a tap on the door, immediately followed by its tentative opening.

"Mabel!" Undine muttered, her brows lowering like her father's; and Mrs.

Spragg, wheeling about to screen her daughter, addressed herself protestingly to the half-open door.

"Who's there? Oh, that YOU, Mrs. Lipscomb? Well, I don't know as you CAN Undie isn't half dressed yet "
"Just like her always pushing in!" Undine murmured as she slipped her arms into their transparent sleeves.

"Oh, that don't matter I'll help dress her!" Mrs. Lipscomb's large blond person surged across the threshold. "Seems to me I ought to lend a hand to-night, considering I was the one that introduced them!"

Undine forced a smile, but Mrs. Spragg, her soft wrinkles deepening with resentment, muttered to Mrs. Heeny, as she bent down to shake out the girl's train: "I guess my daughter's only got to show herself "

The first meeting with old Mr. Dagonet was less formidable than Undine had expected. She had been once before to the house in Washington Square, when, with her mother, she had returned Mrs. Marvell's ceremonial visit; but on that occasion Ralph's grandfather had not been present. All the rites connected with her engagement were new and mysterious to Undine, and none more so than the unaccountable necessity of "dragging" as she phrased it Mrs. Spragg into the affair. It was an accepted article of the Apex creed that parental detachment should be completest at the moment when the filial fate was decided; and to find that New York reversed this rule was as puzzling to Undine as to her mother. Mrs. Spragg was so unprepared for the part she was to play that on the occasion of her visit to Mrs. Marvell her helplessness had infected Undine, and their half-hour in the sober faded drawing-room remained among the girl's most unsatisfactory memories.

She re-entered it alone with more assurance. Her confidence in her beauty had hitherto carried her through every ordeal; and it was fortified now by the feeling of power that came with the sense of being loved. If they would only leave her mother out she was sure, in her own phrase, of being able to "run the thing"; and Mrs. Spragg had providentially been left out of the Dagonet dinner.

It was to consist, it appeared, only of the small family group Undine had already met; and, seated at old Mr. Dagonet's right, in the high dark dining-room with mahogany doors and dim portraits of "Signers" and their females, she felt a conscious joy in her ascendancy. Old Mr. Dagonet small, frail and softly sardonic appeared to fall at once under her spell. If she felt, beneath his amenity, a kind of delicate dangerousness, like that of some fine surgical instrument, she ignored it as unimportant; for she had as yet no clear

perception of forces that did not directly affect her.

Mrs. Marvell, low-voiced, faded, yet impressive, was less responsive to her arts, and Undine divined in her the head of the opposition to Ralph's marriage. Mrs. Heeny had reported that Mrs. Marvell had other views for her son; and this was confirmed by such echoes of the short sharp struggle as reached the throbbing listeners at the Stentorian. But the conflict over, the air had immediately cleared, showing the enemy in the act of unconditional surrender. It surprised Undine that there had been no reprisals, no return on the points conceded. That was not her idea of warfare, and she could ascribe the completeness of the victory only to the effect of her charms.

Mrs. Marvell's manner did not express entire subjugation; yet she seemed anxious to dispel any doubts of her good faith, and if she left the burden of the talk to her lively daughter it might have been because she felt more capable of showing indulgence by her silence than in her speech.

As for Mrs. Fairford, she had never seemed more brilliantly bent on fusing the various elements under her hand. Undine had already discovered that she adored her brother, and had guessed that this would make her either a strong ally or a determined enemy. The latter alternative, however, did not alarm the girl. She thought Mrs. Fairford "bright," and wanted to be liked by her; and she was in the state of dizzy self-assurance when it seemed easy to win any sympathy she chose to seek.

For the only other guests Mrs. Fairford's husband, and the elderly Charles Bowen who seemed to be her special friend Undine had no attention to spare: they remained on a plane with the dim pictures hanging at her back. She had expected a larger party; but she was relieved, on the whole, that it was small enough to permit of her dominating it. Not that she wished to do so by any loudness of assertion. Her quickness in noting external differences had already taught her to modulate and lower her voice, and to replace "The I-dea!" and "I wouldn't wonder" by more polished locutions; and she had not been ten minutes at table before she found that to seem very much in love, and a little confused and subdued by the newness and intensity of the sentiment, was, to the Dagonet mind, the becoming attitude for a young lady in her situation. The part was not hard to play, for she WAS in love, of course. It was pleasant, when she looked across the table, to meet Ralph's grey eyes, with that new look in them, and to feel that she had kindled it; but I it was only part of her larger pleasure in the general homage to her beauty, in the sensations of interest and curiosity excited by everything about her, from the family portraits overhead to the old Dagonet silver on the table which were to be hers too, after all!

The talk, as at Mrs. Fairford's, confused her by its lack of the personal allusion, its tendency to turn to books, pictures and politics. "Politics," to Undine, had always been like a kind of back-kitchen to business the place where the refuse was thrown and the doubtful messes were brewed. As a drawing-room topic, and one to provoke disinterested sentiments, it had the hollowness of Fourth of July orations, and her mind wandered in spite of the desire to appear informed and competent.

Old Mr. Dagonet, with his reedy staccato voice, that gave polish and relief to every syllable, tried to come to her aid by questioning her affably about her family and the friends she had made in New York. But the caryatid-parent, who exists simply as a filial prop, is not a fruitful theme, and Undine, called on for the first time to view her own progenitors as a subject of conversation, was struck by their lack of points. She had never paused to consider what her father and mother were "interested" in, and, challenged to specify, could have named with sincerity only herself. On the subject of her New York friends it was not much easier to enlarge; for so far her circle had grown less rapidly than she expected. She had fancied Ralph's wooing would at once admit her to all his social privileges; but he had shown a puzzling reluctance to introduce her to the Van Degen set, where he came and went with such familiarity; and the persons he seemed anxious to have her know a few frumpy "clever women" of his sister's age, and one or two brisk old ladies in shabby houses with mahogany furniture and Stuart portraits did not offer the opportunities she sought.

"Oh, I don't know many people yet I tell Ralph he's got to hurry up and take me round," she said to Mr. Dagonet, with a side-sparkle for Ralph, whose gaze, between the flowers and lights, she was aware of perpetually drawing.

"My daughter will take you you must know his mother's friends," the old gentleman rejoined while Mrs. Marvell smiled noncommittally.

"But you have a great friend of your own the lady who takes you into society," Mr. Dagonet pursued; and Undine had the sense that the irrepressible Mabel was again "pushing in."

"Oh, yes Mabel Lipscomb. We were school-mates," she said indifferently.

"Lipscomb? Lipscomb? What is Mr. Lipscomb's occupation?"

"He's a broker," said Undine, glad to be able to place her friend's husband in so handsome a light. The subtleties of a professional classification unknown to Apex had already taught her that in New York it is more distinguished to be a broker than a dentist; and she was surprised at Mr. Dagonet's lack of enthusiasm.

"Ah? A broker?" He said it almost as Popple might have said "A DENTIST?" and Undine found herself astray in a new labyrinth of social distinctions. She felt a sudden contempt for Harry Lipscomb, who had already struck her as too loud, and irrelevantly comic. "I guess Mabel'll get a divorce pretty soon," she added, desiring, for personal reasons, to present Mrs. Lipscomb as favourably as possible.

Mr. Dagonet's handsome eye-brows drew together. "A divorce? H'm that's bad. Has he been misbehaving himself?"

Undine looked innocently surprised. "Oh, I guess not. They like each other well enough. But he's been a disappointment to her. He isn't in the right set, and I think Mabel realizes she'll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him."

These words, uttered in the high fluting tone that she rose to when sure of her subject, fell on a pause which prolonged and deepened itself to receive them, while every face at the table, Ralph Marvell's excepted, reflected in varying degree Mr. Dagonet's pained astonishment.

"But, my dear young lady what would your friend's situation be if, as you put it, she 'got rid' of her husband on so trivial a pretext?"

Undine, surprised at his dullness, tried to explain. "Oh that wouldn't be the reason GIVEN, of course. Any lawyer could fix it up for them. Don't they generally call it desertion?"

There was another, more palpitating, silence, broken by a laugh from Ralph.
"RALPH!" his mother breathed; then, turning to Undine, she said with a constrained smile: "I believe in certain parts of the country such unfortunate arrangements are beginning to be tolerated. But in New York, in spite of our growing indifference, a divorced woman is still thank heaven! at a decided disadvantage."

Undine's eyes opened wide. Here at last was a topic that really interested her, and one that gave another amazing glimpse into the camera obscura of New York society. "Do you mean to say Mabel would be worse off, then? Couldn't she even go round as much as she does now?"

Mrs. Marvell met this gravely. "It would depend, I should say, on the kind of people she wished to see."

"Oh, the very best, of course! That would be her only object."

Ralph interposed with another laugh. "You see, Undine, you'd better think twice before you divorce me!"

"RALPH!" his mother again breathed; but the girl, flushed and sparkling, flung back: "Oh, it all depends on YOU! Out in Apex, if a girl marries a man who don't come up to what she expected, people consider it's to her credit to want to change. YOU'D better think twice of that!"

"If I were only sure of knowing what you expect!" he caught up her joke, tossing it back at her across the fascinated silence of their listeners.

"Why, EVERYTHING!" she announced and Mr. Dagonet, turning, laid an intricately-veined old hand on, hers, and said, with a change of tone that relaxed the tension of the listeners: "My child, if you look like that you'll get it."

VIII

It was doubtless owing to Mrs. Fairford's foresight that such possibilities of tension were curtailed, after dinner, by her carrying off Ralph and his betrothed to the theatre.

Mr. Dagonet, it was understood, always went to bed after an hour's whist with his daughter; and the silent Mr. Fairford gave his evenings to bridge at his club. The party, therefore, consisted only of Undine and Ralph, with Mrs. Fairford and her attendant friend. Undine vaguely wondered why the grave and grey-haired Mr. Bowen formed so invariable a part of that lady's train; but she concluded that it was the York custom for married ladies to have gentlemen "'round" (as girls had in Apex), and that Mr. Bowen was the sole survivor of Laura Fairford's earlier triumphs.

She had, however, little time to give to such conjectures, for the performance they were attending the debut of a fashionable London actress had attracted a large audience in which Undine immediately recognized a number of familiar faces. Her engagement had been announced only the day before, and she had the delicious sense of being "in all the papers," and of focussing countless glances of interest and curiosity as she swept through the theatre in Mrs. Fairford's wake. Their stalls were near the stage, and progress thither was slow enough to permit of prolonged enjoyment of this sensation. Before passing to her place she paused for Ralph to remove her cloak, and as he lifted it from her shoulders she heard a lady say behind her: "There she is the one in white, with the lovely back " and a man answer: "Gad! Where did he find anything as good as that?"

Anonymous approval was sweet enough; but she was to taste a moment more exquisite when, in the proscenium box across the house, she saw Clare Van Degen seated beside the prim figure of Miss Harriet Ray. "They're here to see me with him they hate it, but they couldn't keep away!" She turned and lifted a smile of possessorship to Ralph. Mrs. Fairford seemed also struck by the presence Of the two ladies, and Undine heard her whisper to Mr. Bowen: "Do you see Clare over there and Harriet with her? Harriet WOULD COME I call it Spartan! And so like Clare to ask her!"

Her companion laughed. "It's one of the deepest instincts in human nature. The murdered are as much given as the murderer to haunting the scene of the crime."

Doubtless guessing Ralph's desire to have Undine to himself, Mrs. Fairford had sent the girl in first; and Undine, as she seated herself, was aware that the occupant of the next stall half turned to her, as with a vague gesture of recognition. But just then the curtain rose, and she became absorbed in the development of the drama, especially as it tended to display the remarkable toilets which succeeded each other on the person of its leading lady. Undine, seated at Ralph Marvell's side, and feeling the thrill of his proximity as a subtler element in the general interest she was exciting, was at last repaid for the disappointment of her evening at the opera. It was characteristic of her that she remembered her failures as keenly as her triumphs, and that the passionate desire to obliterate, to "get even" with them, was always among the latent incentives of her conduct. Now at last she was having what she wanted she was in conscious possession of the "real thing"; and through her other, diffused, sensations Ralph's adoration gave her such a last refinement of pleasure as might have come to some warrior Queen borne in triumph by captive princes, and reading in the eyes of one the passion he dared not speak. When the curtain fell this vague enjoyment was heightened by various acts of recognition. All the people she wanted to "go with," as they said in Apex, seemed to be about her in the stalls and boxes; and her eyes continued to revert with special satisfaction to the incongruous group formed by Mrs. Peter Van Degen and Miss Ray. The sight made it irresistible to whisper to Ralph: "You ought to go round and talk to your cousin. Have you told her we're engaged?"

"Clare? of course. She's going to call on you tomorrow."

"Oh, she needn't put herself out she's never been yet," said Undine loftily.

He made no rejoinder, but presently asked: "Who's that you're waving to?"

"Mr. Popple. He's coming round to see us. You know he wants to paint me."

Undine fluttered and beamed as the brilliant Popple made his way across the stalls to the seat which her neighbour had momentarily left.

"First-rate chap next to you whoever he is to give me this chance," the artist declared. "Ha, Ralph, my boy, how did you pull it off? That's what we're all of us wondering." He leaned over to give Marvell's hand the ironic grasp of celibacy. "Well, you've left us lamenting: he has, you know. Miss Spragg. But I've got one pull over the others I can paint you! He can't forbid that, can he? Not before marriage, anyhow!"

Undine divided her shining glances between the two. "I guess he isn't going to treat me any different afterward," she proclaimed with joyous defiance.

"Ah, well, there's no telling, you know. Hadn't we better begin at once?
Seriously, I want awfully to get you into the spring show."
"Oh, really? That would be too lovely!"

"YOU would be, certainly the way I mean to do you. But I see Ralph getting glum. Cheer up, my dear fellow; I daresay you'll be invited to some of the sittings that's for Miss Spragg to say. Ah, here comes your neighbour back, confound him You'll let me know when we can begin?"

As Popple moved away Undine turned eagerly to Marvell. "Do you suppose there's time? I'd love to have him to do me!"

Ralph smiled. "My poor child he WOULD 'do' you, with a vengeance.
Infernal cheek, his asking you to sit "
She stared. "But why? He's painted your cousin, and all the smart women."

"Oh, if a 'smart' portrait's all you want!"

"I want what the others want," she answered, frowning and pouting a little. She was already beginning to resent in Ralph the slightest sign of resistance to her pleasure; and her resentment took the form a familiar one in Apex courtships of turning on him, in the next entr'acte, a deliberately averted shoulder. The result of this was to bring her, for the first time, in more direct relation to her other neighbour. As she turned he turned too, showing her, above a shining shirt-front fastened with a large imitation pearl, a ruddy plump snub face without an angle in it, which yet looked sharper than a razor. Undine's eyes met his with a startled look, and for a long moment they remained suspended on each other's stare.

Undine at length shrank back with an unrecognizing face; but her movement made her opera-glass slip to the floor, and her neighbour bent down and picked it up.

"Well don't you know me yet?" he said with a slight smile, as he restored the glass to her.

She had grown white to the lips, and when she tried to speak the effort produced only a faint click in her throat. She felt that the change in her appearance must be visible, and the dread of letting Marvell see it made her continue to turn her ravaged face to her other neighbour. The round black eyes set prominently in the latter's round glossy countenance had expressed at first only an impersonal and slightly ironic interest; but a look of surprise grew in them as Undine's silence continued.

"What's the matter? Don't you want me to speak to you?"

She became aware that Marvell, as if unconscious of her slight show of displeasure, had left his seat, and was making his way toward the aisle; and this assertion of independence, which a moment before she would so deeply have resented, now gave her a feeling of intense relief.

"No don't speak to me, please. I'll tell you another time I'll write." Her neighbour continued to gaze at her, forming his lips into a noiseless whistle under his small dark moustache.

"Well, I That's about the stiffest," he murmured; and as she made no answer he added: "Afraid I'll ask to be introduced to your friend?"

She made a faint movement of entreaty. "I can't explain. I promise to see you; but I ASK you not to talk to me now."

He unfolded his programme, and went on speaking in a low tone while he affected to study it. "Anything to oblige, of course. That's always been my motto. But is it a bargain fair and square? You'll see me?"

She receded farther from him. "I promise. I I WANT to," she faltered.

"All right, then. Call me up in the morning at the Driscoll Building.
Seven-o-nine got it?"
She nodded, and he added in a still lower tone: "I suppose I can congratulate you, anyhow?" and then, without waiting for her reply, turned to study Mrs. Van Degen's box through his opera-glass. Clare, as if aware of the scrutiny fixed on her from below leaned back and threw a question over her shoulder to Ralph Marvell, who had just seated himself behind her.

"Who's the funny man with the red face talking to Miss Spragg?"

Ralph bent forward. "The man next to her? Never saw him before. But I think

you're mistaken: she's not speaking to him."

"She WAS Wasn't she, Harriet?"

Miss Ray pinched her lips together without speaking, and Mrs. Van Degen paused for the fraction of a second. "Perhaps he's an Apex friend," she then suggested.

"Very likely. Only I think she'd have introduced him if he had been."

His cousin faintly shrugged. "Shall you encourage that?"

Peter Van Degen, who had strayed into his wife's box for a moment, caught the colloquy, and lifted his opera-glass.

"The fellow next to Miss Spragg? (By George, Ralph, she's ripping to-night!) Wait a minute I know his face. Saw him in old Harmon Driscoll's office the day of the Eubaw Mine meeting. This chap's his secretary, or something. Driscoll called him in to give some facts to the directors, and he seemed a mighty wide-awake customer."

Clare Van Degen turned gaily to her cousin. "If he has anything to do with the Driscolls you'd better cultivate him! That's the kind of acquaintance the Dagonets have always needed. I married to set them an example!"

Ralph rose with a laugh. "You're right. I'll hurry back and make his acquaintance." He held out his hand to his cousin, avoiding her disappointed eyes.

Undine, on entering her bedroom late that evening, was startled by the presence of a muffled figure which revealed itself, through the dimness, as the ungirded midnight outline of Mrs. Spragg.

"MOTHER? What on earth ?" the girl exclaimed, as Mrs. Spragg pressed the electric button and flooded the room with light. The idea of a mother's sitting up for her daughter was so foreign to Apex customs that it roused only mistrust and irritation in the object of the demonstration.

Mrs. Spragg came forward deprecatingly to lift the cloak from her daughter's shoulders.

"I just HAD to, Undie I told father I HAD to. I wanted to hear all about it."

Undine shrugged away from her. "Mercy! At this hour? You'll be as white as a sheet to-morrow, sitting up all night like this."

She moved toward the toilet-table, and began to demolish with feverish hands

the structure which Mrs. Heeny, a few hours earlier, had so lovingly raised. But the rose caught in a mesh of hair, and Mrs. Spragg, venturing timidly to release it, had a full view of her daughter's face in the glass.

"Why, Undie, YOU'RE as white as a sheet now! You look fairly sick.
What's the matter, daughter?"
The girl broke away from her.

"Oh, can't you leave me alone, mother? There do I look white NOW?" she cried, the blood flaming into her pale cheeks; and as Mrs. Spragg shrank back, she added more mildly, in the tone of a parent rebuking a persistent child: "It's enough to MAKE anybody sick to be stared at that way!"

Mrs. Spragg overflowed with compunction. "I'm so sorry, Undie. I guess it was just seeing you in this glare of light."

"Yes the light's awful; do turn some off," ordered Undine, for whom, ordinarily, no radiance was too strong; and Mrs. Spragg, grateful to have commands laid upon her, hastened to obey.

Undine, after this, submitted in brooding silence to having her dress unlaced, and her slippers and dressing-gown brought to her. Mrs. Spragg visibly yearned to say more, but she restrained the impulse lest it should provoke her dismissal.

"Won't you take just a sup of milk before you go to bed?" she suggested at length, as Undine sank into an armchair.

"I've got some for you right here in the parlour."

Without looking up the girl answered: "No. I don't want anything. Do go to bed."

Her mother seemed to be struggling between the life-long instinct of obedience and a swift unformulated fear. "I'm going, Undie." She wavered. "Didn't they receive you right, daughter?" she asked with sudden resolution.

"What nonsense! How should they receive me? Everybody was lovely to me." Undine rose to her feet and went on with her undressing, tossing her clothes on the floor and shaking her hair over her bare shoulders.

Mrs. Spragg stooped to gather up the scattered garments as they fell, folding them with a wistful caressing touch, and laying them on the lounge, without daring to raise her eyes to her daughter. It was not till she heard Undine throw herself on the bed that she went toward her and drew the coverlet up with deprecating hands.

"Oh, do put the light out I'm dead tired," the girl grumbled, pressing her face into the pillow.

Mrs. Spragg turned away obediently; then, gathering all her scattered impulses into a passionate act of courage, she moved back to the bedside.

"Undie you didn't see anybody I mean at the theatre? ANYBODY YOU DIDN'T WANT TO SEE?"
Undine, at the question, raised her head and started right against the tossed pillows, her white exasperated face close to her mother's twitching features. The two women examined each other a moment, fear and anger in their crossed glances; then Undine answered: "No, nobody. Good-night."

IX

Undine, late the next day, waited alone under the leafless trellising of a wistaria arbour on the west side of the Central Park. She had put on her plainest dress, and wound a closely, patterned veil over her least vivid hat; but even thus toned down to the situation she was conscious of blazing out from it inconveniently.

The habit of meeting young men in sequestered spots was not unknown to her: the novelty was in feeling any embarrassment about it. Even now she was disturbed not so much by the unlikely chance of an accidental encounter with Ralph Marvell as by the remembrance of similar meetings, far from accidental, with the romantic Aaronson. Could it be that the hand now adorned with Ralph's engagement ring had once, in this very spot, surrendered itself to the riding-master's pressure? At the thought a wave of physical disgust passed over her, blotting out another memory as distasteful but more remote.

It was revived by the appearance of a ruddy middle-sized young man, his stoutish figure tightly buttoned into a square-shouldered over-coat, who presently approached along the path that led to the arbour. Silhouetted against the slope of the asphalt, the newcomer revealed an outline thick yet compact, with a round head set on a neck in which, at the first chance, prosperity would be likely to develop a red crease. His face, with its rounded surfaces, and the sanguine innocence of a complexion belied by prematurely astute black eyes, had a look of jovial cunning which Undine had formerly thought "smart" but which now struck her as merely vulgar. She felt that in the Marvell set Elmer Moffatt would have been stamped as "not a gentleman." Nevertheless something in his look seemed to promise the capacity to develop into any character he might care to assume; though it did not seem probable that, for the present, that of a gentleman would be among them. He had always had a

brisk swaggering step, and the faintly impudent tilt of the head that she had once thought "dashing"; but whereas this look had formerly denoted a somewhat desperate defiance of the world and its judgments it now suggested an almost assured relation to these powers; and Undine's heart sank at the thought of what the change implied.

As he drew nearer, the young man's air of assurance was replaced by an expression of mildly humorous surprise.

"Well this is white of you. Undine!" he said, taking her lifeless fingers into his dapperly gloved hand.

Through her veil she formed the words: "I said I'd come."

He laughed. "That's so. And you see I believed you. Though I might not have "

"I don't see the use of beginning like this," she interrupted nervously.

"That's so too. Suppose we walk along a little ways? It's rather chilly standing round."

He turned down the path that descended toward the Ramble and the girl moved on beside him with her long flowing steps.

When they had reached the comparative shelter of the interlacing trees Moffatt paused again to say: "If we're going to talk I'd like to see you. Undine;" and after a first moment of reluctance she submissively threw back her veil.

He let his eyes rest on her in silence; then he said judicially: "You've filled out some; but you're paler." After another appreciative scrutiny he added: "There's mighty few women as well worth looking at, and I'm obliged to you for letting me have the chance again."

Undine's brows drew together, but she softened her frown to a quivering smile.

"I'm glad to see you too, Elmer I am, REALLY!"

He returned her smile while his glance continued to study her humorously. "You didn't betray the fact last night. Miss Spragg."

"I was so taken aback. I thought you were out in Alaska somewhere."

The young man shaped his lips into the mute whistle by which he habitually vented his surprise. "You DID? Didn't Abner E. Spragg tell you he'd seen me down town?"

Undine gave him a startled glance. "Father? Why, have you seen him? He

never said a word about it!"

Her companion's whistle became audible. "He's running yet!" he said gaily. "I wish I could scare some people as easy as I can your father."

The girl hesitated. "I never felt toward you the way father did," she hazarded at length; and he gave her another long look in return.

"Well, if they'd left you alone I don't believe you'd ever have acted mean to me," was the conclusion he drew from it.

"I didn't mean to, Elmer … I give you my word but I was so young …
I didn't know anything…."
His eyes had a twinkle of reminiscent pleasantry. "No I don't suppose it WOULD teach a girl much to be engaged two years to a stiff like Millard Binch; and that was about all that had happened to you before I came along."

Undine flushed to the forehead. "Oh, Elmer I was only a child when I was engaged to Millard "

"That's a fact. And you went on being one a good while afterward. The
Apex Eagle always head-lined you 'The child-bride' "
"I can't see what's the use now ."

"That ruled out of court too? See here. Undine what CAN we talk about?
I understood that was what we were here for."
"Of course." She made an effort at recovery. "I only meant to say what's the use of raking up things that are over?"

"Rake up? That's the idea, is it? Was that why you tried to cut me last night?"

"I oh, Elmer! I didn't mean to; only, you see, I'm engaged."

"Oh, I saw that fast enough. I'd have seen it even if I didn't read the papers." He gave a short laugh. "He was feeling pretty good, sitting there alongside of you, wasn't he? I don't wonder he was. I remember. But I don't see that that was a reason for cold-shouldering me. I'm a respectable member of society now I'm one of Harmon B. Driscoll's private secretaries." He brought out the fact with mock solemnity.

But to Undine, though undoubtedly impressive, the statement did not immediately present itself as a subject for pleasantry.

"Elmer Moffatt you ARE?"

He laughed again. "Guess you'd have remembered me last night if you'd

known it."

She was following her own train of thought with a look of pale intensity. "You're LIVING in New York, then you're going to live here right along?"

"Well, it looks that way; as long as I can hang on to this job. Great men always gravitate to the metropolis. And I gravitated here just as Uncle Harmon B. was looking round for somebody who could give him an inside tip on the Eubaw mine deal you know the Driscolls are pretty deep in Eubaw. I happened to go out there after our little unpleasantness at Apex, and it was just the time the deal went through. So in one way your folks did me a good turn when they made Apex too hot for me: funny to think of, ain't it?"

Undine, recovering herself, held out her hand impulsively.

"I'm real glad of it I mean I'm real glad you've had such a stroke of luck!"

"Much obliged," he returned. "By the way, you might mention the fact to Abner E. Spragg next time you run across him."
"Father'll be real glad too, Elmer." She hesitated, and then went on: "You must see now that it was natural father and mother should have felt the way they did "

"Oh, the only thing that struck me as unnatural was their making you feel so too. But I'm free to admit I wasn't a promising case in those days." His glance played over her for a moment. "Say, Undine it was good while it lasted, though, wasn't it?"

She shrank back with a burning face and eyes of misery.

"Why, what's the matter? That ruled out too? Oh, all right. Look at here, Undine, suppose you let me know what you ARE here to talk about, anyhow."

She cast a helpless glance down the windings of the wooded glen in which they had halted.

"Just to ask you to beg you not to say anything of this kind again EVER "

"Anything about you and me?"

She nodded mutely.

"Why, what's wrong? Anybody been saying anything against me?"

"Oh, no. It's not that!"

"What on earth is it, then except that you're ashamed of me, one way or

another?" She made no answer, and he stood digging the tip of his walking-stick into a fissure of the asphalt. At length he went on in a tone that showed a first faint trace of irritation: "I don't want to break into your gilt-edged crowd, if it's that you're scared of."

His tone seemed to increase her distress. "No, no you don't understand.
All I want is that nothing shall be known."
"Yes; but WHY? It was all straight enough, if you come to that."

"It doesn't matter … whether it was straight … or … not …" He interpolated a whistle which made her add: "What I mean is that out here in the East they don't even like it if a girl's been ENGAGED before."

This last strain on his credulity wrung a laugh from Moffatt. "Gee! How'd they expect her fair young life to pass? Playing 'Holy City' on the melodeon, and knitting tidies for church fairs?"

"Girls are looked after here. It's all different. Their mothers go round with them."

This increased her companion's hilarity and he glanced about him with a pretense of compunction. "Excuse ME! I ought to have remembered. Where's your chaperon, Miss Spragg?" He crooked his arm with mock ceremony. "Allow me to escort you to the bew-fay. You see I'm onto the New York style myself."

A sigh of discouragement escaped her. "Elmer if you really believe I never wanted to act mean to you, don't you act mean to me now!"

"Act mean?" He grew serious again and moved nearer to her. "What is it you want, Undine? Why can't you say it right out?"

"What I told you. I don't want Ralph Marvell or any of them to know anything. If any of his folks found out, they'd never let him marry me never! And he wouldn't want to: he'd be so horrified. And it would KILL me, Elmer it would just kill me!"

She pressed close to him, forgetful of her new reserves and repugnances, and impelled by the passionate absorbing desire to wring from him some definite pledge of safety.

"Oh, Elmer, if you ever liked me, help me now, and I'll help you if I get the chance!"

He had recovered his coolness as hers forsook her, and stood his ground steadily, though her entreating hands, her glowing face, were near enough to

have shaken less sturdy nerves.

"That so, Puss? You just ask me to pass the sponge over Elmer Moffatt of Apex City? Cut the gentleman when we meet? That the size of it?"
"Oh, Elmer, it's my first chance I can't lose it!" she broke out, sobbing.

"Nonsense, child! Of course you shan't. Here, look up. Undine why, I never saw you cry before. Don't you be afraid of me I ain't going to interrupt the wedding march." He began to whistle a bar of Lohengrin. "I only just want one little promise in return."

She threw a startled look at him and he added reassuringly: "Oh, don't mistake me. I don't want to butt into your set not for social purposes, anyhow; but if ever it should come handy to know any of 'em in a business way, would you fix it up for me AFTER YOU'RE MARRIED?'"

Their eyes met, and she remained silent for a tremulous moment or two; then she held out her hand. "Afterward yes. I promise. And YOU promise, Elmer?"

"Oh, to have and to hold!" he sang out, swinging about to follow her as she hurriedly began to retrace her steps.

The March twilight had fallen, and the Stentorian facade was all aglow, when Undine regained its monumental threshold. She slipped through the marble vestibule and soared skyward in the mirror-lined lift, hardly conscious of the direction she was taking. What she wanted was solitude, and the time to put some order into her thoughts; and she hoped to steal into her room without meeting her mother. Through her thick veil the clusters of lights in the Spragg drawing-room dilated and flowed together in a yellow blur, from which, as she entered, a figure detached itself; and with a start of annoyance she saw Ralph Marvell rise from the perusal of the "fiction number" of a magazine which had replaced "The Hound of the Baskervilles" on the onyx table.

"Yes; you told me not to come and here I am." He lifted her hand to his lips as his eyes tried to find hers through the veil.

She drew back with a nervous gesture. "I told you I'd be awfully late."

"I know trying on! And you're horribly tired, and wishing with all your might I wasn't here."

"I'm not so sure I'm not!" she rejoined, trying to hide her vexation in a smile.

"What a tragic little voice! You really are done up. I couldn't help dropping in for a minute; but of course if you say so I'll be off." She was removing her long gloves and he took her hands and drew her close. "Only take off your

veil, and let me see you."

A quiver of resistance ran through her: he felt it and dropped her hands.

"Please don't tease. I never could bear it," she stammered, drawing away.

"Till to-morrow, then; that is, if the dress-makers permit."

She forced a laugh. "If I showed myself now you might not come back to-morrow. I look perfectly hideous it was so hot and they kept me so long."

"All to make yourself more beautiful for a man who's blind with your beauty already?"

The words made her smile, and moving nearer she bent her head and stood still while he undid her veil. As he put it back their lips met, and his look of passionate tenderness was incense to her.

But the next moment his expression passed from worship to concern.
"Dear! Why, what's the matter? You've been crying!"
She put both hands to her hat in the instinctive effort to hide her face. His persistence was as irritating as her mother's.

"I told you it was frightfully hot and all my things were horrid; and it made me so cross and nervous!" She turned to the looking-glass with a feint of smoothing her hair.

Marvell laid his hand on her arm, "I can't bear to see you so done up. Why can't we be married to-morrow, and escape all these ridiculous preparations? I shall hate your fine clothes if they're going to make you so miserable."

She dropped her hands, and swept about on him, her face lit up by a new idea. He was extraordinarily handsome and appealing, and her heart began to beat faster.

"I hate it all too! I wish we COULD be married right away!"

Marvell caught her to him joyously. "Dearest dearest! Don't, if you don't mean it! The thought's too glorious!"

Undine lingered in his arms, not with any intent of tenderness, but as if too deeply lost in a new train of thought to be conscious of his hold.

"I suppose most of the things COULD be got ready sooner if I said they MUST," she brooded, with a fixed gaze that travelled past him. "And the rest why shouldn't the rest be sent over to Europe after us? I want to go straight off with you, away from everything ever so far away, where there'll be nobody but

you and me alone!" She had a flash of illumination which made her turn her lips to his.

"Oh, my darling my darling!" Marvell whispered.

X

Mr. and Mrs. Spragg were both given to such long periods of ruminating apathy that the student of inheritance might have wondered whence Undine derived her overflowing activity. The answer would have been obtained by observing her father's business life. From the moment he set foot in Wall Street Mr. Spragg became another man. Physically the change revealed itself only by the subtlest signs. As he steered his way to his office through the jostling crowd of William Street his relaxed muscles did not grow more taut or his lounging gait less desultory. His shoulders were hollowed by the usual droop, and his rusty black waistcoat showed the same creased concavity at the waist, the same flabby prominence below. It was only in his face that the difference was perceptible, though even here it rather lurked behind the features than openly modified them: showing itself now and then in the cautious glint of half-closed eyes, the forward thrust of black brows, or a tightening of the lax lines of the mouth as the gleam of a night-watchman's light might flash across the darkness of a shuttered house-front. The shutters were more tightly barred than usual, when, on a morning some two weeks later than the date of the incidents last recorded, Mr. Spragg approached the steel and concrete tower in which his office occupied a lofty pigeon-hole. Events had moved rapidly and somewhat surprisingly in the interval, and Mr. Spragg had already accustomed himself to the fact that his daughter was to be married within the week, instead of awaiting the traditional post-Lenten date. Conventionally the change meant little to him; but on the practical side it presented unforeseen difficulties. Mr. Spragg had learned within the last weeks that a New York marriage involved material obligations unknown to Apex. Marvell, indeed, had been loftily careless of such questions; but his grandfather, on the announcement of the engagement, had called on Mr. Spragg and put before him, with polished precision, the young man's financial situation.

Mr. Spragg, at the moment, had been inclined to deal with his visitor in a spirit of indulgent irony. As he leaned back in his revolving chair, with feet adroitly balanced against a tilted scrap basket, his air of relaxed power made Mr. Dagonet's venerable elegance seem as harmless as that of an ivory jack-straw and his first replies to his visitor were made with the mildness of a kindly giant.

"Ralph don't make a living out of the law, you say? No, it didn't strike me he'd be likely to, from the talks I've had with him. Fact is, the law's a business that wants " Mr. Spragg broke off, checked by a protest from Mr. Dagonet. "Oh, a PROFESSION, you call it? It ain't a business?" His smile grew more indulgent as this novel distinction dawned on him. "Why, I guess that's the whole trouble with Ralph. Nobody expects to make money in a PROFESSION; and if you've taught him to regard the law that way, he'd better go right into cooking-stoves and done with it."

Mr. Dagonet, within a narrower range, had his own play of humour; and it met Mr. Spragg's with a leap. "It's because I knew he would manage to make cooking-stoves as unremunerative as a profession that I saved him from so glaring a failure by putting him into the law."

The retort drew a grunt of amusement from Mr. Spragg; and the eyes of the two men met in unexpected understanding.

"That so? What can he do, then?" the future father-in-law enquired.

"He can write poetry at least he tells me he can." Mr. Dagonet hesitated, as if aware of the inadequacy of the alternative, and then added: "And he can count on three thousand a year from me."

Mr. Spragg tilted himself farther back without disturbing his subtly-calculated relation to the scrap basket.

"Does it cost anything like that to print his poetry?"

Mr. Dagonet smiled again: he was clearly enjoying his visit. "Dear, no he doesn't go in for 'luxe' editions. And now and then he gets ten dollars from a magazine."

Mr. Spragg mused. "Wasn't he ever TAUGHT to work?"

"No; I really couldn't have afforded that."

"I see. Then they've got to live on two hundred and fifty dollars a month."

Mr. Dagonet remained pleasantly unmoved. "Does it cost anything like that to buy your daughter's dresses?"

A subterranean chuckle agitated the lower folds of Mr. Spragg's waistcoat.

"I might put him in the way of something I guess he's smart enough."

Mr. Dagonet made a gesture of friendly warning. "It will pay us both in the end to keep him out of business," he said, rising as if to show that his mission

was accomplished.

The results of this friendly conference had been more serious than Mr. Spragg could have foreseen and the victory remained with his antagonist. It had not entered into Mr. Spragg's calculations that he would have to give his daughter any fixed income on her marriage. He meant that she should have the "handsomest" wedding the New York press had ever celebrated, and her mother's fancy was already afloat on a sea of luxuries a motor, a Fifth Avenue house, and a tiara that should out-blaze Mrs. Van Degen's; but these were movable benefits, to be conferred whenever Mr. Spragg happened to be "on the right side" of the market. It was a different matter to be called on, at such short notice, to bridge the gap between young Marvell's allowance and Undine's requirements; and her father's immediate conclusion was that the engagement had better be broken off. Such scissions were almost painless in Apex, and he had fancied it would be easy, by an appeal to the girl's pride, to make her see that she owed it to herself to do better.

"You'd better wait awhile and look round again," was the way he had put it to her at the opening of the talk of which, even now, he could not recall the close without a tremor.

Undine, when she took his meaning, had been terrible. Everything had gone down before her, as towns and villages went down before one of the tornadoes of her native state. Wait awhile? Look round? Did he suppose she was marrying for MONEY? Didn't he see it was all a question, now and here, of the kind of people she wanted to "go with"? Did he want to throw her straight back into the Lipscomb set, to have her marry a dentist and live in a West Side flat? Why hadn't they stayed in Apex, if that was all he thought she was fit for? She might as well have married Millard Binch, instead of handing him over to Indiana Frusk! Couldn't her father understand that nice girls, in New York, didn't regard getting married like going on a buggy-ride? It was enough to ruin a girl's chances if she broke her engagement to a man in Ralph Marvell's set. All kinds of spiteful things would be said about her, and she would never be able to go with the right people again. They had better go back to Apex right off it was they and not SHE who had wanted to leave Apex, anyhow she could call her mother to witness it. She had always, when it came to that, done what her father and mother wanted, but she'd given up trying to make out what they were after, unless it was to make her miserable; and if that was it, hadn't they had enough of it by this time? She had, anyhow. But after this she meant to lead her own life; and they needn't ask her where she was going, or what she meant to do, because this time she'd die before she told them and they'd made life so hateful to her that she only wished she was dead already.

Mr. Spragg heard her out in silence, pulling at his beard with one sallow wrinkled hand, while the other dragged down the armhole of his waistcoat. Suddenly he looked up and said: "Ain't you in love with the fellow, Undie?"

The girl glared back at him, her splendid brows beetling like an Amazon's. "Do you think I'd care a cent for all the rest of it if I wasn't?"

"Well, if you are, you and he won't mind beginning in a small way."

Her look poured contempt on his ignorance. "Do you s'pose I'd drag him down?" With a magnificent gesture she tore Marvell's ring from her finger. "I'll send this back this minute. I'll tell him I thought he was a rich man, and now I see I'm mistaken " She burst into shattering sobs, rocking her beautiful body back and forward in all the abandonment of young grief; and her father stood over her, stroking her shoulder and saying helplessly: "I'll see what I can do, Undine "

All his life, and at ever-diminishing intervals, Mr. Spragg had been called on by his womenkind to "see what he could do"; and the seeing had almost always resulted as they wished. Undine did not have to send back her ring, and in her state of trance-like happiness she hardly asked by what means her path had been smoothed, but merely accepted her mother's assurance that "father had fixed everything all right."

Mr. Spragg accepted the situation also. A son-in-law who expected to be pensioned like a Grand Army veteran was a phenomenon new to his experience; but if that was what Undine wanted she should have it. Only two days later, however, he was met by a new demand the young people had decided to be married "right off," instead of waiting till June. This change of plan was made known to Mr. Spragg at a moment when he was peculiarly unprepared for the financial readjustment it necessitated. He had always declared himself able to cope with any crisis if Undine and her mother would "go steady"; but he now warned them of his inability to keep up with the new pace they had set. Undine, not deigning to return to the charge, had commissioned her mother to speak for her; and Mr. Spragg was surprised to meet in his wife a firmness as inflexible as his daughter's.

"I can't do it, Loot can't put my hand on the cash," he had protested; but Mrs. Spragg fought him inch by inch, her back to the wall flinging out at last, as he pressed her closer: "Well, if you want to know, she's seen Elmer."

The bolt reached its mark, and her husband turned an agitated face on her.

"Elmer? What on earth he didn't come HERE?"

"No; but he sat next to her the other night at the theatre, and she's wild with us for not having warned her."

Mr. Spragg's scowl drew his projecting brows together. "Warned her of what? What's Elmer to her? Why's she afraid of Elmer Moffatt?"

"She's afraid of his talking."

"Talking? What on earth can he say that'll hurt HER?"

"Oh, I don't know," Mrs. Spragg wailed. "She's so nervous I can hardly get a word out of her."

Mr. Spragg's whitening face showed the touch of a new fear. "Is she afraid he'll get round her again make up to her? Is that what she means by 'talking'?" "I don't know, I don't know. I only know she is afraid she's afraid as death of him."

For a long interval they sat silently looking at each other while their heavy eyes exchanged conjectures: then Mr. Spragg rose from his chair, saying, as he took up his hat: "Don't you fret, Leota; I'll see what I can do."

He had been "seeing" now for an arduous fortnight; and the strain on his vision had resulted in a state of tension such as he had not undergone since the epic days of the Pure Water Move at Apex. It was not his habit to impart his fears to Mrs. Spragg and Undine, and they continued the bridal preparations, secure in their invariable experience that, once "father" had been convinced of the impossibility of evading their demands, he might be trusted to satisfy them by means with which his womenkind need not concern themselves. Mr. Spragg, as he approached his office on the morning in question, felt reasonably sure of fulfilling these expectations; but he reflected that a few more such victories would mean disaster.

He entered the vast marble vestibule of the Ararat Trust Building and walked toward the express elevator that was to carry him up to his office. At the door of the elevator a man turned to him, and he recognized Elmer Moffatt, who put out his hand with an easy gesture.

Mr. Spragg did not ignore the gesture: he did not even withhold his hand. In his code the cut, as a conscious sign of disapproval, did not exist. In the south, if you had a grudge against a man you tried to shoot him; in the west, you tried to do him in a mean turn in business; but in neither region was the cut among the social weapons of offense. Mr. Spragg, therefore, seeing Moffatt in his path, extended a lifeless hand while he faced the young man scowlingly. Moffatt met the hand and the scowl with equal coolness.

"Going up to your office? I was on my way there."

The elevator door rolled back, and Mr. Spragg, entering it, found his companion at his side. They remained silent during the ascent to Mr. Spragg's threshold; but there the latter turned to enquire ironically of Moffatt: "Anything left to say?"
Moffatt smiled. "Nothing LEFT no; I'm carrying a whole new line of goods."

Mr. Spragg pondered the reply; then he opened the door and suffered Moffatt to follow him in. Behind an inner glazed enclosure, with its one window dimmed by a sooty perspective barred with chimneys, he seated himself at a dusty littered desk, and groped instinctively for the support of the scrap basket. Moffatt, uninvited, dropped into the nearest chair, and Mr. Spragg said, after another silence: "I'm pretty busy this morning."

"I know you are: that's why I'm here," Moffatt serenely answered. He leaned back, crossing his legs, and twisting his small stiff moustache with a plump hand adorned by a cameo.

"Fact is," he went on, "this is a coals-of-fire call. You think I owe you a grudge, and I'm going to show you I'm not that kind. I'm going to put you onto a good thing oh, not because I'm so fond of you; just because it happens to hit my sense of a joke."

While Moffatt talked Mr. Spragg took up the pile of letters on his desk and sat shuffling them like a pack of cards. He dealt them deliberately to two imaginary players; then he pushed them aside and drew out his watch.

"All right I carry one too," said the young man easily. "But you'll find it's time gained to hear what I've got to say."

Mr. Spragg considered the vista of chimneys without speaking, and Moffatt continued: "I don't suppose you care to hear the story of my life, so I won't refer you to the back numbers. You used to say out in Apex that I spent too much time loafing round the bar of the Mealey House; that was one of the things you had against me. Well, maybe I did but it taught me to talk, and to listen to the other fellows too. Just at present I'm one of Harmon B. Driscoll's private secretaries, and some of that Mealey House loafing has come in more useful than any job I ever put my hand to. The old man happened to hear I knew something about the inside of the Eubaw deal, and took me on to have the information where he could get at it. I've given him good talk for his money; but I've done some listening too. Eubaw ain't the only commodity the Driscolls deal in."

Mr. Spragg restored his watch to his pocket and shifted his drowsy gaze from the window to his visitor's face.

"Yes," said Moffatt, as if in reply to the movement, "the Driscolls are getting busy out in Apex. Now they've got all the street railroads in their pocket they want the water-supply too but you know that as well as I do. Fact is, they've got to have it; and there's where you and I come in."

Mr. Spragg thrust his hands in his waistcoat arm-holes and turned his eyes back to the window.

"I'm out of that long ago," he said indifferently.

"Sure," Moffatt acquiesced; "but you know what went on when you were in it."

"Well?" said Mr. Spragg, shifting one hand to the Masonic emblem on his watch-chain.

"Well, Representative James J. Rolliver, who was in it with you, ain't out of it yet. He's the man the Driscolls are up against. What d'you know about him?"

Mr. Spragg twirled the emblem thoughtfully. "Driscoll tell you to come here?"

Moffatt laughed. "No, SIR not by a good many miles."

Mr. Spragg removed his feet from the scrap basket and straightened himself in his chair.

"Well I didn't either; good morning, Mr. Moffatt."

The young man stared a moment, a humorous glint in his small black eyes; but he made no motion to leave his seat. "Undine's to be married next week, isn't she?" he asked in a conversational tone.

Mr. Spragg's face blackened and he swung about in his revolving chair.

"You go to "

Moffatt raised a deprecating hand. "Oh, you needn't warn me off. I don't want to be invited to the wedding. And I don't want to forbid the banns."

There was a derisive sound in Mr. Spragg's throat.

"But I DO want to get out of Driscoll's office," Moffatt imperturbably continued. "There's no future there for a fellow like me. I see things big. That's

the reason Apex was too tight a fit for me. It's only the little fellows that succeed in little places. New York's my size without a single alteration. I could prove it to you to-morrow if I could put my hand on fifty thousand dollars."

Mr. Spragg did not repeat his gesture of dismissal: he was once more listening guardedly but intently. Moffatt saw it and continued.

"And I could put my hand on double that sum yes, sir, DOUBLE if you'd just step round with me to old Driscoll's office before five P. M. See the connection, Mr. Spragg?"

The older man remained silent while his visitor hummed a bar or two of "In the Gloaming"; then he said: "You want me to tell Driscoll what I know about James J. Rolliver?"

"I want you to tell the truth I want you to stand for political purity in your native state. A man of your prominence owes it to the community, sir," cried Moffatt. Mr. Spragg was still tormenting his Masonic emblem.

"Rolliver and I always stood together," he said at last, with a tinge of reluctance.

"Well, how much have you made out of it? Ain't he always been ahead of the game?"

"I can't do it I can't do it," said Mr. Spragg, bringing his clenched hand down on the desk, as if addressing an invisible throng of assailants.

Moffatt rose without any evidence of disappointment in his ruddy countenance. "Well, so long," he said, moving toward the door. Near the threshold he paused to add carelessly: "Excuse my referring to a personal matter but I understand Miss Spragg's wedding takes place next Monday."

Mr. Spragg was silent.

"How's that?" Moffatt continued unabashed. "I saw in the papers the date was set for the end of June."

Mr. Spragg rose heavily from his seat. "I presume my daughter has her reasons," he said, moving toward the door in Moffatt's wake.

"I guess she has same as I have for wanting you to step round with me to old Driscoll's. If Undine's reasons are as good as mine "

"Stop right here, Elmer Moffatt!" the older man broke out with lifted hand. Moffatt made a burlesque feint of evading a blow; then his face grew serious,

and he moved close to Mr. Spragg, whose arm had fallen to his side.

"See here, I know Undine's reasons. I've had a talk with her didn't she tell you? SHE don't beat about the bush the way you do. She told me straight out what was bothering her. She wants the Marvells to think she's right out of Kindergarten. 'No goods sent out on approval from this counter.' And I see her point I don't mean to publish my meemo'rs. Only a deal's a deal." He paused a moment, twisting his fingers about the heavy gold watch-chain that crossed his waistcoat. "Tell you what, Mr. Spragg, I don't bear malice not against Undine, anyway and if I could have afforded it I'd have been glad enough to oblige her and forget old times. But you didn't hesitate to kick me when I was down and it's taken me a day or two to get on my legs again after that kicking. I see my way now to get there and keep there; and there's a kinder poetic justice in your being the man to help me up. If I can get hold of fifty thousand dollars within a day or so I don't care who's got the start of me. I've got a dead sure thing in sight, and you're the only man that can get it for me. Now do you see where we're coming out?"

Mr. Spragg, during this discourse, had remained motionless, his hands in his pockets, his jaws moving mechanically, as though he mumbled a tooth-pick under his beard. His sallow cheek had turned a shade paler, and his brows hung threateningly over his half-closed eyes. But there was no threat there was scarcely more than a note of dull curiosity in the voice with which he said: "You mean to talk?"

Moffatt's rosy face grew as hard as a steel safe. "I mean YOU to talk to old Driscoll." He paused, and then added: "It's a hundred thousand down, between us."

Mr. Spragg once more consulted his watch. "I'll see you again," he said with an effort.

Moffatt struck one fist against the other. "No, SIR you won't! You'll only hear from me through the Marvell family. Your news ain't worth a dollar to Driscoll if he don't get it to-day."

He was checked by the sound of steps in the outer office, and Mr.
Spragg's stenographer appeared in the doorway.
"It's Mr. Marvell," she announced; and Ralph Marvell, glowing with haste and happiness, stood between the two men, holding out his hand to Mr. Spragg.

"Am I awfully in the way, sir? Turn me out if I am but first let me just say a word about this necklace I've ordered for Un "

He broke off, made aware by Mr. Spragg's glance of the presence of Elmer

Moffatt, who, with unwonted discretion, had dropped back into the shadow of the door. Marvell turned on Moffatt a bright gaze full of the instinctive hospitality of youth; but Moffatt looked straight past him at Mr. Spragg. The latter, as if in response to an imperceptible signal, mechanically pronounced his visitor's name; and the two young men moved toward each other.

"I beg your pardon most awfully am I breaking up an important conference?" Ralph asked as he shook hands.

"Why, no I guess we're pretty nearly through. I'll step outside and woo the blonde while you're talking," Moffatt rejoined in the same key.

"Thanks so much I shan't take two seconds." Ralph broke off to scrutinize him. "But haven't we met before? It seems to me I've seen you just lately "

Moffatt seemed about to answer, but his reply was checked by an abrupt movement on the part of Mr. Spragg. There was a perceptible pause, during which Moffatt's bright black glance rested questioningly on Ralph; then he looked again at the older man, and their eyes held each other for a silent moment.

"Why, no not as I'm aware of, Mr. Marvell," Moffatt said, addressing himself amicably to Ralph. "Better late than never, though and I hope to have the pleasure soon again."

He divided a nod between the two men, and passed into the outer office, where they heard him addressing the stenographer in a strain of exaggerated gallantry.

XI

The July sun enclosed in a ring of fire the ilex grove of a villa in the hills near Siena.

Below, by the roadside, the long yellow house seemed to waver and palpitate in the glare; but steep by steep, behind it, the cool ilex-dusk mounted to the ledge where Ralph Marvell, stretched on his back in the grass, lay gazing up at a black reticulation of branches between which bits of sky gleamed with the hardness and brilliancy of blue enamel.

Up there too the air was thick with heat; but compared with the white fire below it was a dim and tempered warmth, like that of the churches in which he and Undine sometimes took refuge at the height of the torrid days.

Ralph loved the heavy Italian summer, as he had loved the light spring days

leading up to it: the long line of dancing days that had drawn them on and on ever since they had left their ship at Naples four months earlier. Four months of beauty, changeful, inexhaustible, weaving itself about him in shapes of softness and strength; and beside him, hand in hand with him, embodying that spirit of shifting magic, the radiant creature through whose eyes he saw it. This was what their hastened marriage had blessed them with, giving them leisure, before summer came, to penetrate to remote folds of the southern mountains, to linger in the shade of Sicilian orange-groves, and finally, travelling by slow stages to the Adriatic, to reach the central hill-country where even in July they might hope for a breathable air.

To Ralph the Sienese air was not only breathable but intoxicating. The sun, treading the earth like a vintager, drew from it heady fragrances, crushed out of it new colours. All the values of the temperate landscape were reversed: the noon high-lights were whiter but the shadows had unimagined colour. On the blackness of cork and ilex and cypress lay the green and purple lustres, the coppery iridescences, of old bronze; and night after night the skies were wine-blue and bubbling with stars. Ralph said to himself that no one who had not seen Italy thus prostrate beneath the sun knew what secret treasures she could yield.

As he lay there, fragments of past states of emotion, fugitive felicities of thought and sensation, rose and floated on the surface of his thoughts. It was one of those moments when the accumulated impressions of life converge on heart and brain, elucidating, enlacing each other, in a mysterious confusion of beauty. He had had glimpses of such a state before, of such mergings of the personal with the general life that one felt one's self a mere wave on the wild stream of being, yet thrilled with a sharper sense of individuality than can be known within the mere bounds of the actual. But now he knew the sensation in its fulness, and with it came the releasing power of language. Words were flashing like brilliant birds through the boughs overhead; he had but to wave his magic wand to have them flutter down to him. Only they were so beautiful up there, weaving their fantastic flights against the blue, that it was pleasanter, for the moment, to watch them and let the wand lie.

He stared up at the pattern they made till his eyes ached with excess of light; then he changed his position and looked at his wife.

Undine, near by, leaned against a gnarled tree with the slightly constrained air of a person unused to sylvan abandonments. Her beautiful back could not adapt itself to the irregularities of the tree-trunk, and she moved a little now and then in the effort to find an easier position. But her expression was serene, and Ralph, looking up at her through drowsy lids, thought her face had never been more exquisite.

"You look as cool as a wave," he said, reaching out for the hand on her knee. She let him have it, and he drew it closer, scrutinizing it as if it had been a bit of precious porcelain or ivory. It was small and soft, a mere featherweight, a puff-ball of a hand not quick and thrilling, not a speaking hand, but one to be fondled and dressed in rings, and to leave a rosy blur in the brain. The fingers were short and tapering, dimpled at the base, with nails as smooth as rose-leaves. Ralph lifted them one by one, like a child playing with piano-keys, but they were inelastic and did not spring back far only far enough to show the dimples.

He turned the hand over and traced the course of its blue veins from the wrist to the rounding of the palm below the fingers; then he put a kiss in the warm hollow between. The upper world had vanished: his universe had shrunk to the palm of a hand. But there was no sense of diminution. In the mystic depths whence his passion sprang, earthly dimensions were ignored and the curve of beauty was boundless enough to hold whatever the imagination could pour into it. Ralph had never felt more convinced of his power to write a great poem; but now it was Undine's hand which held the magic wand of expression.

She stirred again uneasily, answering his last words with a faint accent of reproach.

"I don't FEEL cool. You said there'd be a breeze up here.".

He laughed.

"You poor darling! Wasn't it ever as hot as this in Apex?"

She withdrew her hand with a slight grimace.

"Yes but I didn't marry you to go back to Apex!"

Ralph laughed again; then he lifted himself on his elbow and regained the hand. "I wonder what you DID marry me for?"

"Mercy! It's too hot for conundrums." She spoke without impatience, but with a lassitude less joyous than his.

He roused himself. "Do you really mind the heat so much? We'll go, if you do."

She sat up eagerly. "Go to Switzerland, you mean?"

"Well, I hadn't taken quite as long a leap. I only meant we might drive back to

Siena."

She relapsed listlessly against her tree-trunk. "Oh, Siena's hotter than this."

"We could go and sit in the cathedral it's always cool there at sunset."

"We've sat in the cathedral at sunset every day for a week."

"Well, what do you say to stopping at Lecceto on the way? I haven't shown you Lecceto yet; and the drive back by moonlight would be glorious."

This woke her to a slight show of interest. "It might be nice but where could we get anything to eat?"

Ralph laughed again. "I don't believe we could. You're too practical."

"Well, somebody's got to be. And the food in the hotel is too disgusting if we're not on time."

"I admit that the best of it has usually been appropriated by the extremely good-looking cavalry-officer who's so keen to know you."

Undine's face brightened. "You know he's not a Count; he's a Marquis. His name's Roviano; his palace in Rome is in the guide-books, and he speaks English beautifully. Celeste found out about him from the headwaiter," she said, with the security of one who treats of recognized values.

Marvell, sitting upright, reached lazily across the grass for his hat. "Then there's all the more reason for rushing back to defend our share." He spoke in the bantering tone which had become the habitual expression of his tenderness; but his eyes softened as they absorbed in a last glance the glimmering submarine light of the ancient grove, through which Undine's figure wavered nereid-like above him.

"You never looked your name more than you do now," he said, kneeling at her side and putting his arm about her. She smiled back a little vaguely, as if not seizing his allusion, and being content to let it drop into the store of unexplained references which had once stimulated her curiosity but now merely gave her leisure to think of other things. But her smile was no less lovely for its vagueness, and indeed, to Ralph, the loveliness was enhanced by the latent doubt. He remembered afterward that at that moment the cup of life seemed to brim over.

"Come, dear here or there it's all divine!"

In the carriage, however, she remained insensible to the soft spell of the

evening, noticing only the heat and dust, and saying, as they passed under the wooded cliff of Lecceto, that they might as well have stopped there after all, since with such a headache as she felt coming on she didn't care if she dined or not. Ralph looked up yearningly at the long walls overhead; but Undine's mood was hardly favourable to communion with such scenes, and he made no attempt to stop the carriage. Instead he presently said: "If you're tired of Italy, we've got the world to choose from."

She did not speak for a moment; then she said: "It's the heat I'm tired of. Don't people generally come here earlier?"

"Yes. That's why I chose the summer: so that we could have it all to ourselves."

She tried to put a note of reasonableness into her voice. "If you'd told me we were going everywhere at the wrong time, of course I could have arranged about my clothes."

"You poor darling! Let us, by all means, go to the place where the clothes will be right: they're too beautiful to be left out of our scheme of life."

Her lips hardened. "I know you don't care how I look. But you didn't give me time to order anything before we were married, and I've got nothing but my last winter's things to wear."

Ralph smiled. Even his subjugated mind perceived the inconsistency of Undine's taxing him with having hastened their marriage; but her variations on the eternal feminine still enchanted him.

"We'll go wherever you please you make every place the one place," he said, as if he were humouring an irresistible child.

"To Switzerland, then? Celeste says St. Moritz is too heavenly," exclaimed Undine, who gathered her ideas of Europe chiefly from the conversation of her experienced attendant.

"One can be cool short of the Engadine. Why not go south again say to Capri?"
"Capri? Is that the island we saw from Naples, where the artists go?" She drew her brows together. "It would be simply awful getting there in this heat."

"Well, then, I know a little place in Switzerland where one can still get away from the crowd, and we can sit and look at a green water-fall while I lie in wait for adjectives."

Mr. Spragg's astonishment on learning that his son-in-law contemplated

maintaining a household on the earnings of his Muse was still matter for pleasantry between the pair; and one of the humours of their first weeks together had consisted in picturing themselves as a primeval couple setting forth across a virgin continent and subsisting on the adjectives which Ralph was to trap for his epic. On this occasion, however, his wife did not take up the joke, and he remained silent while their carriage climbed the long dusty hill to the Fontebranda gate. He had seen her face droop as he suggested the possibility of an escape from the crowds in Switzerland, and it came to him, with the sharpness of a knife-thrust, that a crowd was what she wanted that she was sick to death of being alone with him.

He sat motionless, staring ahead at the red-brown walls and towers on the steep above them. After all there was nothing sudden in his discovery. For weeks it had hung on the edge of consciousness, but he had turned from it with the heart's instinctive clinging to the unrealities by which it lives. Even now a hundred qualifying reasons rushed to his aid. They told him it was not of himself that Undine had wearied, but only of their present way of life. He had said a moment before, without conscious exaggeration, that her presence made any place the one place; yet how willingly would he have consented to share in such a life as she was leading before their marriage? And he had to acknowledge their months of desultory wandering from one remote Italian hill-top to another must have seemed as purposeless to her as balls and dinners would have been to him. An imagination like his, peopled with such varied images and associations, fed by so many currents from the long stream of human experience, could hardly picture the bareness of the small half-lit place in which his wife's spirit fluttered. Her mind was as destitute of beauty and mystery as the prairie school-house in which she had been educated; and her ideals seemed to Ralph as pathetic as the ornaments made of corks and cigar-bands with which her infant hands had been taught to adorn it. He was beginning to understand this, and learning to adapt himself to the narrow compass of her experience. The task of opening new windows in her mind was inspiring enough to give him infinite patience; and he would not yet own to himself that her pliancy and variety were imitative rather than spontaneous.

Meanwhile he had no desire to sacrifice her wishes to his, and it distressed him that he dared not confess his real reason for avoiding the Engadine. The truth was that their funds were shrinking faster than he had expected. Mr. Spragg, after bluntly opposing their hastened marriage on the ground that he was not prepared, at such short notice, to make the necessary provision for his daughter, had shortly afterward (probably, as Undine observed to Ralph, in consequence of a lucky "turn" in the Street) met their wishes with all possible liberality, bestowing on them a wedding in conformity with Mrs. Spragg's ideals and up to the highest standard of Mrs. Heeny's clippings, and pledging

himself to provide Undine with an income adequate to so brilliant a beginning. It was understood that Ralph, on their return, should renounce the law for some more paying business; but this seemed the smallest of sacrifices to make for the privilege of calling Undine his wife; and besides, he still secretly hoped that, in the interval, his real vocation might declare itself in some work which would justify his adopting the life of letters.

He had assumed that Undine's allowance, with the addition of his own small income, would be enough to satisfy their needs. His own were few, and had always been within his means; but his wife's daily requirements, combined with her intermittent outbreaks of extravagance, had thrown out all his calculations, and they were already seriously exceeding their income.

If any one had prophesied before his marriage that he would find it difficult to tell this to Undine he would have smiled at the suggestion; and during their first days together it had seemed as though pecuniary questions were the last likely to be raised between them. But his marital education had since made strides, and he now knew that a disregard for money may imply not the willingness to get on without it but merely a blind confidence that it will somehow be provided. If Undine, like the lilies of the field, took no care, it was not because her wants were as few but because she assumed that care would be taken for her by those whose privilege it was to enable her to unite floral insouciance with Sheban elegance.

She had met Ralph's first note of warning with the assurance that she "didn't mean to worry"; and her tone implied that it was his business to do so for her. He certainly wanted to guard her from this as from all other cares; he wanted also, and still more passionately after the topic had once or twice recurred between them, to guard himself from the risk of judging where he still adored. These restraints to frankness kept him silent during the remainder of the drive, and when, after dinner, Undine again complained of her headache, he let her go up to her room and wandered out into the dimly lit streets to renewed communion with his problems.

They hung on him insistently as darkness fell, and Siena grew vocal with that shrill diversity of sounds that breaks, on summer nights, from every cleft of the masonry in old Italian towns. Then the moon rose, unfolding depth by depth the lines of the antique land; and Ralph, leaning against an old brick parapet, and watching each silver-blue remoteness disclose itself between the dark masses of the middle distance, felt his spirit enlarged and pacified. For the first time, as his senses thrilled to the deep touch of beauty, he asked himself if out of these floating and fugitive vibrations he might not build something concrete and stable, if even such dull common cares as now oppressed him might not become the motive power of creation. If he could

only, on the spot, do something with all the accumulated spoils of the last months something that should both put money into his pocket and harmony into the rich confusion of his spirit! "I'll write I'll write: that must be what the whole thing means," he said to himself, with a vague clutch at some solution which should keep him a little longer hanging half-way down the steep of disenchantment.

He would have stayed on, heedless of time, to trace the ramifications of his idea in the complex beauty of the scene, but for the longing to share his mood with Undine. For the last few months every thought and sensation had been instantly transmuted into such emotional impulses and, though the currents of communication between himself and Undine were neither deep nor numerous, each fresh rush of feeling seemed strong enough to clear a way to her heart. He hurried back, almost breathlessly, to the inn; but even as he knocked at her door the subtle emanation of other influences seemed to arrest and chill him.

She had put out the lamp, and sat by the window in the moonlight, her head propped on a listless hand. As Marvell entered she turned; then, without speaking, she looked away again.

He was used to this mute reception, and had learned that it had no personal motive, but was the result of an extremely simplified social code. Mr. and Mrs. Spragg seldom spoke to each other when they met, and words of greeting seemed almost unknown to their domestic vocabulary. Marvell, at first, had fancied that his own warmth would call forth a response from his wife, who had been so quick to learn the forms of worldly intercourse; but he soon saw that she regarded intimacy as a pretext for escaping from such forms into a total absence of expression.

To-night, however, he felt another meaning in her silence, and perceived that she intended him to feel it. He met it by silence, but of a different kind; letting his nearness speak for him as he knelt beside her and laid his cheek against hers. She seemed hardly aware of the gesture; but to that he was also used. She had never shown any repugnance to his tenderness, but such response as it evoked was remote and Ariel-like, suggesting, from the first, not so much of the recoil of ignorance as the coolness of the element from which she took her name.

As he pressed her to him she seemed to grow less impassive and he felt her resign herself like a tired child. He held his breath, not daring to break the spell.

At length he whispered: "I've just seen such a wonderful thing I wish you'd been with me!"

"What sort of a thing?" She turned her head with a faint show of interest.

"A I don't know a vision…. It came to me out there just now with the moonrise."

"A vision?" Her interest flagged. "I never cared much about spirits. Mother used to try to drag me to seances but they always made me sleepy."

Ralph laughed. "I don't mean a dead spirit but a living one! I saw the vision of a book I mean to do. It came to me suddenly, magnificently, swooped down on me as that big white moon swooped down on the black landscape, tore at me like a great white eagle-like the bird of Jove! After all, imagination WAS the eagle that devoured Prometheus!"

She drew away abruptly, and the bright moonlight showed him the apprehension in her face. "You're not going to write a book HERE?"

He stood up and wandered away a step or two; then he turned and came back. "Of course not here. Wherever you want. The main point is that it's come to me no, that it's come BACK to me! For it's all these months together, it's all our happiness it's the meaning of life that I've found, and it's you, dearest, you who've given it to me!"

He dropped down beside her again; but she disengaged herself and he heard a little sob in her throat.

"Undine what's the matter?"

"Nothing…I don't know…I suppose I'm homesick…"

"Homesick? You poor darling! You're tired of travelling? What is it?"

"I don't know…I don't like Europe…it's not what I expected, and I think it's all too dreadfully dreary!" The words broke from her in a long wail of rebellion.

Marvell gazed at her perplexedly. It seemed strange that such unguessed thoughts should have been stirring in the heart pressed to his. "It's less interesting than you expected or less amusing? Is that it?"

"It's dirty and ugly all the towns we've been to are disgustingly dirty. I loathe the smells and the beggars. I'm sick and tired of the stuffy rooms in the hotels. I thought it would all be so splendid but New York's ever so much nicer!"

"Not New York in July?"

"I don't care there are the roof-gardens, anyway; and there are always people round. All these places seem as if they were dead. It's all like some awful

cemetery."

A sense of compunction checked Marvell's laughter. "Don't cry, dear don't! I see, I understand. You're lonely and the heat has tired you out. It IS dull here; awfully dull; I've been stupid not to feel it. But we'll start at once we'll get out of it."

She brightened instantly. "We'll go up to Switzerland?"

"We'll go up to Switzerland." He had a fleeting glimpse of the quiet place with the green water-fall, where he might have made tryst with his vision; then he turned his mind from it and said: "We'll go just where you want. How soon can you be ready to start?"

"Oh, to-morrow the first thing to-morrow! I'll make Celeste get out of bed now and pack. Can we go right through to St. Moritz? I'd rather sleep in the train than in another of these awful places."

She was on her feet in a flash, her face alight, her hair waving and floating about her as though it rose on her happy heart-beats.

"Oh, Ralph, it's SWEET of you, and I love you!" she cried out, letting him take her to his breast.

XII

In the quiet place with the green water-fall Ralph's vision might have kept faith with him; but how could he hope to surprise it in the midsummer crowds of St. Moritz? Undine, at any rate, had found there what she wanted; and when he was at her side, and her radiant smile included him, every other question was in abeyance. But there were hours of solitary striding over bare grassy slopes, face to face with the ironic interrogation of sky and mountains, when his anxieties came back, more persistent and importunate. Sometimes they took the form of merely material difficulties. How, for instance, was he to meet the cost of their ruinous suite at the Engadine Palace while he awaited Mr. Spragg's next remittance? And once the hotel bills were paid, what would be left for the journey back to Paris, the looming expenses there, the price of the passage to America? These questions would fling him back on the thought of his projected book, which was, after all, to be what the masterpieces of literature had mostly been a pot-boiler. Well! Why not? Did not the worshipper always heap the rarest essences on the altar of his divinity? Ralph still rejoiced in the thought of giving back to Undine something of the beauty of their first months together. But even on his solitary walks the vision eluded him; and he could spare so few hours to its pursuit!

Undine's days were crowded, and it was still a matter of course that where she went he should follow. He had risen visibly in her opinion since they had been absorbed into the life of the big hotels, and she had seen that his command of foreign tongues put him at an advantage even in circles where English was generally spoken if not understood. Undine herself, hampered by her lack of languages, was soon drawn into the group of compatriots who struck the social pitch of their hotel.

Their types were familiar enough to Ralph, who had taken their measure in former wanderings, and come across their duplicates in every scene of continental idleness. Foremost among them was Mrs. Harvey Shallum, a showy Parisianized figure, with a small wax-featured husband whose ultra-fashionable clothes seemed a tribute to his wife's importance rather than the mark of his personal taste. Mr. Shallum, in fact, could not be said to have any personal bent. Though he conversed with a colourless fluency in the principal European tongues, he seldom exercised his gift except in intercourse with hotel-managers and head-waiters; and his long silences were broken only by resigned allusions to the enormities he had suffered at the hands of this gifted but unscrupulous class.

Mrs. Shallum, though in command of but a few verbs, all of which, on her lips, became irregular, managed to express a polyglot personality as vivid as her husband's was effaced. Her only idea of intercourse with her kind was to organize it into bands and subject it to frequent displacements; and society smiled at her for these exertions like an infant vigorously rocked. She saw at once Undine's value as a factor in her scheme, and the two formed an alliance on which Ralph refrained from shedding the cold light of depreciation. It was a point of honour with him not to seem to disdain any of Undine's amusements: the noisy interminable picnics, the hot promiscuous balls, the concerts, bridge-parties and theatricals which helped to disguise the difference between the high Alps and Paris or New York. He told himself that there is always a Narcissus-element in youth, and that what Undine really enjoyed was the image of her own charm mirrored in the general admiration. With her quick perceptions and adaptabilities she would soon learn to care more about the quality of the reflecting surface; and meanwhile no criticism of his should mar her pleasure.

The appearance at their hotel of the cavalry-officer from Siena was a not wholly agreeable surprise; but even after the handsome Marquis had been introduced to Undine, and had whirled her through an evening's dances, Ralph was not seriously disturbed. Husband and wife had grown closer to each other since they had come to St. Moritz, and in the brief moments she could give him Undine was now always gay and approachable. Her fitful humours had

vanished, and she showed qualities of comradeship that seemed the promise of a deeper understanding. But this very hope made him more subject to her moods, more fearful of disturbing the harmony between them. Least of all could he broach the subject of money: he had too keen a memory of the way her lips could narrow, and her eyes turn from him as if he were a stranger.

It was a different matter that one day brought the look he feared to her face. She had announced her intention of going on an excursion with Mrs. Shallum and three or four of the young men who formed the nucleus of their shifting circle, and for the first time she did not ask Ralph if he were coming; but he felt no resentment at being left out. He was tired of these noisy assaults on the high solitudes, and the prospect of a quiet afternoon turned his thoughts to his book. Now if ever there seemed a chance of recapturing the moonlight vision…

From his balcony he looked down on the assembling party. Mrs. Shallum was already screaming bilingually at various windows in the long facade; and Undine presently came out of the hotel with the Marchese Roviano and two young English diplomatists. Slim and tall in her trim mountain garb, she made the ornate Mrs. Shallum look like a piece of ambulant upholstery. The high air brightened her cheeks and struck new lights from her hair, and Ralph had never seen her so touched with morning freshness. The party was not yet complete, and he felt a movement of annoyance when he recognized, in the last person to join it, a Russian lady of cosmopolitan notoriety whom he had run across in his unmarried days, and as to whom he had already warned Undine. Knowing what strange specimens from the depths slip through the wide meshes of the watering-place world, he had foreseen that a meeting with the Baroness Adelschein was inevitable; but he had not expected her to become one of his wife's intimate circle.

When the excursionists had started he turned back to his writing-table and tried to take up his work; but he could not fix his thoughts: they were far away, in pursuit of Undine. He had been but five months married, and it seemed, after all, rather soon for him to be dropped out of such excursions as unquestioningly as poor Harvey Shallum. He smiled away this first twinge of jealousy, but the irritation it left found a pretext in his displeasure at Undine's choice of companions. Mrs. Shallum grated on his taste, but she was as open to inspection as a shop-window, and he was sure that time would teach his wife the cheapness of what she had to show. Roviano and the Englishmen were well enough too: frankly bent on amusement, but pleasant and well-bred. But they would naturally take their tone from the women they were with; and Madame Adelschein's tone was notorious. He knew also that Undine's faculty of self-defense was weakened by the instinct of adapting herself to whatever

company she was in, of copying "the others" in speech and gesture as closely as she reflected them in dress; and he was disturbed by the thought of what her ignorance might expose her to.

She came back late, flushed with her long walk, her face all sparkle and mystery, as he had seen it in the first days of their courtship; and the look somehow revived his irritated sense of having been intentionally left out of the party.

"You've been gone forever. Was it the Adelschein who made you go such lengths?" he asked her, trying to keep to his usual joking tone.

Undine, as she dropped down on the sofa and unpinned her hat, shed on him the light of her guileless gaze.

"I don't know: everybody was amusing. The Marquis is awfully bright."

"I'd no idea you or Bertha Shallum knew Madame Adelschein well enough to take her off with you in that way."

Undine sat absently smoothing the tuft of glossy cock's-feathers in her hat.

"I don't see that you've got to know people particularly well to go for a walk with them. The Baroness is awfully bright too."

She always gave her acquaintances their titles, seeming not, in this respect, to have noticed that a simpler form prevailed.

"I don't dispute the interest of what she says; but I've told you what decent people think of what she does," Ralph retorted, exasperated by what seemed a wilful pretense of ignorance.

She continued to scrutinize him with her clear eyes, in which there was no shadow of offense.

"You mean they don't want to go round with her? You're mistaken: it's not true. She goes round with everybody. She dined last night with the Grand Duchess; Roviano told me so."

This was not calculated to make Ralph take a more tolerant view of the question.

"Does he also tell you what's said of her?"

"What's said of her?" Undine's limpid glance rebuked him. "Do you mean that disgusting scandal you told me about? Do you suppose I'd let him talk to me about such things? I meant you're mistaken about her social position. He says

she goes everywhere."

Ralph laughed impatiently. "No doubt Roviano's an authority; but it doesn't happen to be his business to choose your friends for you."

Undine echoed his laugh. "Well, I guess I don't need anybody to do that: I can do it myself," she said, with the good-humoured curtness that was the habitual note of intercourse with the Spraggs.

Ralph sat down beside her and laid a caressing touch on her shoulder. "No, you can't, you foolish child. You know nothing of this society you're in; of its antecedents, its rules, its conventions; and it's my affair to look after you, and warn you when you're on the wrong track."

"Mercy, what a solemn speech!" She shrugged away his hand without ill-temper. "I don't believe an American woman needs to know such a lot about their old rules. They can see I mean to follow my own, and if they don't like it they needn't go with me."

"Oh, they'll go with you fast enough, as you call it. They'll be too charmed to. The question is how far they'll make you go with THEM, and where they'll finally land you."

She tossed her head back with the movement she had learned in "speaking" school-pieces about freedom and the British tyrant.

"No one's ever yet gone any farther with me than I wanted!" she declared. She was really exquisitely simple.

"I'm not sure Roviano hasn't, in vouching for Madame Adelschein. But he probably thinks you know about her. To him this isn't 'society' any more than the people in an omnibus are. Society, to everybody here, means the sanction of their own special group and of the corresponding groups elsewhere. The Adelschein goes about in a place like this because it's nobody's business to stop her; but the women who tolerate her here would drop her like a shot if she set foot on their own ground."

The thoughtful air with which Undine heard him out made him fancy this argument had carried; and as be ended she threw him a bright look.

"Well, that's easy enough: I can drop her if she comes to New York."

Ralph sat silent for a moment then he turned away and began to gather up his scattered pages.

Undine, in the ensuing days, was no less often with Madame Adelschein, and

Ralph suspected a challenge in her open frequentation of the lady. But if challenge there were, he let it lie. Whether his wife saw more or less of Madame Adelschein seemed no longer of much consequence: she had so amply shown him her ability to protect herself. The pang lay in the completeness of the proof in the perfect functioning of her instinct of self-preservation. For the first time he was face to face with his hovering dread: he was judging where he still adored.

Before long more pressing cares absorbed him. He had already begun to watch the post for his father-in-law's monthly remittance, without precisely knowing how, even with its aid, he was to bridge the gulf of expense between St. Moritz and New York. The non-arrival of Mr. Spragg's cheque was productive of graver tears, and these were abruptly confirmed when, coming in one afternoon, he found Undine crying over a letter from her mother.

Her distress made him fear that Mr. Spragg was ill, and he drew her to him soothingly; but she broke away with an impatient movement.

"Oh, they're all well enough but father's lost a lot of money. He's been speculating, and he can't send us anything for at least three months."

Ralph murmured reassuringly: "As long as there's no one ill!" but in reality he was following her despairing gaze down the long perspective of their barren quarter.

"Three months! Three months!"

Undine dried her eyes, and sat with set lips and tapping foot while he read her mother's letter.

"Your poor father! It's a hard knock for him. I'm sorry," he said as he handed it back.

For a moment she did not seem to hear; then she said between her teeth:
"It's hard for US. I suppose now we'll have to go straight home."
He looked at her with wonder. "If that were all! In any case I should have to be back in a few weeks."

"But we needn't have left here in August! It's the first place in Europe that I've liked, and it's just my luck to be dragged away from it!"

"I'm so awfully sorry, dearest. It's my fault for persuading you to marry a pauper."

"It's father's fault. Why on earth did he go and speculate? There's no use his saying he's sorry now!" She sat brooding for a moment and then suddenly took

Ralph's hand. "Couldn't your people do something help us out just this once, I mean?"

He flushed to the forehead: it seemed inconceivable that she should make such a suggestion.

"I couldn't ask them it's not possible. My grandfather does as much as he can for me, and my mother has nothing but what he gives her."

Undine seemed unconscious of his embarrassment. "He doesn't give us nearly as much as father does," she said; and, as Ralph remained silent, she went on:

"Couldn't you ask your sister, then? I must have some clothes to go home in."

His heart contracted as he looked at her. What sinister change came over her when her will was crossed? She seemed to grow inaccessible, implacable her eyes were like the eyes of an enemy.

"I don't know I'll see," he said, rising and moving away from her. At that moment the touch of her hand was repugnant. Yes he might ask Laura, no doubt: and whatever she had would be his. But the necessity was bitter to him, and Undine's unconsciousness of the fact hurt him more than her indifference to her father's misfortune.

What hurt him most was the curious fact that, for all her light irresponsibility, it was always she who made the practical suggestion, hit the nail of expediency on the head. No sentimental scruple made the blow waver or deflected her resolute aim. She had thought at once of Laura, and Laura was his only, his inevitable, resource. His anxious mind pictured his sister's wonder, and made him wince under the sting of Henley Fairford's irony: Fairford, who at the time of the marriage had sat silent and pulled his moustache while every one else argued and objected, yet under whose silence Ralph had felt a deeper protest than under all the reasoning of the others. It was no comfort to reflect that Fairford would probably continue to say nothing! But necessity made light of these twinges, and Ralph set his teeth and cabled.

Undine's chief surprise seemed to be that Laura's response, though immediate and generous, did not enable them to stay on at St. Moritz. But she apparently read in her husband's look the uselessness of such a hope, for, with one of the sudden changes of mood that still disarmed him, she accepted the need of departure, and took leave philosophically of the Shallums and their band. After all, Paris was ahead, and in September one would have a chance to see the new models and surprise the secret councils of the dressmakers.

Ralph was astonished at the tenacity with which she held to her purpose. He tried, when they reached Paris, to make her feel the necessity of starting at once for home; but she complained of fatigue and of feeling vaguely unwell, and he had to yield to her desire for rest. The word, however, was to strike him as strangely misapplied, for from the day of their arrival she was in state of perpetual activity. She seemed to have mastered her Paris by divination, and between the hounds of the Boulevards and the Place Vendome she moved at once with supernatural ease.

"Of course," she explained to him, "I understand how little we've got to spend; but I left New York without a rag, and it was you who made me countermand my trousseau, instead of having it sent after us. I wish now I hadn't listened to you father'd have had to pay for THAT before he lost his money. As it is, it will be cheaper in the end for me to pick up a few things here. The advantage of going to the French dress-makers is that they'll wait twice as long for their money as the people at home. And they're all crazy to dress me Bertha Shallum will tell you so: she says no one ever had such a chance! That's why I was willing to come to this stuffy little hotel I wanted to save every scrap I could to get a few decent things. And over here they're accustomed to being bargained with you ought to see how I've beaten them down! Have you any idea what a dinner-dress costs in New York ?"

So it went on, obtusely and persistently, whenever he tried to sound the note of prudence. But on other themes she was more than usually responsive. Paris enchanted her, and they had delightful hours at the theatres the "little" ones amusing dinners at fashionable restaurants, and reckless evenings in haunts where she thrilled with simple glee at the thought of what she must so obviously be "taken for." All these familiar diversions regained, for Ralph, a fresh zest in her company. Her innocence, her high spirits, her astounding comments and credulities, renovated the old Parisian adventure and flung a veil of romance over its hackneyed scenes. Beheld through such a medium the future looked less near and implacable, and Ralph, when he had received a reassuring letter from his sister, let his conscience sleep and slipped forth on the high tide of pleasure. After all, in New York amusements would be fewer, and their life, for a time, perhaps more quiet. Moreover, Ralph's dim glimpses of Mr. Spragg's past suggested that the latter was likely to be on his feet again at any moment, and atoning by redoubled prodigalities for his temporary straits; and beyond all these possibilities there was the book to be written the book on which Ralph was sure he should get a real hold as soon as they settled down in New York.

Meanwhile the daily cost of living, and the bills that could not be deferred, were eating deep into Laura's subsidy. Ralph's anxieties returned, and his

plight was brought home to him with a shock when, on going one day to engage passages, he learned that the prices were that of the "rush season," and one of the conditions immediate payment. At other times, he was told the rules were easier; but in September and October no exception could be made.

As he walked away with this fresh weight on his mind he caught sight of the strolling figure of Peter Van Degen Peter lounging and luxuriating among the seductions of the Boulevard with the disgusting ease of a man whose wants are all measured by money, and who always has enough to gratify them.

His present sense of these advantages revealed itself in the affability of his greeting to Ralph, and in his off-hand request that the latter should "look up Clare," who had come over with him to get her winter finery.

"She's motoring to Italy next week with some of her long-haired friends but I'm off for the other side; going back on the Sorceress. She's just been overhauled at Greenock, and we ought to have a good spin over. Better come along with me, old man."

The Sorceress was Van Degen's steam-yacht, most huge and complicated of her kind: it was his habit, after his semi-annual flights to Paris and London, to take a joyous company back on her and let Clare return by steamer. The character of these parties made the invitation almost an offense to Ralph; but reflecting that it was probably a phrase distributed to every acquaintance when Van Degen was in a rosy mood, he merely answered: "Much obliged, my dear fellow; but Undine and I are sailing immediately."

Peter's glassy eye grew livelier. "Ah, to be sure you're not over the honeymoon yet. How's the bride? Stunning as ever? My regards to her, please. I suppose she's too deep in dress-making to be called on? Don't you forget to look up Clare!" He hurried on in pursuit of a flitting petticoat and Ralph continued his walk home.

He prolonged it a little in order to put off telling Undine of his plight; for he could devise only one way of meeting the cost of the voyage, and that was to take it at once, and thus curtail their Parisian expenses. But he knew how unwelcome this plan would be, and he shrank the more from seeing Undine's face harden; since, of late, he had so basked in its brightness.

When at last he entered the little salon she called "stuffy" he found her in conference with a blond-bearded gentleman who wore the red ribbon in his lapel, and who, on Ralph's appearance and at a sign, as it appeared, from Mrs. Marvell swept into his note-case some small objects that had lain on the table, and bowed himself out with a "Madame Monsieur" worthy of the highest traditions.

Ralph looked after him with amusement. "Who's your friend an Ambassador or a tailor?"

Undine was rapidly slipping on her rings, which, as he now saw, had also been scattered over the table.

"Oh, it was only that jeweller I told you about the one Bertha Shallum goes to."

"A jeweller? Good heavens, my poor girl! You're buying jewels?" The extravagance of the idea struck a laugh from him.

Undine's face did not harden: it took on, instead, almost deprecating look. "Of course not how silly you are! I only wanted a few old things reset. But I won't if you'd rather not."

She came to him and sat down at his side, laying her hand on his arm. He took the hand up and looked at the deep gleam of the sapphires in the old family ring he had given her.

"You won't have that reset?" he said, smiling and twisting the ring about on her finger; then he went on with his thankless explanation. "It's not that I don't want you to do this or that; it's simply that, for the moment, we're rather strapped. I've just been to see the steamer people, and our passages will cost a good deal more than I thought."

He mentioned the sum and the fact that he must give an answer the next day. Would she consent to sail that very Saturday? Or should they go a fortnight later, in a slow boat from Plymouth?

Undine frowned on both alternatives. She was an indifferent sailor and shrank from the possible "nastiness" of the cheaper boat. She wanted to get the voyage over as quickly and luxuriously as possible Bertha Shallum had told her that in a "deck-suite" no one need be sea-sick but she wanted still more to have another week or two of Paris; and it was always hard to make her see why circumstances could not be bent to her wishes.

"This week? But how on earth can I be ready? Besides, we're dining at Enghien with the Shallums on Saturday, and motoring to Chantilly with the Jim Driscolls on Sunday. I can't imagine how you thought we could go this week!"

But she still opposed the cheap steamer, and after they had carried the question on to Voisin's, and there unprofitably discussed it through a long luncheon, it seemed no nearer a solution.

"Well, think it over let me know this evening," Ralph said, proportioning the waiter's fee to a bill burdened by Undine's reckless choice of primeurs.

His wife was to join the newly-arrived Mrs. Shallum in a round of the rue de la Paix; and he had seized the opportunity of slipping off to a classical performance at the Français. On their arrival in Paris he had taken Undine to one of these entertainments, but it left her too weary and puzzled for him to renew the attempt, and he had not found time to go back without her. He was glad now to shed his cares in such an atmosphere. The play was of the greatest, the interpretation that of the vanishing grand manner which lived in his first memories of the Parisian stage, and his surrender such influences as complete as in his early days. Caught up in the fiery chariot of art, he felt once more the tug of its coursers in his muscles, and the rush of their flight still throbbed in him when he walked back late to the hotel.

XIII

He had expected to find Undine still out; but on the stairs he crossed Mrs. Shallum, who threw at him from under an immense hat-brim: "Yes, she's in, but you'd better come and have tea with me at the Luxe. I don't think husbands are wanted!"

Ralph laughingly rejoined that that was just the moment for them to appear; and Mrs. Shallum swept on, crying back: "All the same, I'll wait for you!"

In the sitting-room Ralph found Undine seated behind a tea-table on the other side of which, in an attitude of easy intimacy, Peter Van Degen stretched his lounging length.

He did not move on Ralph's appearance, no doubt thinking their kinship close enough to make his nod and "Hullo!" a sufficient greeting. Peter in intimacy was given to miscalculations of the sort, and Ralph's first movement was to glance at Undine and see how it affected her. But her eyes gave out the vivid rays that noise and banter always struck from them; her face, at such moments, was like a theatre with all the lustres blazing. That the illumination should have been kindled by his cousin's husband was not precisely agreeable to Marvell, who thought Peter a bore in society and an insufferable nuisance on closer terms. But he was becoming blunted to Undine's lack of discrimination; and his own treatment of Van Degen was always tempered by his sympathy for Clare.

He therefore listened with apparent good-humour to Peter's suggestion of an evening at a petit theatre with the Harvey Shallums, and joined in the laugh

with which Undine declared: "Oh, Ralph won't go he only likes the theatres where they walk around in bathtowels and talk poetry. Isn't that what you've just been seeing?" she added, with a turn of the neck that shed her brightness on him.

"What? One of those five-barrelled shows at the Français? Great Scott,
Ralph no wonder your wife's pining for the Folies Bergère!"
"She needn't, my dear fellow. We never interfere with each other's vices."

Peter, unsolicited, was comfortably lighting a cigarette. "Ah, there's the secret of domestic happiness. Marry somebody who likes all the things you don't, and make love to somebody who likes all the things you do."

Undine laughed appreciatively. "Only it dooms poor Ralph to such awful frumps. Can't you see the sort of woman who'd love his sort of play?"

"Oh, I can see her fast enough my wife loves 'em," said their visitor, rising with a grin; while Ralph threw, out: "So don't waste your pity on me!" and Undine's laugh had the slight note of asperity that the mention of Clare always elicited.

"To-morrow night, then, at Paillard's," Van Degen concluded. "And about the other business that's a go too? I leave it to you to settle the date."

The nod and laugh they exchanged seemed to hint at depths of collusion from which Ralph was pointedly excluded; and he wondered how large a programme of pleasure they had already had time to sketch out. He disliked the idea of Undine's being too frequently seen with Van Degen, whose Parisian reputation was not fortified by the connections that propped it up in New York; but he did not want to interfere with her pleasure, and he was still wondering what to say when, as the door closed, she turned to him gaily.

"I'm so glad you've come! I've got some news for you." She laid a light touch on his arm.

Touch and tone were enough to disperse his anxieties, and he answered that he was in luck to find her already in when he had supposed her engaged, over a Nouveau Luxe tea-table, in repairing the afternoon's ravages.

"Oh, I didn't shop much I didn't stay out long." She raised a kindling face to him. "And what do you think I've been doing? While you were sitting in your stuffy old theatre, worrying about the money I was spending (oh, you needn't fib I know you were!) I was saving you hundreds and thousands. I've saved you the price of our passage!"

Ralph laughed in pure enjoyment of her beauty. When she shone on him like that what did it matter what nonsense she talked?

"You wonderful woman how did you do it? By countermanding a tiara?"

"You know I'm not such a fool as you pretend!" She held him at arm's length with a nod of joyous mystery. "You'll simply never guess! I've made Peter Van Degen ask us to go home on the Sorceress. What. do you say to that?"

She flashed it out on a laugh of triumph, without appearing to have a doubt of the effect the announcement would produce.

Ralph stared at her. "The Sorceress? You MADE him?"

"Well, I managed it, I worked him round to it! He's crazy about the idea now but I don't think he'd thought of it before he came."

"I should say not!" Ralph ejaculated. "He never would have had the cheek to think of it."

"Well, I've made him, anyhow! Did you ever know such luck?"

"Such luck?" He groaned at her obstinate innocence. "Do you suppose I'll let you cross the ocean on the Sorceress?"

She shrugged impatiently. "You say that because your cousin doesn't go on her."

"If she doesn't, it's because it's no place for decent women."

"It's Clare's fault if it isn't. Everybody knows she's crazy about you, and she makes him feel it. That's why he takes up with other women."

Her anger reddened her cheeks and dropped her brows like a black bar above her glowing eyes. Even in his recoil from what she said Ralph felt the tempestuous heat of her beauty. But for the first time his latent resentments rose in him, and he gave her back wrath for wrath.

"Is that the precious stuff he tells you?"

"Do you suppose I had to wait for him to tell me? Everybody knows it everybody in New York knew she was wild when you married. That's why she's always been so nasty to me. If you won't go on the Sorceress they'll all say it's because she was jealous of me and wouldn't let you."

Ralph's indignation had already flickered down to disgust. Undine was no longer beautiful she seemed to have the face of her thoughts. He stood up with

an impatient laugh.

"Is that another of his arguments? I don't wonder they're convincing " But as quickly as it had come the sneer dropped, yielding to a wave of pity, the vague impulse to silence and protect her. How could he have given way to the provocation of her weakness, when his business was to defend her from it and lift her above it? He recalled his old dreams of saving her from Van Degenism it was not thus that he had imagined the rescue.

"Don't let's pay Peter the compliment of squabbling over him," he said, turning away to pour himself a cup of tea.

When he had filled his cup he sat down beside Undine, with a smile. "No doubt he was joking and thought you were; but if you really made him believe we might go with him you'd better drop him a line."

Undine's brow still gloomed. "You refuse, then?"

"Refuse? I don't need to! Do you want to succeed to half the chorus-world of New York?"

"They won't be on board with us, I suppose!"

"The echoes of their conversation will. It's the only language Peter knows."

"He told me he longed for the influence of a good woman " She checked herself, reddening at Ralph's laugh.

"Well, tell him to apply again when he's been under it a month or two.
Meanwhile we'll stick to the liners."
Ralph was beginning to learn that the only road to her reason lay through her vanity, and he fancied that if she could be made to see Van Degen as an object of ridicule she might give up the idea of the Sorceress of her own accord. But her will hardened slowly under his joking opposition, and she became no less formidable as she grew more calm. He was used to women who, in such cases, yielded as a matter of course to masculine judgments: if one pronounced a man "not decent" the question was closed. But it was Undine's habit to ascribe all interference with her plans to personal motives, and he could see that she attributed his opposition to the furtive machinations of poor Clare. It was odious to him to prolong the discussion, for the accent of recrimination was the one he most dreaded on her lips. But the moment came when he had to take the brunt of it, averting his thoughts as best he might from the glimpse it gave of a world of mean familiarities, of reprisals drawn from the vulgarest of vocabularies. Certain retorts sped through the air like the flight of household utensils, certain charges rang out like accusations of tampering with the

groceries. He stiffened himself against such comparisons, but they stuck in his imagination and left him thankful when Undine's anger yielded to a burst of tears. He had held his own and gained his point. The trip on the Sorceress was given up, and a note of withdrawal despatched to Van Degen; but at the same time Ralph cabled his sister to ask if she could increase her loan. For he had conquered only at the cost of a concession: Undine was to stay in Paris till October, and they were to sail on a fast steamer, in a deck-suite, like the Harvey Shallums.

Undine's ill-humour was soon dispelled by any new distraction, and she gave herself to the untroubled enjoyment of Paris. The Shallums were the centre of a like-minded group, and in the hours the ladies could spare from their dress-makers the restaurants shook with their hilarity and the suburbs with the shriek of their motors. Van Degen, who had postponed his sailing, was a frequent sharer in these amusements; but Ralph counted on New York influences to detach him from Undine's train. He was learning to influence her through her social instincts where he had once tried to appeal to other sensibilities.

His worst moment came when he went to see Clare Van Degen, who, on the eve of departure, had begged him to come to her hotel. He found her less restless and rattling than usual, with a look in her eyes that reminded him of the days when she had haunted his thoughts. The visit passed off without vain returns to the past; but as he was leaving she surprised him by saying: "Don't let Peter make a goose of your wife."

Ralph reddened, but laughed.

"Oh, Undine's wonderfully able to defend herself, even against such seductions as Peter's."

Mrs. Van Degen looked down with a smile at the bracelets on her thin brown wrist. "His personal seductions yes. But as an inventor of amusements he's inexhaustible; and Undine likes to be amused."

Ralph made no reply but showed no annoyance. He simply took her hand and kissed it as he said good-bye; and she turned from him without audible farewell.

As the day of departure approached. Undine's absorption in her dresses almost precluded the thought of amusement. Early and late she was closeted with fitters and packers even the competent Celeste not being trusted to handle the treasures now pouring in and Ralph cursed his weakness in not restraining her, and then fled for solace to museums and galleries.

He could not rouse in her any scruple about incurring fresh debts, yet he knew

she was no longer unaware of the value of money. She had learned to bargain, pare down prices, evade fees, brow-beat the small tradespeople and wheedle concessions from the great not, as Ralph perceived, from any effort to restrain her expenses, but only to prolong and intensify the pleasure of spending. Pained by the trait, he tried to laugh her out of it. He told her once that she had a miserly hand showing her, in proof, that, for all their softness, the fingers would not bend back, or the pink palm open. But she retorted a little sharply that it was no wonder, since she'd heard nothing talked of since their marriage but economy; and this left him without any answer. So the purveyors continued to mount to their apartment, and Ralph, in the course of his frequent nights from it, found himself always dodging the corners of black glazed boxes and swaying pyramids of pasteboard; always lifting his hat to sidling milliners' girls, or effacing himself before slender vendeuses floating by in a mist of opopanax. He felt incompetent to pronounce on the needs to which these visitors ministered; but the reappearance among them of the blond-bearded jeweller gave him ground for fresh fears. Undine had assured him that she had given up the idea of having her ornaments reset, and there had been ample time for their return; but on his questioning her she explained that there had been delays and "bothers" and put him in the wrong by asking ironically if he supposed she was buying things "for pleasure" when she knew as well as he that there wasn't any money to pay for them.

But his thoughts were not all dark. Undine's moods still infected him, and when she was happy he felt an answering lightness. Even when her amusements were too primitive to be shared he could enjoy their reflection in her face. Only, as he looked back, he was struck by the evanescence, the lack of substance, in their moments of sympathy, and by the permanent marks left by each breach between them. Yet he still fancied that some day the balance might be reversed, and that as she acquired a finer sense of values the depths in her would find a voice.

Something of this was in his mind when, the afternoon before their departure, he came home to help her with their last arrangements. She had begged him, for the day, to leave her alone in their cramped salon, into which belated bundles were still pouring; and it was nearly dark when he returned. The evening before she had seemed pale and nervous, and at the last moment had excused herself from dining with the Shallums at a suburban restaurant. It was so unlike her to miss any opportunity of the kind that Ralph had felt a little anxious. But with the arrival of the packers she was afoot and in command again, and he withdrew submissively, as Mr. Spragg, in the early Apex days, might have fled from the spring storm of "house-cleaning."

When he entered the sitting-room, he found it still in disorder. Every chair was

hidden under scattered dresses, tissue-paper surged from the yawning trunks and, prone among her heaped-up finery. Undine lay with closed eyes on the sofa.

She raised her head as he entered, and then turned listlessly away.

"My poor girl, what's the matter? Haven't they finished yet?"

Instead of answering she pressed her face into the cushion and began to sob. The violence of her weeping shook her hair down on her shoulders, and her hands, clenching the arm of the sofa, pressed it away from her as if any contact were insufferable.

Ralph bent over her in alarm. "Why, what's wrong, dear? What's happened?"

Her fatigue of the previous evening came back to him a puzzled hunted look in her eyes; and with the memory a vague wonder revived. He had fancied himself fairly disencumbered of the stock formulas about the hallowing effects of motherhood, and there were many reasons for not welcoming the news he suspected she had to give; but the woman a man loves is always a special case, and everything was different that befell Undine. If this was what had befallen her it was wonderful and divine: for the moment that was all he felt.

"Dear, tell me what's the matter," he pleaded.

She sobbed on unheedingly and he waited for her agitation to subside. He shrank from the phrases considered appropriate to the situation, but he wanted to hold her close and give her the depth of his heart in long kiss.

Suddenly she sat upright and turned a desperate face on him. "Why on earth are you staring at me like that? Anybody can see what's the matter!"

He winced at her tone, but managed to get one of her hands in his; and they stayed thus in silence, eye to eye.

"Are you as sorry as all that?" he began at length conscious of the flatness of his voice.

"Sorry sorry? I'm I'm " She snatched her hand away, and went on weeping.

"But, Undine dearest bye and bye you'll feel differently I know you will!"

"Differently? Differently? When? In a year? It TAKES a year a whole year out of life! What do I care how I shall feel in a year?"

The chill of her tone struck in. This was more than a revolt of the nerves: it was a settled, a reasoned resentment. Ralph found himself groping for

extenuations, evasions anything to put a little warmth into her! "Who knows? Perhaps, after all, it's a mistake."

There was no answering light in her face. She turned her head from him wearily.

"Don't you think, dear, you may be mistaken?"

"Mistaken? How on earth can I be mistaken?"

Even in that moment of confusion he was struck by the cold competence of her tone, and wondered how she could be so sure.

"You mean you've asked you've consulted ?" The irony of it took him by the throat. They were the very words he might have spoken in some miserable secret colloquy the words he was speaking to his wife!

She repeated dully: "I know I'm not mistaken."

There was another long silence. Undine lay still, her eyes shut, drumming on the arm of the sofa with a restless hand. The other lay cold in Ralph's clasp, and through it there gradually stole to him the benumbing influence of the thoughts she was thinking: the sense of the approach of illness, anxiety, and expense, and of the general unnecessary disorganization of their lives.

"That's all you feel, then?" he asked at length a little bitterly, as if to disguise from himself the hateful fact that he felt it too. He stood up and moved away. "That's all?" he repeated.

"Why, what else do you expect me to feel? I feel horribly ill, if that's what you want." He saw the sobs trembling up through her again.

"Poor dear poor girl…I'm so sorry so dreadfully sorry!"

The senseless reiteration seemed to exasperate her. He knew it by the quiver that ran through her like the premonitory ripple on smooth water before the coming of the wind. She turned about on him and jumped to her feet.

"Sorry you're sorry? YOU'RE sorry? Why, what earthly difference will it make to YOU?" She drew back a few steps and lifted her slender arms from her sides. "Look at me see how I look how I'm going to look! YOU won't hate yourself more and more every morning when you get up and see yourself in the glass! YOUR life's going on just as usual! But what's mine going to be for months and months? And just as I'd been to all this bother fagging myself to death about all these things " her tragic gesture swept the disordered room "just as I thought I was going home to enjoy myself, and look nice, and see

people again, and have a little pleasure after all our worries " She dropped back on the sofa with another burst of tears. "For all the good this rubbish will do me now! I loathe the very sight of it!" she sobbed with her face in her hands.

XIV

It was one of the distinctions of Mr. Claud Walsingham Popple that his studio was never too much encumbered with the attributes of his art to permit the installing, in one of its cushioned corners, of an elaborately furnished tea-table flanked by the most varied seductions in sandwiches and pastry.

Mr. Popple, like all great men, had at first had his ups and downs; but his reputation had been permanently established by the verdict of a wealthy patron who, returning from an excursion into other fields of portraiture, had given it as the final fruit of his experience that Popple was the only man who could "do pearls." To sitters for whom this was of the first consequence it was another of the artist's merits that he always subordinated art to elegance, in life as well as in his portraits. The "messy" element of production was no more visible in his expensively screened and tapestried studio than its results were perceptible in his painting; and it was often said, in praise of his work, that he was the only artist who kept his studio tidy enough for a lady to sit to him in a new dress.

Mr. Popple, in fact, held that the personality of the artist should at all times be dissembled behind that of the man. It was his opinion that the essence of good-breeding lay in tossing off a picture as easily as you lit a cigarette. Ralph Marvell had once said of him that when he began a portrait he always turned back his cuffs and said: "Ladies and gentlemen, you can see there's absolutely nothing here," and Mrs. Fairford supplemented the description by defining his painting as "chafing-dish" art. On a certain late afternoon of December, some four years after Mr. Popple's first meeting with Miss Undine Spragg of Apex, even the symbolic chafing-dish was nowhere visible in his studio; the only evidence of its recent activity being the full-length portrait of Mrs. Ralph Marvell, who, from her lofty easel and her heavily garlanded frame, faced the doorway with the air of having been invited to "receive" for Mr. Popple.

The artist himself, becomingly clad in mouse-coloured velveteen, had just turned away from the picture to hover above the tea-cups; but his place had been taken by the considerably broader bulk of Mr. Peter Van Degen, who, tightly moulded into a coat of the latest cut, stood before the portrait in the attitude of a first arrival.

"Yes, it's good it's damn good, Popp; you've hit the hair off ripplingly; but the pearls ain't big enough," he pronounced.

A slight laugh sounded from the raised dais behind the easel.

"Of course they're not! But it's not HIS fault, poor man; HE didn't give them to me!" As she spoke Mrs. Ralph Marvell rose from a monumental gilt arm-chair of pseudo-Venetian design and swept her long draperies to Van Degen's side.

"He might, then for the privilege of painting you!" the latter rejoined, transferring his bulging stare from the counterfeit to the original. His eyes rested on Mrs. Marvell's in what seemed a quick exchange of understanding; then they passed on to a critical inspection of her person. She was dressed for the sitting in something faint and shining, above which the long curves of her neck looked dead white in the cold light of the studio; and her hair, all a shadowless rosy gold, was starred with a hard glitter of diamonds.

"The privilege of painting me? Mercy, I have to pay for being painted! He'll tell you he's giving me the picture but what do you suppose this cost?" She laid a finger-tip on her shimmering dress.

Van Degen's eye rested on her with cold enjoyment. "Does the price come higher than the dress?"

She ignored the allusion. "Of course what they charge for is the cut "

"What they cut away? That's what they ought to charge for, ain't it,
Popp?"
Undine took this with cool disdain, but Mr. Popple's sensibilities were offended.

"My dear Peter really the artist, you understand, sees all this as a pure question of colour, of pattern; and it's a point of honour with the MAN to steel himself against the personal seduction."

Mr. Van Degen received this protest with a sound of almost vulgar derision, but Undine thrilled agreeably under the glance which her portrayer cast on her. She was flattered by Van Degen's notice, and thought his impertinence witty; but she glowed inwardly at Mr. Popple's eloquence. After more than three years of social experience she still thought he "spoke beautifully," like the hero of a novel, and she ascribed to jealousy the lack of seriousness with which her husband's friends regarded him. His conversation struck her as intellectual, and his eagerness to have her share his thoughts was in flattering contrast to Ralph's growing tendency to keep his to himself. Popple's homage seemed the, subtlest proof of what Ralph could have made of her if he had "really understood" her. It was but another step to ascribe all her past mistakes to the lack of such understanding; and the satisfaction derived from this thought had

once impelled her to tell the artist that he alone knew how to rouse her 'higher self.' He had assured her that the memory of her words would thereafter hallow his life; and as he hinted that it had been stained by the darkest errors she was moved at the thought of the purifying influence she exerted.

Thus it was that a man should talk to a true woman but how few whom she had known possessed the secret! Ralph, in the first months of their marriage, had been eloquent too, had even gone the length of quoting poetry; but he disconcerted her by his baffling twists and strange allusions (she always scented ridicule in the unknown), and the poets he quoted were esoteric and abstruse. Mr. Popple's rhetoric was drawn from more familiar sources, and abounded in favourite phrases and in moving reminiscences of the Fifth Reader. He was moreover as literary as he was artistic; possessing an unequalled acquaintance with contemporary fiction, and dipping even into the lighter type of memoirs, in which the old acquaintances of history are served up in the disguise of "A Royal Sorceress" or "Passion in a Palace." The mastery with which Mr. Popple discussed the novel of the day, especially in relation to the sensibilities of its hero and heroine, gave Undine a sense of intellectual activity which contrasted strikingly with Marvell's flippant estimate of such works. "Passion," the artist implied, would have been the dominant note of his life, had it not been held in check by a sentiment of exalted chivalry, and by the sense that a nature of such emotional intensity as his must always be "ridden on the curb."

Van Degen was helping himself from the tray of iced cocktails which stood near the tea-table, and Popple, turning to Undine, took up the thread of his discourse. But why, he asked, why allude before others to feelings so few could understand? The average man lucky devil! (with a compassionate glance at Van Degen's back) the average man knew nothing of the fierce conflict between the lower and higher natures; and even the woman whose eyes had kindled it how much did SHE guess of its violence? Did she know Popple recklessly asked how often the artist was forgotten in the man how often the man would take the bit between his teeth, were it not that the look in her eyes recalled some sacred memory, some lesson learned perhaps beside his mother's knee? "I say, Popp was that where you learned to mix this drink? Because it does the old lady credit," Van Degen called out, smacking his lips; while the artist, dashing a nervous hand through his hair, muttered: "Hang it, Peter is NOTHING sacred to you?"

It pleased Undine to feel herself capable of inspiring such emotions. She would have been fatigued by the necessity of maintaining her own talk on Popple's level, but she liked to listen to him, and especially to have others overhear what he said to her.

Her feeling for Van Degen was different. There was more similarity of tastes between them, though his manner flattered her vanity less than Popple's. She felt the strength of Van Degen's contempt for everything he did not understand or could not buy: that was the only kind of "exclusiveness" that impressed her. And he was still to her, as in her inexperienced days, the master of the mundane science she had once imagined that Ralph Marvell possessed. During the three years since her marriage she had learned to make distinctions unknown to her girlish categories. She had found out that she had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous; that she was in the case of those who have cast in their lot with a fallen cause, or to use an analogy more within her range who have hired an opera box on the wrong night. It was all confusing and exasperating. Apex ideals had been based on the myth of "old families" ruling New York from a throne of Revolutionary tradition, with the new millionaires paying them feudal allegiance. But experience had long since proved the delusiveness of the simile. Mrs. Marvell's classification of the world into the visited and the unvisited was as obsolete as a mediaeval cosmogony. Some of those whom Washington Square left unvisited were the centre of social systems far outside its ken, and as indifferent to its opinions as the constellations to the reckonings of the astronomers; and all these systems joyously revolved about their central sun of gold.

There were moments after Undine's return to New York when she was tempted to class her marriage with the hateful early mistakes from the memories of which she had hoped it would free her. Since it was never her habit to accuse herself of such mistakes it was inevitable that she should gradually come to lay the blame on Ralph. She found a poignant pleasure, at this stage of her career, in the question: "What does a young girl know of life?" And the poignancy was deepened by the fact that each of the friends to whom she put the question seemed convinced that had the privilege been his he would have known how to spare her the disenchantment it implied.

The conviction of having blundered was never more present to her than when, on this particular afternoon, the guests invited by Mr. Popple to view her portrait began to assemble before it.

Some of the principal figures of Undine's group had rallied for the occasion, and almost all were in exasperating enjoyment of the privileges for which she pined. There was young Jim Driscoll, heir-apparent of the house, with his short stout mistrustful wife, who hated society, but went everywhere lest it might be thought she had been left out; the "beautiful Mrs. Beringer," a lovely aimless being, who kept (as Laura Fairford said) a home for stray opinions, and could never quite tell them apart; little Dicky Bowles, whom every one

invited because he was understood to "say things" if one didn't; the Harvey Shallums, fresh from Paris, and dragging in their wake a bewildered nobleman vaguely designated as "the Count," who offered cautious conversational openings, like an explorer trying beads on savages; and, behind these more salient types, the usual filling in of those who are seen everywhere because they have learned to catch the social eye.

Such a company was one to flatter the artist as much his sitter, so completely did it represent that unamity of opinion which constitutes social strength. Not one the number was troubled by any personal theory of art: all they asked of a portrait was that the costume should be sufficiently "life-like," and the face not too much so; and a long experience in idealizing flesh and realizing dress-fabrics had enabled Mr. Popple to meet both demands.

"Hang it," Peter Van Degen pronounced, standing before the easel in an attitude of inspired interpretation, "the great thing in a man's portrait is to catch the likeness we all know that; but with a woman's it's different a woman's picture has got to be pleasing. Who wants it about if it isn't? Those big chaps who blow about what they call realism how do THEIR portraits look in a drawing-room? Do you suppose they ever ask themselves that? THEY don't care they're not going to live with the things! And what do they know of drawing-rooms, anyhow? Lots of them haven't even got a dress-suit. There's where old Popp has the pull over 'em HE knows how we live and what we want."

This was received by the artist with a deprecating murmur, and by his public with warm expressions of approval.

"Happily in this case," Popple began ("as in that of so many of my sitters," he hastily put in), "there has been no need to idealize-nature herself has outdone the artist's dream."

Undine, radiantly challenging comparison with her portrait, glanced up at it with a smile of conscious merit, which deepened as young Jim Driscoll declared:

"By Jove, Mamie, you must be done exactly like that for the new music-room."

His wife turned a cautious eye upon the picture.

"How big is it? For our house it would have to be a good deal bigger," she objected; and Popple, fired by the thought of such a dimensional opportunity, rejoined that it would be the chance of all others to. "work in" a marble portico and a court-train: he had just done Mrs. Lycurgus Ambler in a court-train and

feathers, and as THAT was for Buffalo of course the pictures needn't clash.

"Well, it would have to be a good deal bigger than Mrs. Ambler's," Mrs. Driscoll insisted; and on Popple's suggestion that in that case he might "work in" Driscoll, in court-dress also ("You've been presented? Well, you WILL be, you'll HAVE to, if I do the picture which will make a lovely memento") Van Degen turned aside to murmur to Undine: "Pure bluff, you know Jim couldn't pay for a photograph. Old Driscoll's high and dry since the Ararat investigation."

She threw him a puzzled glance, having no time, in her crowded existence, to follow the perturbations of Wall Street save as they affected the hospitality of Fifth Avenue.

"You mean they've lost their money? Won't they give their fancy ball, then?"

Van Degen shrugged. "Nobody knows how it's coming out That queer chap Elmer Moffatt threatens to give old Driscoll a fancy ball says he's going to dress him in stripes! It seems he knows too much about the Apex street-railways."

Undine paled a little. Though she had already tried on her costume for the Driscoll ball her disappointment at Van Degen's announcement was effaced by the mention of Moffatt's name. She had not had the curiosity to follow the reports of the "Ararat Trust Investigation," but once or twice lately, in the snatches of smoking-room talk, she had been surprised by a vague allusion to Elmer Moffatt, as to an erratic financial influence, half ridiculed, yet already half redoubtable. Was it possible that the redoubtable element had prevailed? That the time had come when Elmer Moffatt the Elmer Moffatt of Apex! could, even for a moment, cause consternation in the Driscoll camp? He had always said he "saw things big"; but no one had ever believed he was destined to carry them out on the same scale. Yet apparently in those idle Apex days, while he seemed to be "loafing and fooling," as her father called it, he had really been sharpening his weapons of aggression; there had been something, after all, in the effect of loose-drifting power she had always felt in him. Her heart beat faster, and she longed to question Van Degen; but she was afraid of betraying herself, and turned back to the group about the picture. Mrs. Driscoll was still presenting objections in a tone of small mild obstinacy. "Oh, it's a LIKENESS, of course I can see that; but there's one thing I must say, Mr. Popple. It looks like a last year's dress."

The attention of the ladies instantly rallied to the picture, and the artist paled at the challenge.

"It doesn't look like a last year's face, anyhow that's what makes them all

wild," Van Degen murmured. Undine gave him back a quick smile. She had already forgotten about Moffatt. Any triumph in which she shared left a glow in her veins, and the success of the picture obscured all other impressions. She saw herself throning in a central panel at the spring exhibition, with the crowd pushing about the picture, repeating her name; and she decided to stop on the way home and telephone her press-agent to do a paragraph about Popple's tea.

But in the hall, as she drew on her cloak, her thoughts reverted to the Driscoll fancy ball. What a blow if it were given up after she had taken so much trouble about her dress! She was to go as the Empress Josephine, after the Prudhon portrait in the Louvre. The dress was already fitted and partly embroidered, and she foresaw the difficulty of persuading the dress-maker to take it back.

"Why so pale and sad, fair cousin? What's up?" Van Degen asked, as they emerged from the lift in which they had descended alone from the studio.

"I don't know I'm tired of posing. And it was so frightfully hot."

"Yes. Popple always keeps his place at low-neck temperature, as if the portraits might catch cold." Van Degen glanced at his watch. "Where are you off to?"

"West End Avenue, of course if I can find a cab to take me there."

It was not the least of Undine's grievances that she was still living in the house which represented Mr. Spragg's first real-estate venture in New York. It had been understood, at the time of her marriage, that the young couple were to be established within the sacred precincts of fashion; but on their return from the honeymoon the still untenanted house in West End Avenue had been placed at their disposal, and in view of Mr. Spragg's financial embarrassment even Undine had seen the folly of refusing it. That first winter, more-over, she had not regretted her exile: while she awaited her boy's birth she was glad to be out of sight of Fifth Avenue, and to take her hateful compulsory exercise where no familiar eye could fall on her. And the next year of course her father would give them a better house.

But the next year rents had risen in the Fifth Avenue quarter, and meanwhile little Paul Marvell, from his beautiful pink cradle, was already interfering with his mother's plans. Ralph, alarmed by the fresh rush of expenses, sided with his father-in-law in urging Undine to resign herself to West End Avenue; and thus after three years she was still submitting to the incessant pin-pricks inflicted by the incongruity between her social and geographical situation the need of having to give a west side address to her tradesmen, and the deeper irritation of hearing her friends say: "Do let me give you a lift home, dear Oh,

I'd forgotten! I'm afraid I haven't the time to go so far "

It was bad enough to have no motor of her own, to be avowedly dependent on "lifts," openly and unconcealably in quest of them, and perpetually plotting to provoke their offer (she did so hate to be seen in a cab!) but to miss them, as often as not, because of the remoteness of her destination, emphasized the hateful sense of being "out of things."

Van Degen looked out at the long snow-piled streets, down which the lamps were beginning to put their dreary yellow splashes.

"Of course you won't get a cab on a night like this. If you don't mind the open car, you'd better jump in with me. I'll run you out to the High Bridge and give you a breath of air before dinner."

The offer was tempting, for Undine's triumph in the studio had left her tired and nervous she was beginning to learn that success may be as fatiguing as failure. Moreover, she was going to a big dinner that evening, and the fresh air would give her the eyes and complexion she needed; but in the back of her mind there lingered the vague sense of a forgotten engagement. As she tried to recall it she felt Van Degen raising the fur collar about her chin.

"Got anything you can put over your head? Will that lace thing do? Come along, then." He pushed her through the swinging doors, and added with a laugh, as they reached the street: "You're not afraid of being seen with me, are you? It's all right at this hour Ralph's still swinging on a strap in the elevated."

The winter twilight was deliriously cold, and as they swept through Central Park, and gathered impetus for their northward flight along the darkening Boulevard, Undine felt the rush of physical joy that drowns scruples and silences memory. Her scruples, indeed, were not serious; but Ralph disliked her being too much with Van Degen, and it was her way to get what she wanted with as little "fuss" as possible. Moreover, she knew it was a mistake to make herself too accessible to a man of Peter's sort: her impatience to enjoy was curbed by an instinct for holding off and biding her time that resembled the patient skill with which her father had conducted the sale of his "bad" real estate in the Pure Water Move days. But now and then youth had its way she could not always resist the present pleasure. And it was amusing, too, to be "talked about" with Peter Van Degen, who was noted for not caring for "nice women." She enjoyed the thought of triumphing over meretricious charms: it ennobled her in her own eyes to influence such a man for good.

Nevertheless, as the motor flew on through the icy twilight, her present cares flew with it. She could not shake off the thought of the useless fancy dress which symbolized the other crowding expenses she had not dared confess to

Ralph. Van Degen heard her sigh, and bent down, lowering the speed of the motor.

"What's the matter? Isn't everything all right?"

His tone made her suddenly feel that she could confide in him, and though she began by murmuring that it was nothing she did so with the conscious purpose of being persuaded to confess. And his extraordinary "niceness" seemed to justify her and to prove that she had been right in trusting her instinct rather than in following the counsels of prudence. Heretofore, in their talks, she had never gone beyond the vaguest hint of material "bothers" as to which dissimulation seemed vain while one lived in West End Avenue! But now that the avowal of a definite worry had been wrung from her she felt the injustice of the view generally taken of poor Peter. For he had been neither too enterprising nor too cautious (though people said of him that he "didn't care to part"); he had just laughed away, in bluff brotherly fashion, the gnawing thought of the fancy dress, had assured her he'd give a ball himself rather than miss seeing her wear it, and had added: "Oh, hang waiting for the bill won't a couple of thou make it all right?" in a tone that showed what a small matter money was to any one who took the larger view of life.

The whole incident passed off so quickly and easily that within a few minutes she had settled down with a nod for his "Everything jolly again now?" to untroubled enjoyment of the hour. Peace of mind, she said to herself, was all she needed to make her happy and that was just what Ralph had never given her! At the thought his face seemed to rise before her, with the sharp lines of care between the eyes: it was almost like a part of his "nagging" that he should thrust himself in at such a moment! She tried to shut her eyes to the face; but a moment later it was replaced by another, a small odd likeness of itself; and with a cry of compunction she started up from her furs.

"Mercy! It's the boy's birthday I was to take him to his grandmother's. She was to have a cake for him and Ralph was to come up town. I KNEW there was something I'd forgotten!"

XV

In the Dagonet drawing-room the lamps had long been lit, and Mrs. Fairford, after a last impatient turn, had put aside the curtains of worn damask to strain her eyes into the darkening square. She came back to the hearth, where Charles Bowen stood leaning between the prim caryatides of the white marble chimney-piece.

"No sign of her. She's simply forgotten."

Bowen looked at his watch, and turned to compare it with the high-waisted Empire clock.

"Six o'clock. Why not telephone again? There must be some mistake.
Perhaps she knew Ralph would be late."
Laura laughed. "I haven't noticed that she follows Ralph's movements so closely. When I telephoned just now the servant said she'd been out since two. The nurse waited till half-past four, not liking to come without orders; and now it's too late for Paul to come."

She wandered away toward the farther end of the room, where, through half-open doors, a shining surface of mahogany reflected a flower-wreathed cake in which two candles dwindled.

"Put them out, please," she said to some one in the background; then she shut the doors and turned back to Bowen.

"It's all so unlucky my grandfather giving up his drive, and mother backing out of her hospital meeting, and having all the committee down on her. And Henley: I'd even coaxed Henley away from his bridge! He escaped again just before you came. Undine promised she'd have the boy here at four. It's not as if it had never happened before. She's always breaking her engagements."

"She has so many that it's inevitable some should get broken."

"All if she'd only choose! Now that Ralph has had into business, and is kept in his office so late, it's cruel of her to drag him out every night. He told us the other day they hadn't dined at home for a month. Undine doesn't seem to notice how hard he works."

Bowen gazed meditatively at the crumbling fire. "No why should she?"

"Why SHOULD she? Really, Charles !"

"Why should she, when she knows nothing about it?"

"She may know nothing about his business; but she must know it's her extravagance that's forced him into it." Mrs. Fairford looked at Bowen reproachfully. "You talk as if you were on her side!"

"Are there sides already? If so, I want to look down on them impartially from the heights of pure speculation. I want to get a general view of the whole problem of American marriages."

Mrs. Fairford dropped into her arm-chair with a sigh. "If that's what you want

you must make haste! Most of them don't last long enough to be classified."

"I grant you it takes an active mind. But the weak point is so frequently the same that after a time one knows where to look for it."

"What do you call the weak point?"

He paused. "The fact that the average American looks down on his wife."

Mrs. Fairford was up with a spring. "If that's where paradox lands you!"

Bowen mildly stood his ground. "Well doesn't he prove it? How much does he let her share in the real business of life? How much does he rely on her judgment and help in the conduct of serious affairs? Take Ralph for instance you say his wife's extravagance forces him to work too hard; but that's not what's wrong. It's normal for a man to work hard for a woman what's abnormal is his not caring to tell her anything about it."

"To tell Undine? She'd be bored to death if he did!"

"Just so; she'd even feel aggrieved. But why? Because it's against the custom of the country. And whose fault is that? The man's again I don't mean Ralph I mean the genus he belongs to: homo sapiens, Americanus. Why haven't we taught our women to take an interest in our work? Simply because we don't take enough interest in THEM."

Mrs. Fairford, sinking back into her chair, sat gazing at the vertiginous depths above which his thought seemed to dangle her.

"YOU don't? The American man doesn't the most slaving, self-effacing, self-sacrificing ?"

"Yes; and the most indifferent: there's the point. The 'slaving's' no argument against the indifference To slave for women is part of the old American tradition; lots of people give their lives for dogmas they've ceased to believe in. Then again, in this country the passion for making money has preceded the knowing how to spend it, and the American man lavishes his fortune on his wife because he doesn't know what else to do with it."

"Then you call it a mere want of imagination for a man to spend his money on his wife?"

"Not necessarily but it's a want of imagination to fancy it's all he owes her. Look about you and you'll see what I mean. Why does the European woman interest herself so much more in what the men are doing? Because she's so important to them that they make it worth her while! She's not a parenthesis,

as she is here she's in the very middle of the picture. I'm not implying that Ralph isn't interested in his wife he's a passionate, a pathetic exception. But even he has to conform to an environment where all the romantic values are reversed. Where does the real life of most American men lie? In some woman's drawing-room or in their offices? The answer's obvious, isn't it? The emotional centre of gravity's not the same in the two hemispheres. In the effete societies it's love, in our new one it's business. In America the real crime passionnel is a 'big steal' there's more excitement in wrecking railways than homes."

Bowen paused to light another cigarette, and then took up his theme. "Isn't that the key to our easy divorces? If we cared for women in the old barbarous possessive way do you suppose we'd give them up as readily as we do? The real paradox is the fact that the men who make, materially, the biggest sacrifices for their women, should do least for them ideally and romantically. And what's the result how do the women avenge themselves? All my sympathy's with them, poor deluded dears, when I see their fallacious little attempt to trick out the leavings tossed them by the preoccupied male the money and the motors and the clothes and pretend to themselves and each other that THAT'S what really constitutes life! Oh, I know what you're going to say it's less and less of a pretense with them, I grant you; they're more and more succumbing to the force of the suggestion; but here and there I fancy there's one who still sees through the humbug, and knows that money and motors and clothes are simply the big bribe she's paid for keeping out of some man's way!"

Mrs. Fairford presented an amazed silence to the rush of this tirade; but when she rallied it was to murmur: "And is Undine one of the exceptions?"

Her companion took the shot with a smile. "No she's a monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph. It's Ralph who's the victim and the exception."

"Ah, poor Ralph!" Mrs. Fairford raised her head quickly. "I hear him now. I suppose," she added in an undertone, "we can't give him your explanation for his wife's having forgotten to come?"

Bowen echoed her sigh, and then seemed to toss it from him with his cigarette-end; but he stood in silence while the door opened and Ralph Marvell entered.

"Well, Laura! Hallo, Charles have you been celebrating too?" Ralph turned to his sister. "It's outrageous of me to be so late, and I daren't look my son in the face! But I stayed down town to make provision for his future birthdays." He

returned Mrs. Fairford's kiss. "Don't tell me the party's over, and the guest of honour gone to bed?"

As he stood before them, laughing and a little flushed, the strain of long fatigue sounding through his gaiety and looking out of his anxious eyes, Mrs. Fairford threw a glance at Bowen and then turned away to ring the bell.

"Sit down, Ralph you look tired. I'll give you some tea."

He dropped into an arm-chair. "I did have rather a rush to get here but hadn't I better join the revellers? Where are they?"

He walked to the end of the room and threw open the dining-room doors. "Hallo where have they all gone to? What a jolly cake!" He went up to it. "Why, it's never even been cut!"

Mrs. Fairford called after him: "Come and have your tea first."

"No, no tea afterward, thanks. Are they all upstairs with my grandfather? I must make my peace with Undine " His sister put her arm through his, and drew him back to the fire.

"Undine didn't come."

"Didn't come? Who brought the boy, then?"

"He didn't come either. That's why the cake's not cut."

Ralph frowned. "What's the mystery? Is he ill, or what's happened?"

"Nothing's happened Paul's all right. Apparently Undine forgot. She never went home for him, and the nurse waited till it was too late to come."

She saw his eyes darken; but he merely gave a slight laugh and drew out his cigarette case. "Poor little Paul poor chap!" He moved toward the fire. "Yes, please some tea."

He dropped back into his chair with a look of weariness, as if some strong stimulant had suddenly ceased to take effect on him; but before the tea-table was brought back he had glanced at his watch and was on his feet again.

"But this won't do. I must rush home and see the poor chap before dinner. And my mother and my grandfather? I want to say a word to them I must make Paul's excuses!"

"Grandfather's taking his nap. And mother had to rush out for a postponed committee meeting she left as soon as we heard Paul wasn't coming."

"Ah, I see." He sat down again. "Yes, make the strong, please. I've had a beastly fagging sort of day."

He leaned back with half-closed eyes, his untouched cup in his hand. Bowen took leave, and Laura sat silent, watching her brother under lowered lids while she feigned to be busy with the kettle. Ralph presently emptied his cup and put it aside; then, sinking into his former attitude, he clasped his hands behind his head and lay staring apathetically into the fire. But suddenly he came to life and started up. A motor-horn had sounded outside, and there was a noise of wheels at the door.

"There's Undine! I wonder what could have kept her." He jumped up and walked to the door; but it was Clare Van Degen who came in. At sight of him she gave a little murmur of pleasure. "What luck to find you! No, not luck I came because I knew you'd be here. He never comes near me, Laura: I have to hunt him down to get a glimpse of him!"

Slender and shadowy in her long furs, she bent to kiss Mrs. Fairford and then turned back to Ralph. "Yes, I knew I'd catch you here. I knew it was the boy's birthday, and I've brought him a present: a vulgar expensive Van Degen offering. I've not enough imagination left to find the right thing, the thing it takes feeling and not money to buy. When I look for a present nowadays I never say to the shopman: 'I want this or that' I simply say: 'Give me something that costs so much.'"

She drew a parcel from her muff. "Where's the victim of my vulgarity?
Let me crush him under the weight of my gold."
Mrs. Fairford sighed out "Clare Clare!" and Ralph smiled at his cousin.

"I'm sorry; but you'll have to depute me to present it. The birthday's over; you're too late."

She looked surprised. "Why, I've just left Mamie Driscoll, and she told me Undine was still at Popple's studio a few minutes ago: Popple's giving a tea to show the picture."

"Popple's giving a tea?" Ralph struck an attitude of mock consternation. "Ah, in that case ! In Popple's society who wouldn't forget the flight of time?"

He had recovered his usual easy tone, and Laura sat that Mrs. Van
Degen's words had dispelled his preoccupation. He turned to his cousin.
"Will you trust me with your present for the boy?"
Clare gave him the parcel. "I'm sorry not to give it myself. I said what I did because I knew what you and Laura were thinking but it's really a battered old

Dagonet bowl that came down to me from our revered great-grandmother."

"What the heirloom you used to eat your porridge out of?" Ralph detained her hand to put a kiss on it. "That's dear of you!"

She threw him one of her strange glances. "Why not say: 'That's like you?' But you don't remember what I'm like." She turned away to glance at the clock. "It's late, and I must be off. I'm going to a big dinner at the Chauncey Ellings' but you must be going there too, Ralph? You'd better let me drive you home."

In the motor Ralph leaned back in silence, while the rug was drawn over their knees, and Clare restlessly fingered the row of gold-topped objects in the rack at her elbow. It was restful to be swept through the crowded streets in this smooth fashion, and Clare's presence at his side gave him a vague sense of ease.

For a long time now feminine nearness had come to mean to him, not this relief from tension, but the ever-renewed dread of small daily deceptions, evasions, subterfuges. The change had come gradually, marked by one disillusionment after another; but there had been one moment that formed the point beyond which there was no returning. It was the moment, a month or two before his boy's birth, when, glancing over a batch of belated Paris bills, he had come on one from the jeweller he had once found in private conference with Undine. The bill was not large, but two of its items stood out sharply. "Resetting pearl and diamond pendant. Resetting sapphire and diamond ring." The pearl and diamond pendant was his mother's wedding present; the ring was the one he had given Undine on their engagement. That they were both family relics, kept unchanged through several generations, scarcely mattered to him at the time: he felt only the stab of his wife's deception. She had assured him in Paris that she had not had her jewels reset. He had noticed, soon after their return to New York, that she had left off her engagement-ring; but the others were soon discarded also, and in answer to his question she had told him that, in her ailing state, rings "worried" her. Now he saw she had deceived him, and, forgetting everything else, he went to her, bill in hand. Her tears and distress filled him with immediate contrition. Was this a time to torment her about trifles? His anger seemed to cause her actual physical fear, and at the sight he abased himself in entreaties for forgiveness. When the scene ended she had pardoned him, and the reset ring was on her finger…

Soon afterward, the birth of the boy seemed to wipe out these humiliating memories; yet Marvell found in time that they were not effaced, but only momentarily crowded out of sight. In reality, the incident had a meaning out of proportion to its apparent seriousness, for it put in his hand a clue to a new side of his wife's character. He no longer minded her having lied about the

jeweller; what pained him was that she had been unconscious of the wound she inflicted in destroying the identity of the jewels. He saw that, even after their explanation, she still supposed he was angry only because she had deceived him; and the discovery that she was completely unconscious of states of feeling on which so much of his inner life depended marked a new stage in their relation. He was not thinking of all this as he sat beside Clare Van Degen; but it was part of the chronic disquietude which made him more alive to his cousin's sympathy, her shy unspoken understanding. After all, he and she were of the same blood and had the same traditions. She was light and frivolous, without strength of will or depth of purpose; but she had the frankness of her foibles, and she would never have lied to him or traded on his tenderness.

Clare's nervousness gradually subsided, and she lapsed into a low-voiced mood which seemed like an answer to his secret thought. But she did not sound the personal note, and they chatted quietly of commonplace things: of the dinner-dance at which they were presently to meet, of the costume she had chosen for the Driscoll fancy-ball, the recurring rumours of old Driscoll's financial embarrassment, and the mysterious personality of Elmer Moffatt, on whose movements Wall Street was beginning to fix a fascinated eye. When Ralph, the year after his marriage, had renounced his profession to go into partnership with a firm of real-estate agents, he had come in contact for the first time with the drama of "business," and whenever he could turn his attention from his own tasks he found a certain interest in watching the fierce interplay of its forces. In the down-town world he had heard things of Moffatt that seemed to single him out from the common herd of money-makers: anecdotes of his coolness, his lazy good-temper, the humorous detachment he preserved in the heat of conflicting interests; and his figure was enlarged by the mystery that hung about it the fact that no one seemed to know whence he came, or how he had acquired the information which, for the moment, was making him so formidable. "I should like to see him," Ralph said; "he must be a good specimen of the one of the few picturesque types we've got."

"Yes it might be amusing to fish him out; but the most picturesque types in Wall Street are generally the tamest in a drawing-room." Clare considered. "But doesn't Undine know him? I seem to remember seeing them together."

"Undine and Moffatt? Then you KNOW him you've' met him?"

"Not actually met him but he's been pointed out to me. It must have been some years ago. Yes it was one night at the theatre, just after you announced your engagement." He fancied her voice trembled slightly, as though she thought he might notice her way of dating her memories. "You came into our box," she went on, "and I asked you the name of the red-faced man who was sitting in the stall next to Undine. You didn't know, but some one told us it was

Moffatt."

Marvell was more struck by her tone than by what she was saying. "If Undine knows him it's odd she's never mentioned it," he answered indifferently.

The motor stopped at his door and Clare, as she held out her hand, turned a first full look on him.

"Why do you never come to see me? I miss you more than ever," she said.

He pressed her hand without answering, but after the motor had rolled away he stood for a while on the pavement, looking after it.

When he entered the house the hall was still dark and the small over-furnished drawing-room empty. The parlour-maid told him that Mrs. Marvell had not yet come in, and he went upstairs to the nursery. But on the threshold the nurse met him with the whispered request not to make a noise, as it had been hard to quiet the boy after the afternoon's disappointment, and she had just succeeded in putting him to sleep. Ralph went down to his own room and threw himself in the old college arm-chair in which, four years previously, he had sat the night out, dreaming of Undine. He had no study of his own, and he had crowded into his narrow bed-room his prints and bookshelves, and the other relics of his youth. As he sat among them now the memory of that other night swept over him the night when he had heard the "call"! Fool as he had been not to recognize its meaning then, he knew himself triply mocked in being, even now, at its mercy. The flame of love that had played about his passion for his wife had died down to its embers; all the transfiguring hopes and illusions were gone, but they had left an unquenchable ache for her nearness, her smile, her touch. His life had come to be nothing but a long effort to win these mercies by one concession after another: the sacrifice of his literary projects, the exchange of his profession for an uncongenial business, and the incessant struggle to make enough money to satisfy her increasing exactions. That was where the "call" had led him… The clock struck eight, but it was useless to begin to dress till Undine came in, and he stretched himself out in his chair, reached for a pipe and took up the evening paper. His passing annoyance had died out; he was usually too tired after his day's work for such feelings to keep their edge long. But he was curious disinterestedly curious to know what pretext Undine would invent for being so late, and what excuse she would have found for forgetting the little boy's birthday.

He read on till half-past eight; then he stood up and sauntered to the window. The avenue below it was deserted; not a carriage or motor turned the corner around which he expected Undine to appear, and he looked idly in the opposite direction. There too the perspective was nearly empty, so empty that

he singled out, a dozen blocks away, the blazing lamps of a large touring-car that was bearing furiously down the avenue from Morningside. As it drew nearer its speed slackened, and he saw it hug the curb and stop at his door. By the light of the street lamp he recognized his wife as she sprang out and detected a familiar silhouette in her companion's fur-coated figure. Then the motor flew on and Undine ran up the steps. Ralph went out on the landing. He saw her coming up quickly, as if to reach her room unperceived; but when she caught sight of him she stopped, her head thrown back and the light falling on her blown hair and glowing face.

"Well?" she said, smiling up at him.

"They waited for you all the afternoon in Washington Square the boy never had his birthday," he answered.

Her colour deepened, but she instantly rejoined: "Why, what happened?
Why didn't the nurse take him?"
"You said you were coming to fetch him, so she waited."

"But I telephoned "

He said to himself: "Is THAT the lie?" and answered: "Where from?"

"Why, the studio, of course " She flung her cloak open, as if to attest her veracity. "The sitting lasted longer than usual there was something about the dress he couldn't get "

"But I thought he was giving a tea."

"He had tea afterward; he always does. And he asked some people in to see my portrait. That detained me too. I didn't know they were coming, and when they turned up I couldn't rush away. It would have looked as if I didn't like the picture." She paused and they gave each other a searching simultaneous glance. "Who told you it was a tea?" she asked.

"Clare Van Degen. I saw her at my mother's."

"So you weren't unconsoled after all !"

"The nurse didn't get any message. My people were awfully disappointed; and the poor boy has cried his eyes out."

"Dear me! What a fuss! But I might have known my message wouldn't be delivered. Everything always happens to put me in the wrong with your family."

With a little air of injured pride she started to go to her room; but he put out a hand to detain her.

"You've just come from the studio?"

"Yes. It is awfully late? I must go and dress. We're dining with the Ellings, you know."
"I know… How did you come? In a cab?"

She faced him limpidly. "No; I couldn't find one that would bring me so Peter gave me a lift, like an angel. I'm blown to bits. He had his open car."

Her colour was still high, and Ralph noticed that her lower lip twitched a little. He had led her to the point they had reached solely to be able to say: "If you're straight from the studio, how was it that I saw you coming down from Morningside?"

Unless he asked her that there would be no point in his cross-questioning, and he would have sacrificed his pride without a purpose. But suddenly, as they stood there face to face, almost touching, she became something immeasurably alien and far off, and the question died on his lips.

"Is that all?" she asked with a slight smile.

"Yes; you'd better go and dress," he said, and turned back to his room.

XVI

The turnings of life seldom show a sign-post; or rather, though the sign is always there, it is usually placed some distance back, like the notices that give warning of a bad hill or a level railway-crossing.

Ralph Marvell, pondering upon this, reflected that for him the sign had been set, more than three years earlier, in an Italian ilex-grove. That day his life had brimmed over so he had put it at the time. He saw now that it had brimmed over indeed: brimmed to the extent of leaving the cup empty, or at least of uncovering the dregs beneath the nectar. He knew now that he should never hereafter look at his wife's hand without remembering something he had read in it that day. Its surface-language had been sweet enough, but under the rosy lines he had seen the warning letters.

Since then he had been walking with a ghost: the miserable ghost of his illusion. Only he had somehow vivified, coloured, substantiated it, by the force of his own great need as a man might breathe a semblance of life into a dear drowned body that he cannot give up for dead. All this came to him with

aching distinctness the morning after his talk with his wife on the stairs. He had accused himself, in midnight retrospect, of having failed to press home his conclusion because he dared not face the truth. But he knew this was not the case. It was not the truth he feared, it was another lie. If he had foreseen a chance of her saying: "Yes, I was with Peter Van Degen, and for the reason you think," he would have put it to the touch, stood up to the blow like a man; but he knew she would never say that. She would go on eluding and doubling, watching him as he watched her; and at that game she was sure to beat him in the end.

On their way home from the Elling dinner this certainty had become so insufferable that it nearly escaped him in the cry: "You needn't watch me I shall never again watch you!" But he had held his peace, knowing she would not understand. How little, indeed, she ever understood, had been made clear to him when, the same night, he had followed her upstairs through the sleeping house. She had gone on ahead while he stayed below to lock doors and put out lights, and he had supposed her to be already in her room when he reached the upper landing; but she stood there waiting in the spot where he had waited for her a few hours earlier. She had shone her vividest at dinner, with revolving brilliancy that collective approval always struck from her; and the glow of it still hung on her as she paused there in the dimness, her shining cloak dropped from her white shoulders.

"Ralphie " she began, a soft hand on his arm. He stopped, and she pulled him about so that their faces were close, and he saw her lips curving for a kiss. Every line of her face sought him, from the sweep of the narrowed eyelids to the dimples that played away from her smile. His eye received the picture with distinctness; but for the first time it did not pass into his veins. It was as if he had been struck with a subtle blindness that permitted images to give their colour to the eye but communicated nothing to the brain.

"Good-night," he said, as he passed on.

When a man felt in that way about a woman he was surely in a position to deal with his case impartially. This came to Ralph as the joyless solace of the morning. At last the bandage was off and he could see. And what did he see? Only the uselessness of driving his wife to subterfuges that were no longer necessary. Was Van Degen her lover? Probably not the suspicion died as it rose. She would not take more risks than she could help, and it was admiration, not love, that she wanted. She wanted to enjoy herself, and her conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses, and the sense of walking among them in cool security. Any personal entanglement might mean "bother," and bother was the thing she most abhorred. Probably, as the queer

formula went, his "honour" was safe: he could count on the letter of her fidelity. At moment the conviction meant no more to him than if he had been assured of the honesty of the first strangers he met in the street. A stranger that was what she had always been to him. So malleable outwardly, she had remained insensible to the touch of the heart.

These thoughts accompanied him on his way to business the next morning. Then, as the routine took him back, the feeling of strangeness diminished. There he was again at his daily task nothing tangible was altered. He was there for the same purpose as yesterday: to make money for his wife and child. The woman he had turned from on the stairs a few hours earlier was still his wife and the mother of Paul Marvell. She was an inherent part of his life; the inner disruption had not resulted in any outward upheaval. And with the sense of inevitableness there came a sudden wave of pity. Poor Undine! She was what the gods had made her a creature of skin-deep reactions, a mote in the beam of pleasure. He had no desire to "preach down" such heart as she had he felt only a stronger wish to reach it, teach it, move it to something of the pity that filled his own. They were fellow-victims in the noyade of marriage, but if they ceased to struggle perhaps the drowning would be easier for both…Meanwhile the first of the month was at hand, with its usual batch of bills; and there was no time to think of any struggle less pressing than that connected with paying them…

Undine had been surprised, and a little disconcerted, at her husband's acceptance of the birthday incident. Since the resetting of her bridal ornaments the relations between Washington Square and West End Avenue had been more and more strained; and the silent disapproval of the Marvell ladies was more irritating to her than open recrimination. She knew how keenly Ralph must feel her last slight to his family, and she had been frightened when she guessed that he had seen her returning with Van Degen. He must have been watching from the window, since, credulous as he always was, he evidently had a reason for not believing her when she told him she had come from the studio. There was therefore something both puzzling and disturbing in his silence; and she made up her mind that it must be either explained or cajoled away.

These thoughts were with her as she dressed; but at the Ellings' they fled like ghosts before light and laughter. She had never been more open to the suggestions of immediate enjoyment. At last she had reached the envied situation of the pretty woman with whom society must reckon, and if she had only had the means to live up to her opportunities she would have been perfectly content with life, with herself and her husband. She still thought Ralph "sweet" when she was not bored by his good advice or exasperated by

his inability to pay her bills. The question of money was what chiefly stood between them; and now that this was momentarily disposed of by Van Degen's offer she looked at Ralph more kindly she even felt a return of her first impersonal affection for him. Everybody could see that Clare Van Degen was "gone" on him, and Undine always liked to know that what belonged to her was coveted by others. Her reassurance had been fortified by the news she had heard at the Elling dinner the published fact of Harmon B. Driscoll's unexpected victory. The Ararat investigation had been mysteriously stopped quashed, in the language of the law and Elmer Moffatt "turned down," as Van Degen (who sat next to her) expressed it.

"I don't believe we'll ever hear of that gentleman again," he said contemptuously; and their eyes crossed gaily as she exclaimed: "Then they'll give the fancy ball after all?"

"I should have given you one anyhow shouldn't you have liked that as well?" "Oh, you can give me one too!" she returned; and he bent closer to say: "By Jove, I will and anything else you want."

But on the way home her fears revived. Ralph's indifference struck her as unnatural. He had not returned to the subject of Paul's disappointment, had not even asked her to write a word of excuse to his mother. Van Degen's way of looking at her at dinner he was incapable of graduating his glances had made it plain that the favour she had accepted would necessitate her being more conspicuously in his company (though she was still resolved that it should be on just such terms as she chose); and it would be extremely troublesome if, at this juncture, Ralph should suddenly turn suspicious and secretive.

Undine, hitherto, had found more benefits than drawbacks in her marriage; but now the tie began to gall. It was hard to be criticized for every grasp at opportunity by a man so avowedly unable to do the reaching for her! Ralph had gone into business to make more money for her; but it was plain that the "more" would never be much, and that he would not achieve the quick rise to affluence which was man's natural tribute to woman's merits. Undine felt herself trapped, deceived; and it was intolerable that the agent of her disillusionment should presume to be the critic of her conduct. Her annoyance, however, died out with her fears. Ralph, the morning after the Elling dinner, went his way as usual, and after nerving herself for the explosion which did not come she set down his indifference to the dulling effect of "business." No wonder poor women whose husbands were always "down-town" had to look elsewhere for sympathy! Van Degen's cheque helped to calm her, and the weeks whirled on toward the Driscoll ball.

The ball was as brilliant as she had hoped, and her own part in it as thrilling as

a page from one of the "society novels" with which she had cheated the monotony of Apex days. She had no time for reading now: every hour was packed with what she would have called life, and the intensity of her sensations culminated on that triumphant evening. What could be more delightful than to feel that, while all the women envied her dress, the men did not so much as look at it? Their admiration was all for herself, and her beauty deepened under it as flowers take a warmer colour in the rays of sunset. Only Van Degen's glance weighed on her a little too heavily. Was it possible that he might become a "bother" less negligible than those he had relieved her of? Undine was not greatly alarmed she still had full faith in her powers of self-defense; but she disliked to feel the least crease in the smooth surface of existence. She had always been what her parents called "sensitive."

As the winter passed, material cares once more assailed her. In the thrill of liberation produced by Van Degen's gift she had been imprudent had launched into fresh expenses. Not that she accused herself of extravagance: she had done nothing not really necessary. The drawing-room, for instance, cried out to be "done over," and Popple, who was an authority on decoration, had shown her, with a few strokes of his pencil how easily it might be transformed into a French "period" room, all curves and cupids: just the setting for a pretty woman and his portrait of her. But Undine, still hopeful of leaving West End Avenue, had heroically resisted the suggestion, and contented herself with the renewal of the curtains and carpet, and the purchase of some fragile gilt chairs which, as she told Ralph, would be "so much to the good" when they moved the explanation, as she made it, seemed an additional evidence of her thrift.

Partly as a result of these exertions she had a "nervous breakdown" toward the middle of the winter, and her physician having ordered massage and a daily drive it became necessary to secure Mrs. Heeny's attendance and to engage a motor by the month. Other unforeseen expenses the bills, that, at such times, seem to run up without visible impulsion were added to by a severe illness of little Paul's: a long costly illness, with three nurses and frequent consultations. During these days Ralph's anxiety drove him to what seemed to Undine foolish excesses of expenditure and when the boy began to get better the doctors advised country air. Ralph at once hired a small house at Tuxedo and Undine of course accompanied her son to the country; but she spent only the Sundays with him, running up to town during the week to be with her husband, as she explained. This necessitated the keeping up of two households, and even for so short a time the strain on Ralph's purse was severe. So it came about that the bill for the fancy-dress was still unpaid, and Undine left to wonder distractedly what had become of Van Degen's money. That Van Degen seemed also to wonder was becoming unpleasantly apparent: his cheque had evidently not brought in the return he expected, and he put his

grievance to her frankly one day when he motored down to lunch at Tuxedo.

They were sitting, after luncheon, in the low-ceilinged drawing-room to which Undine had adapted her usual background of cushions, bric-a-brac and flowers since one must make one's setting "home-like," however little one's habits happened to correspond with that particular effect. Undine, conscious of the intimate charm of her mise-en-scene, and of the recovered freshness and bloom which put her in harmony with it, had never been more sure of her power to keep her friend in the desired state of adoring submission. But Peter, as he grew more adoring, became less submissive; and there came a moment when she needed all her wits to save the situation. It was easy enough to rebuff him, the easier as his physical proximity always roused in her a vague instinct of resistance; but it was hard so to temper the rebuff with promise that the game of suspense should still delude him. He put it to her at last, standing squarely before her, his batrachian sallowness unpleasantly flushed, and primitive man looking out of the eyes from which a frock-coated gentleman usually pined at her.

"Look here the installment plan's all right; but ain't you a bit behind even on that?" (She had brusquely eluded a nearer approach.) "Anyhow, I think I'd rather let the interest accumulate for a while. This is good-bye till I get back from Europe."

The announcement took her by surprise. "Europe? Why, when are you sailing?"

"On the first of April: good day for a fool to acknowledge his folly.
I'm beaten, and I'm running away."
She sat looking down, her hand absently occupied with the twist of pearls he had given her. In a flash she saw the peril of this departure. Once off on the Sorceress, he was lost to her the power of old associations would prevail. Yet if she were as "nice" to him as he asked "nice" enough to keep him the end might not be much more to her advantage. Hitherto she had let herself drift on the current of their adventure, but she now saw what port she had half-unconsciously been trying for. If she had striven so hard to hold him, had "played" him with such patience and such skill, it was for something more than her passing amusement and convenience: for a purpose the more tenaciously cherished that she had not dared name it to herself. In the light of this discovery she saw the need of feigning complete indifference.

"Ah, you happy man! It's good-bye indeed, then," she threw back at him, lifting a plaintive smile to his frown.

"Oh, you'll turn up in Paris later, I suppose to get your things for

Newport."
"Paris? Newport? They're not on my map! When Ralph can get away we shall go to the Adirondacks for the boy. I hope I shan't need Paris clothes there! It doesn't matter, at any rate," she ended, laughing, "because nobody I care about will see me."

Van Degen echoed her laugh. "Oh, come that's rough on Ralph!"

She looked down with a slight increase of colour. "I oughtn't to have said it, ought I? But the fact is I'm unhappy and a little hurt "

"Unhappy? Hurt?" He was at her side again. "Why, what's wrong?"

She lifted her eyes with a grave look. "I thought you'd be sorrier to leave me."

"Oh, it won't be for long it needn't be, you know." He was perceptibly softening. "It's damnable, the way you're tied down. Fancy rotting all summer in the Adirondacks! Why do you stand it? You oughtn't to be bound for life by a girl's mistake."

The lashes trembled slightly on her cheek. "Aren't we all bound by our mistakes we women? Don't let us talk of such things! Ralph would never let me go abroad without him." She paused, and then, with a quick upward sweep of the lids: "After all, it's better it should be good-bye since I'm paying for another mistake in being so unhappy at your going."

"Another mistake? Why do you call it that?"

"Because I've misunderstood you or you me." She continued to smile at him wistfully. "And some things are best mended by a break."

He met her smile with a loud sigh she could feel him in the meshes again. "IS it to be a break between us?"

"Haven't you just said so? Anyhow, it might as well be, since we shan't be in the same place again for months."

The frock-coated gentleman once more languished from his eyes: she thought she trembled on the edge of victory. "Hang it," he broke out, "you ought to have a change you're looking awfully pulled down. Why can't you coax your mother to run over to Paris with you? Ralph couldn't object to that."

She shook her head. "I don't believe she could afford it, even if I could persuade her to leave father. You know father hasn't done very well lately: I shouldn't like to ask him for the money."

"You're so confoundedly proud!" He was edging nearer. "It would all be so easy if you'd only be a little fond of me…"

She froze to her sofa-end. "We women can't repair our mistakes. Don't make me more miserable by reminding me of mine."

"Oh, nonsense! There's nothing cash won't do. Why won't you let me straighten things out for you?"

Her colour rose again, and she looked him quickly and consciously in the eye. It was time to play her last card. "You seem to forget that I am married," she said.

Van Degen was silent for a moment she thought he was swaying to her in the flush of surrender. But he remained doggedly seated, meeting her look with an odd clearing of his heated gaze, as if a shrewd businessman had suddenly replaced the pining gentleman at the window.

"Hang it so am I!" he rejoined; and Undine saw that in the last issue he was still the stronger of the two.

XVII

Nothing was bitterer to her than to confess to herself the failure of her power; but her last talk with Van Degen had taught her a lesson almost worth the abasement. She saw the mistake she had made in taking money from him, and understood that if she drifted into repeating that mistake her future would be irretrievably compromised. What she wanted was not a hand-to-mouth existence of precarious intrigue: to one with her gifts the privileges of life should come openly. Already in her short experience she had seen enough of the women who sacrifice future security for immediate success, and she meant to lay solid foundations before she began to build up the light super-structure of enjoyment.

Nevertheless it was galling to see Van Degen leave, and to know that for the time he had broken away from her. Over a nature so insensible to the spells of memory, the visible and tangible would always prevail. If she could have been with him again in Paris, where, in the shining spring days, every sight and sound ministered to such influences, she was sure she could have regained her hold. And the sense of frustration was intensified by the fact that every one she knew was to be there: her potential rivals were crowding the east-bound steamers. New York was a desert, and Ralph's seeming unconsciousness of the fact increased her resentment. She had had but one chance at Europe since her marriage, and that had been wasted through her husband's unaccountable

perversity. She knew now with what packed hours of Paris and London they had paid for their empty weeks in Italy.

Meanwhile the long months of the New York spring stretched out before her in all their social vacancy to the measureless blank of a summer in the Adirondacks. In her girlhood she had plumbed the dim depths of such summers; but then she had been sustained by the hope of bringing some capture to the surface. Now she knew better: there were no "finds" for her in that direction. The people she wanted would be at Newport or in Europe, and she was too resolutely bent on a definite object, too sternly animated by her father's business instinct, to turn aside in quest of casual distractions.

The chief difficulty in the way of her attaining any distant end had always been her reluctance to plod through the intervening stretches of dulness and privation. She had begun to see this, but she could not always master the weakness: never had she stood in greater need of Mrs. Heeny's "Go slow. Undine!" Her imagination was incapable of long flights. She could not cheat her impatience with the mirage of far-off satisfactions, and for the moment present and future seemed equally void. But her desire to go to Europe and to rejoin the little New York world that was reforming itself in London and Paris was fortified by reasons which seemed urgent enough to justify an appeal to her father.

She went down to his office to plead her case, fearing Mrs. Spragg's intervention. For some time past Mr. Spragg had been rather continuously overworked, and the strain was beginning to tell on him. He had never quite regained, in New York, the financial security of his Apex days. Since he had changed his base of operations his affairs had followed an uncertain course, and Undine suspected that his breach with his old political ally, the Representative Rolliver who had seen him through the muddiest reaches of the Pure Water Move, was not unconnected with his failure to get a footing in Wall Street. But all this was vague and shadowy to her Even had "business" been less of a mystery, she was too much absorbed in her own affairs to project herself into her father's case; and she thought she was sacrificing enough to delicacy of feeling in sparing him the "bother" of Mrs. Spragg's opposition. When she came to him with a grievance he always heard her out with the same mild patience; but the long habit of "managing" him had made her, in his own language, "discount" this tolerance, and when she ceased to speak her heart throbbed with suspense as he leaned back, twirling an invisible toothpick under his sallow moustache. Presently he raised a hand to stroke the limp beard in which the moustache was merged; then he groped for the Masonic emblem that had lost itself in one of the folds of his depleted waistcoat.

He seemed to fish his answer from the same rusty depths, for as his fingers closed about the trinket he said: "Yes, the heated term IS trying in New York. That's why the Fresh Air Fund pulled my last dollar out of me last week."

Undine frowned: there was nothing more irritating, in these encounters with her father, than his habit of opening the discussion with a joke.

"I wish you'd understand that I'm serious, father. I've never been strong since the baby was born, and I need a change. But it's not only that: there are other reasons for my wanting to go."

Mr. Spragg still held to his mild tone of banter. "I never knew you short on reasons, Undie. Trouble is you don't always know other people's when you see 'em."

His daughter's lips tightened. "I know your reasons when I see them, father: I've heard them often enough. But you can't know mine because I haven't told you not the real ones."

"Jehoshaphat! I thought they were all real as long as you had a use for them."

Experience had taught her that such protracted trifling usually concealed an exceptional vigour of resistance, and the suspense strengthened her determination.

"My reasons are all real enough," she answered; "but there's one more serious than the others."

Mr. Spragg's brows began to jut. "More bills?"

"No." She stretched out her hand and began to finger the dusty objects on his desk. "I'm unhappy at home."

"Unhappy !" His start overturned the gorged waste-paper basket and shot a shower of paper across the rug. He stooped to put the basket back; then he turned his slow fagged eyes on his daughter. "Why, he worships the ground you walk on, Undie."

"That's not always a reason, for a woman " It was the answer she would have given to Popple or Van Degen, but she saw in an instant the mistake of thinking it would impress her father. In the atmosphere of sentimental casuistry to which she had become accustomed, she had forgotten that Mr. Spragg's private rule of conduct was as simple as his business morality was complicated.

He glowered at her under thrust-out brows. "It isn't a reason, isn't it? I can

seem to remember the time when you used to think it was equal to a whole carload of whitewash."

She blushed a bright red, and her own brows were levelled at his above her stormy steel-grey eyes. The sense of her blunder made her angrier with him, and more ruthless.

"I can't expect you to understand you never HAVE, you or mother, when it came to my feelings. I suppose some people are born sensitive I can't imagine anybody'd CHOOSE to be so. Because I've been too proud to complain you've taken it for granted that I was perfectly happy. But my marriage was a mistake from the beginning; and Ralph feels just as I do about it. His people hate me, they've always hated me; and he looks at everything as they do. They've never forgiven me for his having had to go into business with their aristocratic ideas they look down on a man who works for his living. Of course it's all right for YOU to do it, because you're not a Marvell or a Dagonet; but they think Ralph ought to just lie back and let you support the baby and me."

This time she had found the right note: she knew it by the tightening of her father's slack muscles and the sudden straightening of his back.

"By George, he pretty near does!" he exclaimed bringing down his fist on the desk. "They haven't been taking it out of you about that, have they?" "They don't fight fair enough to say so. They just egg him on to turn against me. They only consented to his marrying me because they thought you were so crazy about the match you'd give us everything, and he'd have nothing to do but sit at home and write books."

Mr. Spragg emitted a derisive groan. "From what I hear of the amount of business he's doing I guess he could keep the Poet's Corner going right along. I suppose the old man was right he hasn't got it in him to make money."

"Of course not; he wasn't brought up to it, and in his heart of hearts he's ashamed of having to do it. He told me it was killing a little more of him every day."

"Do they back him up in that kind of talk?"

"They back him up in everything. Their ideas are all different from ours. They look down on us can't you see that? Can't you guess how they treat me from the way they've acted to you and mother?"

He met this with a puzzled stare. "The way they've acted to me and mother? Why, we never so much as set eyes on them."

"That's just what I mean! I don't believe they've even called on mother this year, have they? Last year they just left their cards without asking. And why do you suppose they never invite you to dine? In their set lots of people older than you and mother dine every night of the winter society's full of them. The Marvells are ashamed to have you meet their friends: that's the reason. They're ashamed to have it known that Ralph married an Apex girl, and that you and mother haven't always had your own servants and carriages; and Ralph's ashamed of it too, now he's got over being crazy about me. If he was free I believe he'd turn round to-morrow and marry that Ray girl his mother's saving up for him."

Mr. Spragg listened with a heavy brow and pushed-out lip. His daughter's outburst seemed at last to have roused him to a faint resentment. After she had ceased to speak he remained silent, twisting an inky penhandle between his fingers; then he said: "I guess mother and I can worry along without having Ralph's relatives drop in; but I'd like to make it clear to them that if you came from Apex your income came from there too. I presume they'd be sorry if Ralph was left to support you on HIS."

She saw that she had scored in the first part of the argument, but every watchful nerve reminded her that the hardest stage was still ahead.

"Oh, they're willing enough he should take your money that's only natural, they think."

A chuckle sounded deep down under Mr. Spragg's loose collar. "There seems to be practical unanimity on that point," he observed. "But I don't see," he continued, jerking round his bushy brows on her, "how going to Europe is going to help you out."

Undine leaned close enough for her lowered voice to reach him. "Can't you understand that, knowing how they all feel about me and how Ralph feels I'd give almost anything to get away?"

Her father looked at her compassionately. "I guess most of us feel that once in a way when we're youngy, Undine. Later on you'll see going away ain't much use when you've got to turn round and come back."

She nodded at him with close-pressed lips, like a child in possession of some solemn secret.

"That's just it that's the reason I'm so wild to go; because it MIGHT mean I wouldn't ever have to come back."

"Not come back? What on earth are you talking about?"

"It might mean that I could get free begin over again…"

He had pushed his seat back with a sudden jerk and cut her short by striking his palm on the arm of the chair.

"For the Lord's sake. Undine do you know what you're saying?"

"Oh, yes, I know." She gave him back a confident smile. "If I can get away soon go straight over to Paris…there's some one there who'd do anything… who COULD do anything…if I was free…"

Mr. Spragg's hands continued to grasp his chair-arms. "Good God, Undine Marvell are you sitting there in your sane senses and talking to me of what you could do if you were FREE?"

Their glances met in an interval of speechless communion; but Undine did not shrink from her father's eyes and when she lowered her own it seemed to be only because there was nothing left for them to say.

"I know just what I could do if I were free. I could marry the right man," she answered boldly.

He met her with a murmur of helpless irony. "The right man? The right man? Haven't you had enough of trying for him yet?"

As he spoke the door behind them opened, and Mr. Spragg looked up abruptly.

The stenographer stood on the threshold, and above her shoulder Undine perceived the ingratiating grin of Elmer Moffatt.

"'A little farther lend thy guiding hand' but I guess I can go the rest of the way alone," he said, insinuating himself through the doorway with an airy gesture of dismissal; then he turned to Mr. Spragg and Undine.

"I agree entirely with Mrs. Marvell and I'm happy to have the opportunity of telling her so," he proclaimed, holding his hand out gallantly.

Undine stood up with a laugh. "It sounded like old times, I suppose you thought father and I were quarrelling? But we never quarrel any more: he always agrees with me." She smiled at Mr. Spragg and turned her shining eyes on Moffatt. "I wish that treaty had been signed a few years sooner!" the latter rejoined in his usual tone of humorous familiarity.

Undine had not met him since her marriage, and of late the adverse turn of his fortunes had carried him quite beyond her thoughts. But his actual presence was always stimulating, and even through her self-absorption she was struck

by his air of almost defiant prosperity. He did not look like a man who has been beaten; or rather he looked like a man who does not know when he is beaten; and his eye had the gleam of mocking confidence that had carried him unabashed through his lowest hours at Apex.

"I presume you're here to see me on business?" Mr. Spragg enquired, rising from his chair with a glance that seemed to ask his daughter's silence.

"Why, yes. Senator," rejoined Moffatt, who was given, in playful moments, to the bestowal of titles high-sounding. "At least I'm here to ask you a little question that may lead to business."

Mr. Spragg crossed the office and held open the door. "Step this way, please," he said, guiding Moffatt out before him, though the latter hung back to exclaim: "No family secrets, Mrs. Marvell anybody can turn the fierce white light on ME!"

With the closing of the door Undine's thoughts turned back to her own preoccupations. It had not struck her as incongruous that Moffatt should have business dealings with her father: she was even a little surprised that Mr. Spragg should still treat him so coldly. But she had no time to give to such considerations. Her own difficulties were too importunately present to her. She moved restlessly about the office, listening to the rise and fall of the two voices on the other side of the partition without once wondering what they were discussing.

What should she say to her father when he came back what argument was most likely to prevail with him? If he really had no money to give her she was imprisoned fast Van Degen was lost to her, and the old life must go on interminably…In her nervous pacings she paused before the blotched looking-glass that hung in a corner of the office under a steel engraving of Daniel Webster. Even that defective surface could not disfigure her, and she drew fresh hope from the sight of her beauty. Her few weeks of ill-health had given her cheeks a subtler curve and deepened the shadows beneath her eyes, and she was handsomer than before her marriage. No, Van Degen was not lost to her even! From narrowed lids to parted lips her face was swept by a smile like retracted sunlight. He was not lost to her while she could smile like that! Besides, even if her father had no money, there were always mysterious ways of "raising" it in the old Apex days he had often boasted of such feats. As the hope rose her eyes widened trustfully, and this time the smile that flowed up to them was as limpid as a child's. That was the was her father liked her to look at him…

The door opened, and she heard Mr. Spragg say behind her: "No, sir, I won't

that's final."

He came in alone, with a brooding face, and lowered himself heavily into his chair. It was plain that the talk between the two men had had an abrupt ending. Undine looked at her father with a passing flicker of curiosity. Certainly it was an odd coincidence that Moffatt should have called while she was there…

"What did he want?" she asked, glancing back toward the door.

Mr. Spragg mumbled his invisible toothpick. "Oh, just another of his wild-cat schemes some real-estate deal he's in."

"Why did he come to YOU about it?"

He looked away from her, fumbling among the letters on the desk. "Guess he'd tried everybody else first. He'd go and ring the devil's front-door bell if he thought he could get anything out of him."

"I suppose he did himself a lot of harm by testifying in the Ararat investigation?"

"Yes, SIR he's down and out this time."

He uttered the words with a certain satisfaction. His daughter did not answer, and they sat silent, facing each other across the littered desk. Under their brief about Elmer Moffatt currents of rapid intelligence seemed to be flowing between them. Suddenly Undine leaned over the desk, her eyes widening trustfully, and the limpid smile flowing up to them.

"Father, I did what you wanted that one time, anyhow won't you listen to me and help me out now?"

XVIII

Undine stood alone on the landing outside her father's office.

Only once before had she failed to gain her end with him and there was a peculiar irony in the fact that Moffatt's intrusion should have brought before her the providential result of her previous failure. Not that she confessed to any real resemblance between the two situations. In the present case she knew well enough what she wanted, and how to get it. But the analogy had served her father's purpose, and Moffatt's unlucky entrance had visibly strengthened his resistance.

The worst of it was that the obstacles in the way were real enough. Mr. Spragg had not put her off with vague asseverations somewhat against her will he had

forced his proofs on her, showing her how much above his promised allowance he had contributed in the last three years to the support of her household. Since she could not accuse herself of extravagance having still full faith in her gift of "managing" she could only conclude that it was impossible to live on what her father and Ralph could provide; and this seemed a practical reason for desiring her freedom. If she and Ralph parted he would of course return to his family, and Mr. Spragg would no longer be burdened with a helpless son-in-law. But even this argument did not move him. Undine, as soon as she had risked Van Degen's name, found herself face to face with a code of domestic conduct as rigid as its exponent's business principles were elastic. Mr. Spragg did not regard divorce as intrinsically wrong or even inexpedient; and of its social disadvantages he had never even heard. Lots of women did it, as Undine said, and if their reasons were adequate they were justified. If Ralph Marvell had been a drunkard or "unfaithful" Mr. Spragg would have approved Undine's desire to divorce him; but that it should be prompted by her inclination for another man and a man with a wife of his own was as shocking to him as it would have been to the most uncompromising of the Dagonets and Marvells. Such things happened, as Mr. Spragg knew, but they should not happen to any woman of his name while he had the power to prevent it; and Undine recognized that for the moment he had that power.

As she emerged from the elevator she was surprised to see Moffatt in the vestibule. His presence was an irritating reminder of her failure, and she walked past him with a rapid bow; but he overtook her.

"Mrs. Marvell I've been waiting to say a word to you."

If it had been any one else she would have passed on; but Moffatt's voice had always a detaining power. Even now that she knew him to be defeated and negligible, the power asserted itself, and she paused to say: "I'm afraid I can't stop I'm late for an engagement."

"I shan't make you much later; but if you'd rather have me call round at your house "

"Oh, I'm so seldom in." She turned a wondering look on him. "What is it you wanted to say?"

"Just two words. I've got an office in this building and the shortest way would be to come up there for a minute." As her look grew distant he added: "I think what I've got to say is worth the trip."

His face was serious, without underlying irony: the face he wore when he wanted to be trusted.

"Very well," she said, turning back.

Undine, glancing at her watch as she came out of Moffatt's office, saw that he had been true to his promise of not keeping her more than ten minutes. The fact was characteristic. Under all his incalculableness there had always been a hard foundation of reliability: it seemed to be a matter of choice with him whether he let one feel that solid bottom or not. And in specific matters the same quality showed itself in an accuracy of statement, a precision of conduct, that contrasted curiously with his usual hyperbolic banter and his loose lounging manner. No one could be more elusive yet no one could be firmer to the touch. Her face had cleared and she moved more lightly as she left the building. Moffatt's communication had not been completely clear to her, but she understood the outline of the plan he had laid before her, and was satisfied with the bargain they had struck. He had begun by reminding her of her promise to introduce him to any friend of hers who might be useful in the way of business. Over three years had passed since they had made the pact, and Moffatt had kept loyally to his side of it. With the lapse of time the whole matter had become less important to her, but she wanted to prove her good faith, and when he reminded her of her promise she at once admitted it.

"Well, then I want you to introduce me to your husband."

Undine was surprised; but beneath her surprise she felt a quick sense of relief. Ralph was easier to manage than so many of her friends and it was a mark of his present indifference to acquiesce in anything she suggested.

"My husband? Why, what can he do for you?"

Moffatt explained at once, in the fewest words, as his way was when it came to business. He was interested in a big "deal" which involved the purchase of a piece of real estate held by a number of wrangling heirs. The real-estate broker with whom Ralph Marvell was associated represented these heirs, but Moffatt had his reasons for not approaching him directly. And he didn't want to go to Marvell with a "business proposition" it would be better to be thrown with him socially as if by accident. It was with that object that Moffatt had just appealed to Mr. Spragg, but Mr. Spragg, as usual, had "turned him down," without even consenting to look into the case.

"He'd rather have you miss a good thing than have it come to you through me. I don't know what on earth he thinks it's in my power to do to you or ever was, for that matter," he added. "Anyhow," he went on to explain, "the power's all on your side now; and I'll show you how little the doing will hurt you as soon as I can have a quiet chat with your husband." He branched off again into technicalities, nebulous projections of capital and interest, taxes and rents,

from which she finally extracted, and clung to, the central fact that if the "deal went through" it would mean a commission of forty thousand dollars to Marvell's firm, of which something over a fourth would come to Ralph.

"By Jove, that's an amazing fellow!" Ralph Marvell exclaimed, turning back into the drawing-room, a few evenings later, at the conclusion of one of their little dinners. Undine looked up from her seat by the fire. She had had the inspired thought of inviting Moffatt to meet Clare Van Degen, Mrs. Fairford and Charles Bowen. It had occurred to her that the simplest way of explaining Moffatt was to tell Ralph that she had unexpectedly discovered an old Apex acquaintance in the protagonist of the great Ararat Trust fight. Moffatt's defeat had not wholly divested him of interest. As a factor in affairs he no longer inspired apprehension, but as the man who had dared to defy Harmon B. Driscoll he was a conspicuous and, to some minds, almost an heroic figure.

Undine remembered that Clare and Mrs. Fairford had once expressed a wish to see this braver of the Olympians, and her suggestion that he should be asked meet them gave Ralph evident pleasure. It was long since she had made any conciliatory sign to his family.

Moffatt's social gifts were hardly of a kind to please the two ladies: he would have shone more brightly in Peter Van Degen's set than in his wife's. But neither Clare nor Mrs. Fairford had expected a man of conventional cut, and Moffatt's loud easiness was obviously less disturbing to them than to their hostess. Undine felt only his crudeness, and the tacit criticism passed on it by the mere presence of such men as her husband and Bowen; but Mrs. Fairford' seemed to enjoy provoking him to fresh excesses of slang and hyperbole. Gradually she drew him into talking of the Driscoll campaign, and he became recklessly explicit. He seemed to have nothing to hold back: all the details of the prodigious exploit poured from him with Homeric volume. Then he broke off abruptly, thrusting his hands into his trouser-pockets and shaping his red lips to a whistle which he checked as his glance met Undine's. To conceal his embarrassment he leaned back in his chair, looked about the table with complacency, and said "I don't mind if I do" to the servant who approached to re-fill his champagne glass.

The men sat long over their cigars; but after an interval Undine called Charles Bowen into the drawing-room to settle some question in dispute between Clare and Mrs. Fairford, and thus gave Moffatt a chance to be alone with her husband. Now that their guests had gone she was throbbing with anxiety to know what had passed between the two; but when Ralph rejoined her in the drawing-room she continued to keep her eyes on the fire and twirl her fan listlessly.

"That's an amazing chap," Ralph repeated, looking down at her. "Where was it you ran across him out at Apex?"

As he leaned against the chimney-piece, lighting his cigarette, it struck Undine that he looked less fagged and lifeless than usual, and she felt more and more sure that something important had happened during the moment of isolation she had contrived.

She opened and shut her fan reflectively. "Yes years ago; father had some business with him and brought him home to dinner one day."

"And you've never seen him since?"

She waited, as if trying to piece her recollections together. "I suppose I must have; but all that seems so long ago," she said sighing. She had been given, of late, to such plaintive glances toward her happy girlhood but Ralph seemed not to notice the allusion.

"Do you know," he exclaimed after a moment, "I don't believe the fellow's beaten yet."

She looked up quickly. "Don't you?"

"No; and I could see that Bowen didn't either. He strikes me as the kind of man who develops slowly, needs a big field, and perhaps makes some big mistakes, but gets where he wants to in the end. Jove, I wish I could put him in a book! There's something epic about him a kind of epic effrontery."

Undine's pulses beat faster as she listened. Was it not what Moffatt had always said of himself that all he needed was time and elbow-room? How odd that Ralph, who seemed so dreamy and unobservant, should instantly have reached the same conclusion! But what she wanted to know was the practical result of their meeting.

"What did you and he talk about when you were smoking?"

"Oh, he got on the Driscoll fight again gave us some extraordinary details. The man's a thundering brute, but he's full of observation and humour. Then, after Bowen joined you, he told me about a new deal he's gone into rather a promising scheme, but on the same Titanic scale. It's just possible, by the way, that we may be able to do something for him: part of the property he's after is held in our office." He paused, knowing Undine's indifference to business matters; but the face she turned to him was alive with interest.

"You mean you might sell the property to him?"

"Well, if the thing comes off. There would be a big commission if we did." He glanced down on her half ironically. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

She answered with a shade of reproach: "Why do you say that? I haven't complained."

"Oh, no; but I know I've been a disappointment as a money-maker."

She leaned back in her chair, closing her eyes as if in utter weariness and indifference, and in a moment she felt him bending over her. "What's the matter? Don't you feel well?"

"I'm a little tired. It's nothing." She pulled her hand away and burst into tears.

Ralph knelt down by her chair and put his arm about her. It was the first time he had touched her since the night of the boy's birthday, and the sense of her softness woke a momentary warmth in his veins.

"What is it, dear? What is it?"

Without turning her head she sobbed out: "You seem to think I'm too selfish and odious that I'm just pretending to be ill."

"No, no," he assured her, smoothing back her hair. But she continued to sob on in a gradual crescendo of despair, till the vehemence of her weeping began to frighten him, and he drew her to her feet and tried to persuade her to let herself be led upstairs. She yielded to his arm, sobbing in short exhausted gasps, and leaning her whole weight on him as he guided her along the passage to her bedroom. On the lounge to which he lowered her she lay white and still, tears trickling through her lashes and her handkerchief pressed against her lips. He recognized the symptoms with a sinking heart: she was on the verge of a nervous attack such as she had had in the winter, and he foresaw with dismay the disastrous train of consequences, the doctors' and nurses' bills, and all the attendant confusion and expense. If only Moffatt's project might be realized if for once he could feel a round sum in his pocket, and be freed from the perpetual daily strain!

The next morning Undine, though calmer, was too weak to leave her bed, and her doctor prescribed rest and absence of worry later, perhaps, a change of scene. He explained to Ralph that nothing was so wearing to a high-strung nature as monotony, and that if Mrs. Marvell were contemplating a Newport season it was necessary that she should be fortified to meet it. In such cases he often recommended a dash to Paris or London, just to tone up the nervous system.

Undine regained her strength slowly, and as the days dragged on the suggestion of the European trip recurred with increasing frequency. But it came always from her medical adviser: she herself had grown strangely passive and indifferent. She continued to remain upstairs on her lounge, seeing no one but Mrs. Heeny, whose daily ministrations had once more been prescribed, and asking only that the noise of Paul's play should be kept from her. His scamperings overhead disturbed her sleep, and his bed was moved into the day nursery, above his father's room. The child's early romping did not trouble Ralph, since he himself was always awake before daylight. The days were not long enough to hold his cares, and they came and stood by him through the silent hours, when there was no other sound to drown their voices.

Ralph had not made a success of his business. The real-estate brokers who had taken him into partnership had done so only with the hope of profiting by his social connections; and in this respect the alliance had been a failure. It was in such directions that he most lacked facility, and so far he had been of use to his partners only as an office-drudge. He was resigned to the continuance of such drudgery, though all his powers cried out against it; but even for the routine of business his aptitude was small, and he began to feel that he was not considered an addition to the firm. The difficulty of finding another opening made him fear a break; and his thoughts turned hopefully to Elmer Moffatt's hint of a "deal." The success of the negotiation might bring advantages beyond the immediate pecuniary profit; and that, at the present juncture, was important enough in itself.

Moffatt reappeared two days after the dinner, presenting himself in West End Avenue in the late afternoon with the explanation that the business in hand necessitated discretion, and that he preferred not to be seen in Ralph's office. It was a question of negotiating with the utmost privacy for the purchase of a small strip of land between two large plots already acquired by purchasers cautiously designated by Moffatt as his "parties." How far he "stood in" with the parties he left it to Ralph to conjecture; but it was plain that he had a large stake in the transaction, and that it offered him his first chance of recovering himself since Driscoll had "thrown" him. The owners of the coveted plot did not seem anxious to sell, and there were personal reasons for Moffatt's not approaching them through Ralph's partners, who were the regular agents of the estate: so that Ralph's acquaintance with the conditions, combined with his detachments from the case, marked him out as a useful intermediary.

Their first talk left Ralph with a dazzled sense of Moffatt's strength and keenness, but with a vague doubt as to the "straightness" of the proposed transaction. Ralph had never seen his way clearly in that dim underworld of affairs where men of the Moffatt and Driscoll type moved like shadowy

destructive monsters beneath the darting small fry of the surface. He knew that "business" has created its own special morality; and his musings on man's relation to his self imposed laws had shown him how little human conduct is generally troubled about its own sanctions. He had a vivid sense of the things a man of his kind didn't do; but his inability to get a mental grasp on large financial problems made it hard to apply to them so simple a measure as this inherited standard. He only knew, as Moffatt's plan developed, that it seemed all right while he talked of it with its originator, but vaguely wrong when he thought it over afterward. It occurred to him to consult his grandfather; and if he renounced the idea for the obvious reason that Mr. Dagonet's ignorance of business was as fathomless as his own, this was not his sole motive. Finally it occurred to him to put the case hypothetically to Mr. Spragg. As far as Ralph knew, his father-in-law's business record was unblemished; yet one felt in him an elasticity of adjustment not allowed for in the Dagonet code.

Mr. Spragg listened thoughtfully to Ralph's statement of the case, growling out here and there a tentative correction, and turning his cigar between his lips as he seemed to turn the problem over in the loose grasp of his mind.

"Well, what's the trouble with it?" he asked at length, stretching his big square-toed shoes against the grate of his son-in-law's dining-room, where, in the after-dinner privacy of a family evening, Ralph had seized the occasion to consult him.

"The trouble?" Ralph considered. "Why, that's just what I should like you to explain to me."

Mr. Spragg threw back his head and stared at the garlanded French clock on the chimney-piece. Mrs. Spragg was sitting upstairs in her daughter's bedroom, and the silence of the house seemed to hang about the two men like a listening presence.

"Well, I dunno but what I agree with the doctor who said there warn't any diseases, but only sick people. Every case is different, I guess." Mr. Spragg, munching his cigar, turned a ruminating glance on Ralph. "Seems to me it all boils down to one thing. Was this fellow we're supposing about under any obligation to the other party the one he was trying to buy the property from?"

Ralph hesitated. "Only the obligation recognized between decent men to deal with each other decently." Mr. Spragg listened to this with the suffering air of a teacher compelled to simplify upon his simplest questions.

"Any personal obligation, I meant. Had the other fellow done him a good turn any time?"

"No I don't imagine them to have had any previous relations at all."

His father-in-law stared. "Where's your trouble, then?" He sat for a moment frowning at the embers. "Even when it's the other way round it ain't always so easy to decide how far that kind of thing's binding… and they say shipwrecked fellows'll make a meal of friend as quick as they would of a total stranger." He drew himself together with a shake of his shoulders and pulled back his feet from the grate. "But I don't see the conundrum in your case, I guess it's up to both parties to take care of their own skins."

He rose from his chair and wandered upstairs to Undine.

That was the Wall Street code: it all "boiled down" to the personal obligation, to the salt eaten in the enemy's tent. Ralph's fancy wandered off on a long trail of speculation from which he was pulled back with a jerk by the need of immediate action. Moffatt's "deal" could not wait: quick decisions were essential to effective action, and brooding over ethical shades of difference might work more ill than good in a world committed to swift adjustments. The arrival of several unforeseen bills confirmed this view, and once Ralph had adopted it he began to take a detached interest in the affair.

In Paris, in his younger days, he had once attended a lesson in acting given at the Conservatoire by one of the great lights of the theatre, and had seen an apparently uncomplicated role of the classic repertory, familiar to him through repeated performances, taken to pieces before his eyes, dissolved into its component elements, and built up again with a minuteness of elucidation and a range of reference that made him feel as though he had been let into the secret of some age-long natural process. As he listened to Moffatt the remembrance of that lesson came back to him. At the outset the "deal," and his own share in it, had seemed simple enough: he would have put on his hat and gone out on the spot in the full assurance of being able to transact the affair. But as Moffatt talked he began to feel as blank and blundering as the class of dramatic students before whom the great actor had analyzed his part. The affair was in fact difficult and complex, and Moffatt saw at once just where the difficulties lay and how the personal idiosyncrasies of "the parties" affected them. Such insight fascinated Ralph, and he strayed off into wondering why it did not qualify every financier to be a novelist, and what intrinsic barrier divided the two arts.

Both men had strong incentives for hastening the affair; and within a fortnight after Moffatt's first advance Ralph was able to tell him that his offer was accepted. Over and above his personal satisfaction he felt the thrill of the agent whom some powerful negotiator has charged with a delicate mission: he might have been an eager young Jesuit carrying compromising papers to his superior.

It had been stimulating to work with Moffatt, and to study at close range the large powerful instrument of his intelligence.

As he came out of Moffatt's office at the conclusion of this visit Ralph met Mr. Spragg descending from his eyrie. He stopped short with a backward glance at Moffatt's door.

"Hallo what were you doing in there with those cut-throats?"

Ralph judged discretion to be essential. "Oh, just a little business for the firm."

Mr. Spragg said no more, but resorted to the soothing labial motion of revolving his phantom toothpick.

"How's Undie getting along?" he merely asked, as he and his son-in-law descended together in the elevator.

"She doesn't seem to feel much stronger. The doctor wants her to run over to Europe for a few weeks. She thinks of joining her friends the Shallums in Paris."

Mr. Spragg was again silent, but he left the building at Ralph's side, and the two walked along together toward Wall Street.

Presently the older man asked: "How did you get acquainted with
Moffatt?"
"Why, by chance Undine ran across him somewhere and asked him to dine the other night."

"Undine asked him to dine?"

"Yes: she told me you used to know him out at Apex."

Mr. Spragg appeared to search his memory for confirmation of the fact. "I believe he used to be round there at one time. I've never heard any good of him yet." He paused at a crossing and looked probingly at his son-in-law. "Is she terribly set on this trip to Europe?"

Ralph smiled. "You know how it is when she takes a fancy to do anything "

Mr. Spragg, by a slight lift of his brooding brows, seemed to convey a deep if unspoken response.

"Well, I'd let her do it this time I'd let her do it," he said as he turned down the steps of the Subway.

Ralph was surprised, for he had gathered from some frightened references of

Mrs. Spragg's that Undine's parents had wind of her European plan and were strongly opposed to it. He concluded that Mr. Spragg had long since measured the extent of profitable resistance, and knew just when it became vain to hold out against his daughter or advise others to do so.

Ralph, for his own part, had no inclination to resist. As he left Moffatt's office his inmost feeling was one of relief. He had reached the point of recognizing that it was best for both that his wife should go. When she returned perhaps their lives would readjust themselves but for the moment he longed for some kind of benumbing influence, something that should give relief to the dull daily ache of feeling her so near and yet so inaccessible. Certainly there were more urgent uses for their brilliant wind-fall: heavy arrears of household debts had to be met, and the summer would bring its own burden. But perhaps another stroke of luck might befall him: he was getting to have the drifting dependence on "luck" of the man conscious of his inability to direct his life. And meanwhile it seemed easier to let Undine have what she wanted.

Undine, on the whole, behaved with discretion. She received the good news languidly and showed no unseemly haste to profit by it. But it was as hard to hide the light in her eyes as to dissemble the fact that she had not only thought out every detail of the trip in advance, but had decided exactly how her husband and son were to be disposed of in her absence. Her suggestion that Ralph should take Paul to his grandparents, and that the West End Avenue house should be let for the summer, was too practical not to be acted on; and Ralph found she had already put her hand on the Harry Lipscombs, who, after three years of neglect, were to be dragged back to favour and made to feel, as the first step in their reinstatement, the necessity of hiring for the summer months a cool airy house on the West Side. On her return from Europe, Undine explained, she would of course go straight to Ralph and the boy in the Adirondacks; and it seemed a foolish extravagance to let the house stand empty when the Lipscombs were so eager to take it.

As the day of departure approached it became harder for her to temper her beams; but her pleasure showed itself so amiably that Ralph began to think she might, after all, miss the boy and himself more than she imagined. She was tenderly preoccupied with Paul's welfare, and, to prepare for his translation to his grandparents' she gave the household in Washington Square more of her time than she had accorded it since her marriage. She explained that she wanted Paul to grow used to his new surroundings; and with that object she took him frequently to his grandmother's, and won her way into old Mr. Dagonet's sympathies by her devotion to the child and her pretty way of joining in his games.

Undine was not consciously acting a part: this new phase was as natural to her

as the other. In the joy of her gratified desires she wanted to make everybody about her happy. If only everyone would do as she wished she would never be unreasonable. She much preferred to see smiling faces about her, and her dread of the reproachful and dissatisfied countenance gave the measure of what she would do to avoid it.

These thoughts were in her mind when, a day or two before sailing, she came out of the Washington Square house with her boy. It was a late spring afternoon, and she and Paul had lingered on till long past the hour sacred to his grandfather's nap. Now, as she came out into the square she saw that, however well Mr. Dagonet had borne their protracted romp, it had left his playmate flushed and sleepy; and she lifted Paul in her arms to carry him to the nearest cab-stand.

As she raised herself she saw a thick-set figure approaching her across the square; and a moment later she was shaking hands with Elmer Moffatt. In the bright spring air he looked seasonably glossy and prosperous; and she noticed that he wore a bunch of violets in his buttonhole. His small black eyes twinkled with approval as they rested on her, and Undine reflected that, with Paul's arms about her neck, and his little flushed face against her own, she must present a not unpleasing image of young motherhood.

"That the heir apparent?" Moffatt asked; adding "Happy to make your acquaintance, sir," as the boy, at Undine's bidding, held out a fist sticky with sugarplums.

"He's been spending the afternoon with his grandfather, and they played so hard that he's sleepy," she explained. Little Paul, at that stage in his career, had a peculiar grace of wide-gazing deep-lashed eyes and arched cherubic lips, and Undine saw that Moffatt was not insensible to the picture she and her son composed. She did not dislike his admiration, for she no longer felt any shrinking from him she would even have been glad to thank him for the service he had done her husband if she had known how to allude to it without awkwardness. Moffatt seemed equally pleased at the meeting, and they looked at each other almost intimately over Paul's tumbled curls.

"He's a mighty fine fellow and no mistake but isn't he rather an armful for you?" Moffatt asked, his eyes lingering with real kindliness on the child's face.

"Oh, we haven't far to go. I'll pick up a cab at the corner."

"Well, let me carry him that far anyhow," said Moffatt.

Undine was glad to be relieved of her burden, for she was unused to the child's weight, and disliked to feel that her skirt was dragging on the pavement. "Go

to the gentleman, Pauly he'll carry you better than mother," she said.

The little boy's first movement was one of recoil from the ruddy sharp-eyed countenance that was so unlike his father's delicate face; but he was an obedient child, and after a moment's hesitation he wound his arms trustfully about the red gentleman's neck.

"That's a good fellow sit tight and I'll give you a ride," Moffatt cried, hoisting the boy to his shoulder.

Paul was not used to being perched at such a height, and his nature was hospitable to new impressions. "Oh, I like it up here you're higher than father!" he exclaimed; and Moffatt hugged him with a laugh.

"It must feel mighty good to come uptown to a fellow like you in the evenings," he said, addressing the child but looking at Undine, who also laughed a little.

"Oh, they're a dreadful nuisance, you know; but Paul's a very good boy."

"I wonder if he knows what a friend I've been to him lately," Moffatt went on, as they turned into Fifth Avenue.

Undine smiled: she was glad he should have given her an opening. "He shall be told as soon as he's old enough to thank you. I'm so glad you came to Ralph about that business."

"Oh I gave him a leg up, and I guess he's given me one too. Queer the way things come round he's fairly put me in the way of a fresh start."

Their eyes met in a silence which Undine was the first to break. "It's been awfully nice of you to do what you've done right along. And this last thing has made a lot of difference to us."

"Well, I'm glad you feel that way. I never wanted to be anything but 'nice,' as you call it." Moffatt paused a moment and then added: "If you're less scared of me than your father is I'd be glad to call round and see you once in a while."

The quick blood rushed to her cheeks. There was nothing challenging, demanding in his tone she guessed at once that if he made the request it was simply for the pleasure of being with her, and she liked the magnanimity implied. Nevertheless she was not sorry to have to answer: "Of course I'll always be glad to see you only, as it happens, I'm just sailing for Europe."

"For Europe?" The word brought Moffatt to a stand so abruptly that little Paul lurched on his shoulder.

"For Europe?" he repeated. "Why, I thought you said the other evening you expected to stay on in town till July. Didn't you think of going to the Adirondacks?"

Flattered by his evident disappointment, she became high and careless in her triumph. "Oh, yes, but that's all changed. Ralph and the boy are going, but I sail on Saturday to join some friends in Paris and later I may do some motoring in Switzerland an Italy."

She laughed a little in the mere enjoyment of putting her plans into words and Moffatt laughed too, but with an edge of sarcasm.

"I see I see: everything's changed, as you say, and your husband can blow you off to the trip. Well, I hope you'll have a first-class time."

Their glances crossed again, and something in his cool scrutiny impelled Undine to say, with a burst of candour: "If I do, you know, I shall owe it all to you!"

"Well, I always told you I meant to act white by you," he answered.

They walked on in silence, and presently he began again in his usual joking strain: "See what one of the Apex girls has been up to?"

Apex was too remote for her to understand the reference, and he went on: "Why, Millard Binch's wife Indiana Frusk that was. Didn't you see in the papers that Indiana'd fixed it up with James J. Rolliver to marry her? They say it was easy enough squaring Millard Binch you'd know it WOULD be but it cost Roliver near a million to mislay Mrs. R. and the children. Well, Indiana's pulled it off, anyhow; she always WAS a bright girl. But she never came up to you."

"Oh " she stammered with a laugh, astonished and agitated by his news. Indiana Frusk and Rolliver! It showed how easily the thing could be done. If only her father had listened to her! If a girl like Indiana Frusk could gain her end so easily, what might not Undine have accomplished? She knew Moffatt was right in saying that Indiana had never come up to her…She wondered how the marriage would strike Van Degen…

She signalled to a cab and they walked toward it without speaking. Undine was recalling with intensity that one of Indiana's shoulders was higher than the other, and that people in Apex had thought her lucky to catch Millard Binch, the druggist's clerk, when Undine herself had cast him off after a lingering engagement. And now Indiana Frusk was to be Mrs. James J. Rolliver!

Undine got into the cab and bent forward to take little Paul.

Moffatt lowered his charge with exaggerated care, and a "Steady there, steady," that made the child laugh; then, stooping over, he put a kiss on Paul's lips before handing him over to his mother.

XIX

"The Parisian Diamond Company Anglo-American branch."

Charles Bowen, seated, one rainy evening of the Paris season, in a corner of the great Nouveau Luxe restaurant, was lazily trying to resolve his impressions of the scene into the phrases of a letter to his old friend Mrs. Henley Fairford.

The long habit of unwritten communion with this lady in no way conditioned by the short rare letters they actually exchanged usually caused his notations, in absence, to fall into such terms when the subject was of a kind to strike an answering flash from her. And who but Mrs. Fairford would see, from his own precise angle, the fantastic improbability, the layers on layers of unsubstantialness, on which the seemingly solid scene before him rested?

The dining-room of the Nouveau Luxe was at its fullest, and, having contracted on the garden side through stress of weather, had even overflowed to the farther end of the long hall beyond; so that Bowen, from his corner, surveyed a seemingly endless perspective of plumed and jewelled heads, of shoulders bare or black-coated, encircling the close-packed tables. He had come half an hour before the time he had named to his expected guest, so that he might have the undisturbed amusement of watching the picture compose itself again before his eyes. During some forty years' perpetual exercise of his perceptions he had never come across anything that gave them the special titillation produced by the sight of the dinner-hour at the Nouveau Luxe: the same sense of putting his hand on human nature's passion for the factitious, its incorrigible habit of imitating the imitation.

As he sat watching the familiar faces swept toward him on the rising tide of arrival for it was one of the joys of the scene that the type was always the same even when the individual was not he hailed with renewed appreciation this costly expression of a social ideal. The dining-room at the Nouveau Luxe represented, on such a spring evening, what unbounded material power had devised for the delusion of its leisure: a phantom "society," with all the rules, smirks, gestures of its model, but evoked out of promiscuity and incoherence while the other had been the product of continuity and choice. And the instinct which had driven a new class of world-compellers to bind themselves to slavish imitation of the superseded, and their prompt and reverent faith in the

reality of the sham they had created, seemed to Bowen the most satisfying proof of human permanence.

With this thought in his mind he looked up to greet his guest. The Comte Raymond de Chelles, straight, slim and gravely smiling, came toward him with frequent pauses of salutation at the crowded tables; saying, as he seated himself and turned his pleasant eyes on the scene: "Il n'y a pas à dire, my dear Bowen, it's charming and sympathetic and original we owe America a debt of gratitude for inventing it!"

Bowen felt a last touch of satisfaction: they were the very words to complete his thought.

"My dear fellow, it's really you and your kind who are responsible. It's the direct creation of feudalism, like all the great social upheavals!"

Raymond de Chelles stroked his handsome brown moustache. "I should have said, on the contrary, that one enjoyed it for the contrast. It's such a refreshing change from our institutions which are, nevertheless, the necessary foundations of society. But just as one may have an infinite admiration for one's wife, and yet occasionally " he waved a light hand toward the spectacle. "This, in the social order, is the diversion, the permitted diversion, that your original race has devised: a kind of superior Bohemia, where one may be respectable without being bored."

Bowen laughed. "You've put it in a nutshell: the ideal of the American woman is to be respectable without being bored; and from that point of view this world they've invented has more originality than I gave it credit for."

Chelles thoughtfully unfolded his napkin. "My impression's a superficial one, of course for as to what goes on underneath !" He looked across the room. "If I married I shouldn't care to have my wife come here too often."

Bowen laughed again. "She'd be as safe as in a bank! Nothing ever goes on! Nothing that ever happens here is real."

"Ah, quant à cela " the Frenchman murmured, inserting a fork into his melon. Bowen looked at him with enjoyment he was such a precious foot-note to the page! The two men, accidentally thrown together some years previously during a trip up the Nile, always met again with pleasure when Bowen returned to France. Raymond de Chelles, who came of a family of moderate fortune, lived for the greater part of the year on his father's estates in Burgundy; but he came up every spring to the entresol of the old Marquis's hotel for a two months' study of human nature, applying to the pursuit the discriminating taste and transient ardour that give the finest bloom to pleasure.

Bowen liked him as a companion and admired him as a charming specimen of the Frenchman of his class, embodying in his lean, fatigued and finished person that happy mean of simplicity and intelligence of which no other race has found the secret. If Raymond de Chelles had been English he would have been a mere fox-hunting animal, with appetites but without tastes; but in his lighter Gallic clay the wholesome territorial savour, the inherited passion for sport and agriculture, were blent with an openness to finer sensations, a sense of the come-and-go of ideas, under which one felt the tight hold of two or three inherited notions, religious, political, and domestic, in total contradiction to his surface attitude. That the inherited notions would in the end prevail, everything in his appearance declared from the distinguished slant of his nose to the narrow forehead under his thinning hair; he was the kind of man who would inevitably "revert" when he married. But meanwhile the surface he presented to the play of life was broad enough to take in the fantastic spectacle of the Nouveau Luxe; and to see its gestures reflected in a Latin consciousness was an endless entertainment to Bowen.

The tone of his guest's last words made him take them up. "But is the lady you allude to more than a hypothesis? Surely you're not thinking of getting married?"

Chelles raised his eye-brows ironically. "When hasn't one to think of it, in my situation? One hears of nothing else at home one knows that, like death, it has to come." His glance, which was still mustering the room, came to a sudden pause and kindled.

"Who's the lady over there fair-haired, in white the one who's just come in with the red-faced man? They seem to be with a party of your compatriots."

Bowen followed his glance to a neighbouring table, where, at the moment, Undine Marvell was seating herself at Peter Van Degen's side, in the company of the Harvey Shallums, the beautiful Mrs. Beringer and a dozen other New York figures.

She was so placed that as she took her seat she recognized Bowen and sent him a smile across the tables. She was more simply dressed than usual, and the pink lights, warming her cheeks and striking gleams from her hair, gave her face a dewy freshness that was new to Bowen. He had always thought her beauty too obvious, too bathed in the bright publicity of the American air; but to-night she seemed to have been brushed by the wing of poetry, and its shadow lingered in her eyes.

Chelles' gaze made it evident that he had received the same impression.

"One is sometimes inclined to deny your compatriots actual beauty to charge

them with producing the effect without having the features; but in this case you say you know the lady?"

"Yes: she's the wife of an old friend."

"The wife? She's married? There, again, it's so puzzling! Your young girls look so experienced, and your married women sometimes so unmarried."

"Well, they often are in these days of divorce!"

The other's interest quickened. "Your friend's divorced?"

"Oh, no; heaven forbid! Mrs. Marvell hasn't been long married; and it was a love-match of the good old kind."

"Ah and the husband? Which is he?"

"He's not here he's in New York."

"Feverishly adding to a fortune already monstrous?"

"No; not precisely monstrous. The Marvells are not well off," said
Bowen, amused by his friend's interrogations.
"And he allows an exquisite being like that to come to Paris without him and in company with the red-faced gentleman who seems so alive to his advantages?"

"We don't 'allow' our women this or that; I don't think we set much store by the compulsory virtues."

His companion received this with amusement. "If: you're as detached as that, why does the obsolete institution of marriage survive with you?"

"Oh, it still has its uses. One couldn't be divorced without it."

Chelles laughed again; but his straying eye still followed the same direction, and Bowen noticed that the fact was not unremarked by the object of his contemplation. Undine's party was one of the liveliest in the room: the American laugh rose above the din of the orchestra as the American toilets dominated the less daring effects at the other tables. Undine, on entering, had seemed to be in the same mood as her companions; but Bowen saw that, as she became conscious of his friend's observation, she isolated herself in a kind of soft abstraction; and he admired the adaptability which enabled her to draw from such surroundings the contrasting graces of reserve.

They had greeted each other with all the outer signs of cordiality, but Bowen fancied she would not care to have him speak to her. She was evidently dining

with Van Degen, and Van Degen's proximity was the last fact she would wish to have transmitted to the critics in Washington Square. Bowen was therefore surprised when, as he rose to leave the restaurant, he heard himself hailed by Peter.

"Hallo hold on! When did you come over? Mrs. Marvell's dying for the last news about the old homestead."

Undine's smile confirmed the appeal. She wanted to know how lately Bowen had left New York, and pressed him to tell her when he had last seen her boy, how he was looking, and whether Ralph had been persuaded to go down to Clare's on Saturdays and get a little riding and tennis? And dear Laura was she well too, and was Paul with her, or still with his grandmother? They were all dreadfully bad correspondents, and so was she. Undine laughingly admitted; and when Ralph had last written her these questions had still been undecided.

As she smiled up at Bowen he saw her glance stray to the spot where his companion hovered; and when the diners rose to move toward the garden for coffee she said, with a sweet note and a detaining smile: "Do come with us I haven't half finished."

Van Degen echoed the request, and Bowen, amused by Undine's arts, was presently introducing Chelles, and joining with him in the party's transit to the terrace. The rain had ceased, and under the clear evening sky the restaurant garden opened green depths that skilfully hid its narrow boundaries. Van Degen's company was large enough to surround two of the tables on the terrace, and Bowen noted the skill with which Undine, leaving him to Mrs. Shallum's care, contrived to draw Raymond de Chelles to the other table. Still more noticeable was the effect of this stratagem on Van Degen, who also found himself relegated to Mrs. Shallum's group. Poor Peter's state was betrayed by the irascibility which wreaked itself on a jostling waiter, and found cause for loud remonstrance in the coldness of the coffee and the badness of the cigars; and Bowen, with something more than the curiosity of the looker-on, wondered whether this were the real clue to Undine's conduct. He had always smiled at Mrs. Fairford's fears for Ralph's domestic peace. He thought Undine too clear-headed to forfeit the advantages of her marriage; but it now struck him that she might have had a glimpse of larger opportunities. Bowen, at the thought, felt the pang of the sociologist over the individual havoc wrought by every social readjustment: it had so long been clear to him that poor Ralph was a survival, and destined, as such, to go down in any conflict with the rising forces.