The Custom Of The Country VOL.II

By
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THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

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Some six weeks later. Undine Marvell stood at the window smiling down on her recovered Paris.

Her hotel sitting-room had, as usual, been flowered, cushioned and lamp-shaded into a delusive semblance of stability; and she had really felt, for the last few weeks, that the life she was leading there must be going to last it seemed so perfect an answer to all her wants!

As she looked out at the thronged street, on which the summer light lay like a blush of pleasure, she felt herself naturally akin to all the bright and careless freedom of the scene. She had been away from Paris for two days, and the spectacle before her seemed more rich and suggestive after her brief absence from it. Her senses luxuriated in all its material details: the thronging motors, the brilliant shops, the novelty and daring of the women's dresses, the piled-up colours of the ambulant flower-carts, the appetizing expanse of the fruiterers' windows, even the chromatic effects of the petits fours behind the plate-glass of the pastry-cooks: all the surface-sparkle and variety of the inexhaustible streets of Paris.

The scene before her typified to Undine her first real taste of life. How meagre and starved the past appeared in comparison with this abundant present! The noise, the crowd, the promiscuity beneath her eyes symbolized the glare and movement of her life. Every moment of her days was packed with excitement and exhilaration. Everything amused her: the long hours of bargaining and debate with dress-makers and jewellers, the crowded lunches at fashionable restaurants, the perfunctory dash through a picture-show or the lingering visit to the last new milliner; the afternoon motor-rush to some leafy suburb, where tea and musics and sunset were hastily absorbed on a crowded terrace above the Seine; the whirl home through the Bois to dress for dinner and start again on the round of evening diversions; the dinner at the Nouveau Luxe or the Café de Paris, and the little play at the Capucines or the Variétés, followed, because the night was "too lovely," and it was a shame to waste it, by a breathless flight back to the Bois, with supper in one of its lamp-hung restaurants, or, if the weather forbade, a tumultuous progress through the midnight haunts where "ladies" were not supposed to show themselves, and might consequently taste the thrill of being occasionally taken for their opposites.

As the varied vision unrolled itself, Undine contrasted it with the pale monotony of her previous summers. The one she most resented was the first after her marriage, the European summer out of whose joys she had been cheated by her own ignorance and Ralph's perversity. They had been free then, there had been no child to hamper their movements, their money anxieties had hardly begun, the face of life had been fresh and radiant, and she had been doomed to waste such opportunities on a succession of ill-smelling Italian towns. She still felt it to be her deepest grievance against her husband; and now that, after four years of petty household worries, another chance of escape had come, he already wanted to drag her back to bondage!

This fit of retrospection had been provoked by two letters which had come that morning. One was from Ralph, who began by reminding her that he had not heard from her for weeks, and went on to point out, in his usual tone of good-humoured remonstrance, that since her departure the drain on her letter of credit had been deep and constant. "I wanted you," he wrote, "to get all the fun you could out of the money I made last spring; but I didn't think you'd get through it quite so fast. Try to come home without leaving too many bills behind you. Your illness and Paul's cost more than I expected, and Lipscomb has had a bad knock in Wall Street, and hasn't yet paid his first quarter..."

Always the same monotonous refrain! Was it her fault that she and the boy had been ill? Or that Harry Lipscomb had been "on the wrong side" of Wall Street? Ralph seemed to have money on the brain: his business life had certainly deteriorated him. And, since he hadn't made a success of it after all, why shouldn't he turn back to literature and try to write his novel? Undine, the previous winter, had been dazzled by the figures which a well-known magazine editor, whom she had met at dinner had named as within reach of the successful novelist. She perceived for the first time that literature was becoming fashionable, and instantly decided that it would be amusing and original if she and Ralph should owe their prosperity to his talent. She already saw herself, as the wife of a celebrated author, wearing "artistic" dresses and doing the drawing-room over with Gothic tapestries and dim lights in altar candle-sticks. But when she suggested Ralph's taking up his novel he answered with a laugh that his brains were sold to the firm that when he came back at night the tank was empty...And now he wanted her to sail for home in a week!

The other letter excited a deeper resentment. It was an appeal from Laura Fairford to return and look after Ralph. He was overworked and out of spirits, she wrote, and his mother and sister, reluctant as they were to interfere, felt they ought to urge Undine to come back to him. Details followed, unwelcome and officious. What right had Laura Fairford to preach to her of wifely obligations? No doubt Charles Bowen had sent home a highly-coloured report and there was really a certain irony in Mrs. Fairford's criticizing her sister-in-law's conduct on information obtained from such a source! Undine turned

from the window and threw herself down on her deeply cushioned sofa. She was feeling the pleasant fatigue consequent on her trip to the country, whither she and Mrs. Shallum had gone with Raymond de Chelles to spend a night at the old Marquis's chateau. When her travelling companions, an hour earlier, had left her at her door, she had half-promised to rejoin them for a late dinner in the Bois; and as she leaned back among the cushions disturbing thoughts were banished by the urgent necessity of deciding what dress she should wear.

These bright weeks of the Parisian spring had given her a first real glimpse into the art of living. From the experts who had taught her to subdue the curves of her figure and soften her bright free stare with dusky pencillings, to the skilled purveyors of countless forms of pleasure the theatres and restaurants, the green and blossoming suburbs, the whole shining shifting spectacle of nights and days every sight and sound and word had combined to charm her perceptions and refine her taste. And her growing friendship with Raymond de Chelles had been the most potent of these influences.

Chelles, at once immensely "taken," had not only shown his eagerness to share in the helter-skelter motions of Undine's party, but had given her glimpses of another, still more brilliant existence, that life of the inaccessible "Faubourg" of which the first tantalizing hints had but lately reached her. Hitherto she had assumed that Paris existed for the stranger, that its native life was merely an obscure foundation for the dazzling superstructure of hotels and restaurants in which her compatriots disported themselves. But lately she had begun to hear about other American women, the women who had married into the French aristocracy, and who led, in the high-walled houses beyond the Seine which she had once thought so dull and dingy, a life that made her own seem as undistinguished as the social existence of the Mealey House. Perhaps what most exasperated her was the discovery, in this impenetrable group, of the Miss Wincher who had poisoned her far-off summer at Potash Springs. To recognize her old enemy in the Marquise de Trezac who so frequently figured in the Parisian chronicle was the more irritating to Undine because her intervening social experiences had caused her to look back on Nettie Wincher as a frumpy girl who wouldn't have "had a show" in New York.

Once more all the accepted values were reversed, and it turned out that Miss Wincher had been in possession of some key to success on which Undine had not yet put her hand. To know that others were indifferent to what she had thought important was to cheapen all present pleasure and turn the whole force of her desires in a new direction. What she wanted for the moment was to linger on in Paris, prolonging her flirtation with Chelles, and profiting by it to detach herself from her compatriots and enter doors closed to their approach. And Chelles himself attracted her: she thought him as "sweet" as she had once thought Ralph, whose fastidiousness and refinement were blent in him with a delightful foreign vivacity. His chief value, however, lay in his power of exciting

Van Degen's jealousy. She knew enough of French customs to be aware that such devotion as Chelles' was not likely to have much practical bearing on her future; but Peter had an alarming way of lapsing into security, and as a spur to his ardour she knew the value of other men's attentions.

It had become Undine's fixed purpose to bring Van Degen to a definite expression of his intentions. The case of Indiana Frusk, whose brilliant marriage the journals of two continents had recently chronicled with unprecedented richness of detail, had made less impression on him than she hoped. He treated it as a comic episode without special bearing on their case, and once, when Undine cited Rolliver's expensive fight for freedom as an instance of the power of love over the most invulnerable natures, had answered carelessly: "Oh, his first wife was a laundress, I believe."

But all about them couples were unpairing and pairing again with an ease and rapidity that encouraged Undine to bide her time. It was simply a question of making Van Degen want her enough, and of not being obliged to abandon the game before he wanted her as much as she meant he should. This was precisely what would happen if she were compelled to leave Paris now. Already the event had shown how right she had been to come abroad: the attention she attracted in Paris had reawakened Van Degen's fancy, and her hold over him was stronger than when they had parted in America. But the next step must be taken with coolness and circumspection; and she must not throw away what she had gained by going away at a stage when he was surer of her than she of him. She was still intensely considering these questions when the door behind her opened and he came in.

She looked up with a frown and he gave a deprecating laugh. "Didn't I knock? Don't look so savage! They told me downstairs you'd got back, and I just bolted in without thinking."

He had widened and purpled since their first encounter, five years earlier, but his features had not matured. His face was still the face of a covetous bullying boy, with a large appetite for primitive satisfactions and a sturdy belief in his intrinsic right to them. It was all the more satisfying to Undine's vanity to see his look change at her tone from command to conciliation, and from conciliation to the entreaty of a capriciously-treated animal.

"What a ridiculous hour for a visit!" she exclaimed, ignoring his excuse. "Well, if you disappear like that, without a word "

"I told my maid to telephone you I was going away."

"You couldn't make time to do it yourself, I suppose?"

"We rushed off suddenly; I'd hardly time to get to the station."

"You rushed off where, may I ask?" Van Degen still lowered down on her.

"Oh didn't I tell you? I've been down staying at Chelles' chateau in
Burgundy." Her face lit up and she raised herself eagerly on her elbow.
"It's the most wonderful old house you ever saw: a real castle, with towers, and water all round it, and a funny kind of bridge they pull up. Chelles said he wanted me to see just how they lived at home, and I did; I saw everything: the tapestries that Louis Quinze gave them, and the family portraits, and the chapel, where their own priest says mass, and they sit by themselves in a balcony with crowns all over it. The priest was a lovely old man he said he'd give anything to convert me. Do you know, I think there's something very beautiful about the Roman Catholic religion? I've often felt I might have been happier if I'd had some religious influence in my life."

She sighed a little, and turned her head away. She flattered herself that she had learned to strike the right note with Van Degen. At this crucial stage he needed a taste of his own methods, a glimpse of the fact that there were women in the world who could get on without him.

He continued to gaze down at her sulkily. "Were the old people there?
You never told me you knew his mother."
"I don't. They weren't there. But it didn't make a bit of difference, because Raymond sent down a cook from the Luxe."

"Oh, Lord," Van Degen groaned, dropping down on the end of the sofa.
"Was the cook got down to chaperon you?"
Undine laughed. "You talk like Ralph! I had Bertha with me."

"BERTHA!" His tone of contempt surprised her. She had supposed that Mrs.
Shallum's presence had made the visit perfectly correct.
"You went without knowing his parents, and without their inviting you? Don't you know what that sort of thing means out here? Chelles did it to brag about you at his club. He wants to compromise you that's his game!"

"Do you suppose he does?" A flicker of a smile crossed her lips. "I'm so unconventional: when I like a man I never stop to think about such things. But I ought to, of course you're quite right." She looked at Van Degen thoughtfully. "At any rate, he's not a married man."

Van Degen had got to his feet again and was standing accusingly before her; but as she spoke the blood rose to his neck and ears. "What difference does that make?"

"It might make a good deal. I see," she added, "how careful I ought to be about going round with you."

"With ME?" His face fell at the retort; then he broke into a laugh. He adored Undine's "smartness," which was of precisely the same quality as his own. "Oh, that's another thing: you can always trust me to look after you!"

"With your reputation? Much obliged!"

Van Degen smiled. She knew he liked such allusions, and was pleased that she thought him compromising.

"Oh, I'm as good as gold. You've made a new man of me!"

"Have I?" She considered him in silence for a moment. "I wonder what you've done to me but make a discontented woman of me discontented with everything I had before I knew you?"

The change of tone was thrilling to him. He forgot her mockery, forgot his rival, and sat down at her side, almost in possession of her waist. "Look here," he asked, "where are we going to dine to-night?"

His nearness was not agreeable to Undine, but she liked his free way, his contempt for verbal preliminaries. Ralph's reserves and delicacies, his perpetual desire that he and she should be attuned to the same key, had always vaguely bored her; whereas in Van Degen's manner she felt a hint of the masterful way that had once subdued her in Elmer Moffatt. But she drew back, releasing herself.

"To-night? I can't I'm engaged."

"I know you are: engaged to ME! You promised last Sunday you'd dine with me out of town to-night."

"How can I remember what I promised last Sunday? Besides, after what you've said, I see I oughtn't to."

"What do you mean by what I've said?"

"Why, that I'm imprudent; that people are talking "

He stood up with an angry laugh. "I suppose you're dining with Chelles.
Is that it?"
"Is that the way you cross-examine Clare?"

"I don't care a hang what Clare does I never have."

"That must in some ways be rather convenient for her!"

"Glad you think so. ARE you dining with him?"

She slowly turned the wedding-ring upon her finger. "You know I'm NOT married to you yet!"

He took a random turn through the room; then he came back and planted himself wrathfully before her. "Can't you see the man's doing his best to make a fool of you?"

She kept her amused gaze on him. "Does it strike you that it's such an awfully easy thing to do?"

The edges of his ears were purple. "I sometimes think it's easier for these damned little dancing-masters than for one of us."

Undine was still smiling up at him; but suddenly her grew grave. "What does it matter what I do or don't do, when Ralph has ordered me home next week?"

"Ordered you home?" His face changed. "Well, you're not going, are you?"

"What's the use of saying such things?" She gave a disenchanted laugh. "I'm a poor man's wife, and can't do the things my friends do. It's not because Ralph loves me that he wants me back it's simply because he can't afford to let me stay!"

Van Degen's perturbation was increasing. "But you mustn't go it's preposterous! Why should a woman like you be sacrificed when a lot of dreary frumps have everything they want? Besides, you can't chuck me like this! Why, we're all to motor down to Aix next week, and perhaps take a dip into Italy "

"OH, ITALY " she murmured on a note of yearning.

He was closer now, and had her hands. "You'd love that, wouldn't you? As far as Venice, anyhow; and then in August there's Trouville you've never tried Trouville? There's an awfully jolly crowd there and the motoring's ripping in Normandy. If you say so I'll take a villa there instead of going back to Newport. And I'll put the Sorceress in commission, and you can make up parties and run off whenever you like, to Scotland or Norway " He hung above her. "Don't dine with Chelles to-night! Come with me, and we'll talk things over; and next week we'll run down to Trouville to choose the villa."

Undine's heart was beating fast, but she felt within her a strange lucid force of resistance. Because of that sense of security she left her hands in Van Degen's. So Mr. Spragg might have felt at the tensest hour of the Pure Water move. She leaned forward, holding her suitor off by the pressure of her bent-back palms.

"Kiss me good-bye, Peter; I sail on Wednesday," she said.

It was the first time she had permitted him a kiss, and as his face darkened down on her she felt a moment's recoil. But her physical reactions were never very acute: she always vaguely wondered why people made "such a fuss," were so violently for or against such demonstrations. A cool spirit within her seemed to watch over and regulate her sensations, and leave her capable of measuring the intensity of those she provoked.

She turned to look at the clock. "You must go now I shall be hours late for dinner."

"Go after that?" He held her fast. "Kiss me again," he commanded.

It was wonderful how cool she felt how easily she could slip out of his grasp! Any man could be managed like a child if he were really in love with one....

"Don't be a goose, Peter; do you suppose I'd have kissed you if "

"If what what what?" he mimicked her ecstatically, not listening.

She saw that if she wished to make him hear her she must put more distance between them, and she rose and moved across the room. From the fireplace she turned to add "if we hadn't been saying good-bye?"

"Good-bye now? What's the use of talking like that?" He jumped up and followed her. "Look here, Undine I'll do anything on earth you want; only don't talk of going! If you'll only stay I'll make it all as straight and square as you please. I'll get Bertha Shallum to stop over with you for the summer; I'll take a house at Trouville and make my wife come out there. Hang it, she SHALL, if you say so! Only be a little good to me!"

Still she stood before him without speaking, aware that her implacable brows and narrowed lips would hold him off as long as she chose.

"What's the matter. Undine? Why don't you answer? You know you can't go back to that deadly dry-rot!"

She swept about on him with indignant eyes. "I can't go on with my present life either. It's hateful as hateful as the other. If I don't go home I've got to decide on something different."

"What do you mean by 'something different'?" She was silent, and he insisted: "Are you really thinking of marrying Chelles?"

She started as if he had surprised a secret. "I'll never forgive you if you speak of it "

"Good Lord! Good Lord!" he groaned.

She remained motionless, with lowered lids, and he went up to her and pulled her about so that she faced him. "Undine, honour bright do you think he'll marry you?"

She looked at him with a sudden hardness in her eyes. "I really can't discuss such things with you."

"Oh, for the Lord's sake don't take that tone! I don't half know what I'm saying...but you mustn't throw yourself away a second time. I'll do anything you want I swear I will!"

A knock on the door sent them apart, and a servant entered with a telegram.

Undine turned away to the window with the narrow blue slip. She was glad of the interruption: the sense of what she had at stake made her want to pause a moment and to draw breath.

The message was a long cable signed with Laura Fairford's name. It told her that Ralph had been taken suddenly ill with pneumonia, that his condition was serious and that the doctors advised his wife's immediate return.

Undine had to read the words over two or three times to get them into her crowded mind; and even after she had done so she needed more time to see their bearing on her own situation. If the message had concerned her boy her brain would have acted more quickly. She had never troubled herself over the possibility of Paul's falling ill in her

absence, but she understood now that if the cable had been about him she would have rushed to the earliest steamer. With Ralph it was different. Ralph was always perfectly well she could not picture him as being suddenly at death's door and in need of her. Probably his mother and sister had had a panic: they were always full of sentimental terrors. The next moment an angry suspicion flashed across her: what if the cable were a device of the Marvell women to bring her back? Perhaps it had been sent with Ralph's connivance! No doubt Bowen had written home about her Washington Square had received some monstrous report of her doings!... Yes, the cable was clearly an echo of Laura's letter mother and daughter had cooked it up to spoil her pleasure. Once the thought had occurred to her it struck root in her mind and began to throw out giant branches. Van Degen followed her to the window, his face still flushed and working. "What's the matter?" he asked, as she continued to stare silently at the telegram.

She crumpled the strip of paper in her hand. If only she had been alone, had had a chance to think out her answers!

"What on earth's the matter?" he repeated.

"Oh, nothing nothing."

"Nothing? When you're as white as a sheet?"

"Am I?" She gave a slight laugh. "It's only a cable from home."

"Ralph?"

She hesitated. "No. Laura."

"What the devil is SHE cabling you about?"

"She says Ralph wants me."

"Now at once?"

"At once."

Van Degen laughed impatiently. "Why don't he tell you so himself? What business is it of Laura Fairford's?"

Undine's gesture implied a "What indeed?"

"Is that all she says?"

She hesitated again. "Yes that's all." As she spoke she tossed the telegram into the basket beneath the writing-table. "As if I didn't HAVE to go anyhow?" she exclaimed.

With an aching clearness of vision she saw what lay before her the hurried preparations, the long tedious voyage on a steamer chosen at haphazard, the arrival in the deadly July heat, and the relapse into all the insufferable daily fag of nursery and kitchen she saw it and her imagination recoiled.

Van Degen's eyes still hung on her: she guessed that he was intensely engaged in trying to follow what was passing through her mind. Presently he came up to her again, no longer perilous and importunate, but awkwardly tender, ridiculously moved by her distress.

"Undine, listen: won't you let me make it all right for you to stay?"

Her heart began to beat more quickly, and she let him come close, meeting his eyes coldly but without anger.

"What do you call 'making it all right'? Paying my bills? Don't you see that's what I hate, and will never let myself be dragged into again?" She laid her hand on his arm. "The time has come when I must be sensible, Peter; that's why we must say good-bye."

"Do you mean to tell me you're going back to Ralph?"

She paused a moment; then she murmured between her lips: "I shall never go back to him."

"Then you DO mean to marry Chelles?"

"I've told you we must say good-bye. I've got to look out for my future."

He stood before her, irresolute, tormented, his lazy mind and impatient senses labouring with a problem beyond their power. "Ain't I here to look out for your future?" he said at last.

"No one shall look out for it in the way you mean. I'd rather never see you again "

He gave her a baffled stare. "Oh, damn it if that's the way you feel!"
He turned and flung away toward the door.

She stood motionless where he left her, every nerve strung to the highest pitch of watchfulness. As she stood there, the scene about her stamped itself on her brain with the sharpest precision. She was aware of the fading of the summer light outside, of the movements of her maid, who was laying out her dinner-dress in the room beyond, and of the fact that the tea-roses on her writing-table, shaken by Van Degen's tread, were dropping their petals over Ralph's letter, and down on the crumpled telegram which she could see through the trellised sides of the scrap-basket.

In another moment Van Degen would be gone. Worse yet, while he wavered in the doorway the Shallums and Chelles, after vainly awaiting her, might dash back from the Bois and break in on them. These and other chances rose before her, urging her to action; but she held fast, immovable, unwavering, a proud yet plaintive image of renunciation.

Van Degen's hand was on the door. He half-opened it and then turned back.

"That's all you've got to say, then?"

"That's all."

He jerked the door open and passed out. She saw him stop in the ante-room to pick up his hat and stick, his heavy figure silhouetted against the glare of the wall-lights. A ray of the same light fell on her where she stood in the unlit sitting-room, and her reflection bloomed out like a flower from the mirror that faced her. She looked at the image and waited. Van Degen put his hat on his head and slowly opened the door into the outer hall. Then he turned abruptly, his bulk eclipsing her reflection as he plunged back into the room and came up to her.

"I'll do anything you say. Undine; I'll do anything in God's world to keep you!"

She turned her eyes from the mirror and let them rest on his face, which looked as small and withered as an old man's, with a lower lip that trembled queerly....

XXI

The spring in New York proceeded through more than its usual extremes of temperature to the threshold of a sultry June.

Ralph Marvell, wearily bent to his task, felt the fantastic humours of the weather as only one more incoherence in the general chaos of his case. It was strange enough, after four years of marriage, to find himself again in his old brown room in Washington Square. It was hardly there that he had expected Pegasus to land him; and, like a man returning to the scenes of his childhood, he found everything on a much smaller scale than he had imagined. Had the Dagonet boundaries really narrowed, or had the breach in the walls of his own life let in a wider vision?

Certainly there had come to be other differences between his present and his former self than that embodied in the presence of his little boy in the next room. Paul, in fact, was now the chief link between Ralph and his past. Concerning his son he still felt and thought, in a general way, in the terms of the Dagonet tradition; he still wanted to implant in Paul some of the reserves and discriminations which divided that tradition from the new spirit of limitless concession. But for himself it was different. Since his transaction with Moffatt he had had the sense of living under a new dispensation. He was not sure that it was any worse than the other; but then he was no longer very sure about anything. Perhaps this growing indifference was merely the reaction from a long nervous strain: that his mother and sister thought it so was shown by the way in which they mutely watched and hovered. Their discretion was like the hushed tread about a sick-bed. They permitted themselves no criticism of Undine; he was asked no awkward questions, subjected to no ill-timed sympathy. They simply took him back, on his own terms, into the life he had left them to; and their silence had none of those subtle implications of disapproval which may be so much more wounding than speech.

For a while he received a weekly letter from Undine. Vague and disappointing though they were, these missives helped him through the days; but he looked forward to them rather as a pretext for replies than for their actual contents. Undine was never at a loss for the spoken word: Ralph had often wondered at her verbal range and her fluent use of terms outside the current vocabulary. She had certainly not picked these up in books, since she never opened one: they seemed rather like some odd transmission of her preaching grandparent's oratory. But in her brief and colourless letters she repeated the same bald statements in the same few terms. She was well, she had been "round" with Bertha Shallum, she had dined with the Jim Driscolls or May Beringer or Dicky Bowles, the weather was too lovely or too awful; such was the gist of her news. On the last page she hoped Paul was well and sent him a kiss; but she never made a suggestion concerning his care or asked a question about his pursuits. One could only infer that,

knowing in what good hands he was, she judged such solicitude superfluous; and it was thus that Ralph put the matter to his mother.

"Of course she's not worrying about the boy why should she? She knows that with you and Laura he's as happy as a king."

To which Mrs. Marvell would answer gravely: "When you write, be sure to say I shan't put on his thinner flannels as long as this east wind lasts."

As for her husband's welfare. Undine's sole allusion to it consisted in the invariable expression of the hope that he was getting along all right: the phrase was always the same, and Ralph learned to know just how far down the third page to look for it. In a postscript she sometimes asked him to tell her mother about a new way of doing hair or cutting a skirt; and this was usually the most eloquent passage of the letter. What satisfaction he extracted from these communications he would have found it hard to say; yet when they did not come he missed them hardly less than if they had given him all he craved. Sometimes the mere act of holding the blue or mauve sheet and breathing its scent was like holding his wife's hand and being enveloped in her fresh young fragrance: the sentimental disappointment vanished in the penetrating physical sensation. In other moods it was enough to trace the letters of the first line and the last for the desert of perfunctory phrases between the two to vanish, leaving him only the vision of their interlaced names, as of a mystic bond which her own hand had tied. Or else he saw her, closely, palpably before him, as she sat at her writing-table, frowning and a little flushed, her bent nape showing the light on her hair, her short lip pulled up by the effort of composition; and this picture had the violent reality of dream-images on the verge of waking. At other times, as he read her letter, he felt simply that at least in the moment of writing it she had been with him. But in one of the last she had said (to excuse a bad blot and an incoherent sentence): "Everybody's talking to me at once, and I don't know what I'm writing." That letter he had thrown into the fire....

After the first few weeks, the letters came less and less regularly: at the end of two months they ceased. Ralph had got into the habit of watching for them on the days when a foreign post was due, and as the weeks went by without a sign he began to invent excuses for leaving the office earlier and hurrying back to Washington Square to search the letter-box for a big tinted envelope with a straggling blotted superscription.

Undine's departure had given him a momentary sense of liberation: at that stage in their relations any change would have brought relief. But now that she was gone he knew she could never really go. Though his feeling for her had changed, it still ruled his life. If he saw her in her weakness he felt her in her power: the power of youth and physical radiance that clung to his disenchanted memories as the scent she used clung to her

letters. Looking back at their four years of marriage he began to ask himself if he had done all he could to draw her half-formed spirit from its sleep. Had he not expected too much at first, and grown too indifferent in the sequel? After all, she was still in the toy age; and perhaps the very extravagance of his love had retarded her growth, helped to imprison her in a little circle of frivolous illusions. But the last months had made a man of him, and when she came back he would know how to lift her to the height of his experience.

So he would reason, day by day, as he hastened back to Washington Square; but when he opened the door, and his first glance at the hall table showed him there was no letter there, his illusions shrivelled down to their weak roots. She had not written: she did not mean to write. He and the boy were no longer a part of her life. When she came back everything would be as it had been before, with the dreary difference that she had tasted new pleasures and that their absence would take the savour from all he had to give her. Then the coming of another foreign mail would lift his hopes, and as he hurried home he would imagine new reasons for expecting a letter....

Week after week he swung between the extremes of hope and dejection, and at last, when the strain had become unbearable, he cabled her. The answer ran: "Very well best love writing"; but the promised letter never came....

He went on steadily with his work: he even passed through a phase of exaggerated energy. But his baffled youth fought in him for air. Was this to be the end? Was he to wear his life out in useless drudgery? The plain prose of it, of course, was that the economic situation remained unchanged by the sentimental catastrophe and that he must go on working for his wife and child. But at any rate, as it was mainly for Paul that he would henceforth work, it should be on his own terms and according to his inherited notions of "straightness." He would never again engage in any transaction resembling his compact with Moffatt. Even now he was not sure there had been anything crooked in that; but the fact of his having instinctively referred the point to Mr. Spragg rather than to his grandfather implied a presumption against it.

His partners were quick to profit by his sudden spurt of energy, and his work grew no lighter. He was not only the youngest and most recent member of the firm, but the one who had so far added least to the volume of its business. His hours were the longest, his absences, as summer approached, the least frequent and the most grudgingly accorded. No doubt his associates knew that he was pressed for money and could not risk a break. They "worked" him, and he was aware of it, and submitted because he dared not lose his job. But the long hours of mechanical drudgery were telling on his active body and undisciplined nerves. He had begun too late to subject himself to the persistent mortification of spirit and flesh which is a condition of the average business life; and

after the long dull days in the office the evenings at his grandfather's whist-table did not give him the counter-stimulus he needed.

Almost every one had gone out of town; but now and then Miss Ray came to dine, and Ralph, seated beneath the family portraits and opposite the desiccated Harriet, who had already faded to the semblance of one of her own great-aunts, listened languidly to the kind of talk that the originals might have exchanged about the same table when New York gentility centred in the Battery and the Bowling Green. Mr. Dagonet was always pleasant to see and hear, but his sarcasms were growing faint and recondite: they had as little bearing on life as the humours of a Restoration comedy. As for Mrs. Marvell and Miss Ray, they seemed to the young man even more spectrally remote: hardly anything that mattered to him existed for them, and their prejudices reminded him of sign-posts warning off trespassers who have long since ceased to intrude.

Now and then he dined at his club and went on to the theatre with some young men of his own age; but he left them afterward, half vexed with himself for not being in the humour to prolong the adventure. There were moments when he would have liked to affirm his freedom in however commonplace a way: moments when the vulgarest way would have seemed the most satisfying. But he always ended by walking home alone and tip-toeing upstairs through the sleeping house lest he should wake his boy....

On Saturday afternoons, when the business world was hurrying to the country for golf and tennis, he stayed in town and took Paul to see the Spraggs. Several times since his wife's departure he had tried to bring about closer relations between his own family and Undine's; and the ladies of Washington Square, in their eagerness to meet his wishes, had made various friendly advances to Mrs. Spragg. But they were met by a mute resistance which made Ralph suspect that Undine's strictures on his family had taken root in her mother's brooding mind; and he gave up the struggle to bring together what had been so effectually put asunder.

If he regretted his lack of success it was chiefly because he was so sorry for the Spraggs. Soon after Undine's marriage they had abandoned their polychrome suite at the Stentorian, and since then their peregrinations had carried them through half the hotels of the metropolis. Undine, who had early discovered her mistake in thinking hotel life fashionable, had tried to persuade her parents to take a house of their own; but though they refrained from taxing her with inconsistency they did not act on her suggestion. Mrs. Spragg seemed to shrink from the thought of "going back to house-keeping," and Ralph suspected that she depended on the transit from hotel to hotel as the one element of variety in her life. As for Mr. Spragg, it was impossible to imagine any one in whom the domestic sentiments were more completely unlocalized and disconnected from any fixed habits; and he was probably aware of his changes of abode chiefly as they obliged

him to ascend from the Subway, or descend from the "Elevated," a few blocks higher up or lower down.

Neither husband nor wife complained to Ralph of their frequent displacements, or assigned to them any cause save the vague one of "guessing they could do better"; but Ralph noticed that the decreasing luxury of their life synchronized with Undine's growing demands for money. During the last few months they had transferred themselves to the "Malibran," a tall narrow structure resembling a grain-elevator divided into cells, where linoleum and lincrusta simulated the stucco and marble of the Stentorian, and fagged business men and their families consumed the watery stews dispensed by "coloured help" in the grey twilight of a basement dining-room.

Mrs. Spragg had no sitting-room, and Paul and his father had to be received in one of the long public parlours, between ladies seated at rickety desks in the throes of correspondence and groups of listlessly conversing residents and callers.

The Spraggs were intensely proud of their grandson, and Ralph perceived that they would have liked to see Paul charging uproariously from group to group, and thrusting his bright curls and cherubic smile upon the general attention. The fact that the boy preferred to stand between his grandfather's knees and play with Mr. Spragg's Masonic emblem, or dangle his legs from the arm of Mrs. Spragg's chair, seemed to his grandparents evidence of ill-health or undue repression, and he was subjected by Mrs. Spragg to searching enquiries as to how his food set, and whether he didn't think his Popper was too strict with him. A more embarrassing problem was raised by the "surprise" (in the shape of peanut candy or chocolate creams) which he was invited to hunt for in Gran'ma's pockets, and which Ralph had to confiscate on the way home lest the dietary rules of Washington Square should be too visibly infringed.

Sometimes Ralph found Mrs. Heeny, ruddy and jovial, seated in the arm-chair opposite Mrs. Spragg, and regaling her with selections from a new batch of clippings. During Undine's illness of the previous winter Mrs. Heeny had become a familiar figure to Paul, who had learned to expect almost as much from her bag as from his grandmother's pockets; so that the intemperate Saturdays at the Malibran were usually followed by languid and abstemious Sundays in Washington Square. Mrs. Heeny, being unaware of this sequel to her bounties, formed the habit of appearing regularly on Saturdays, and while she chatted with his grandmother the little boy was encouraged to scatter the grimy carpet with face-creams and bunches of clippings in his thrilling quest for the sweets at the bottom of her bag.

"I declare, if he ain't in just as much of a hurry f'r everything as his mother!" she exclaimed one day in her rich rolling voice; and stooping to pick up a long strip of

newspaper which Paul had flung aside she added, as she smoothed it out: "I guess 'f he was a little mite older he'd be better pleased with this 'n with the candy. It's the very thing I was trying to find for you the other day, Mrs. Spragg," she went on, holding the bit of paper at arm's length; and she began to read out, with a loudness proportioned to the distance between her eyes and the text:

"With two such sprinters as 'Pete' Van Degen and Dicky Bowles to set the pace, it's no wonder the New York set in Paris has struck a livelier gait than ever this spring. It's a high-pressure season and no mistake, and no one lags behind less than the fascinating Mrs. Ralph Marvell, who is to be seen daily and nightly in all the smartest restaurants and naughtiest theatres, with so many devoted swains in attendance that the rival beauties of both worlds are said to be making catty comments. But then Mrs. Marvell's gowns are almost as good as her looks and how can you expect the other women to stand for such a monopoly?"

To escape the strain of these visits, Ralph once or twice tried the experiment of leaving Paul with his grand-parents and calling for him in the late afternoon; but one day, on re-entering the Malibran, he was met by a small abashed figure clad in a kaleidoscopic tartan and a green velvet cap with a silver thistle. After this experience of the "surprises" of which Gran'ma was capable when she had a chance to take Paul shopping Ralph did not again venture to leave his son, and their subsequent Saturdays were passed together in the sultry gloom of the Malibran. Conversation with the Spraggs was almost impossible. Ralph could talk with his father-in-law in his office, but in the hotel parlour Mr. Spragg sat in a ruminating silence broken only by the emission of an occasional "Well well" addressed to his grandson. As for Mrs. Spragg, her son-in-law could not remember having had a sustained conversation with her since the distant day when he had first called at the Stentorian, and had been "entertained," in Undine's absence, by her astonished mother. The shock of that encounter had moved Mrs. Spragg to eloquence; but Ralph's entrance into the family, without making him seem less of a stranger, appeared once for all to have relieved her of the obligation of finding something to say to him.

The one question she invariably asked: "You heard from Undie?" had been relatively easy to answer while his wife's infrequent letters continued to arrive; but a Saturday came when he felt the blood rise to his temples as, for the fourth consecutive week, he stammered out, under the snapping eyes of Mrs. Heeny: "No, not by this post either I begin to think I must have lost a letter"; and it was then that Mr. Spragg, who had sat silently looking up at the ceiling, cut short his wife's exclamation by an enquiry about real estate in the Bronx. After that, Ralph noticed, Mrs. Spragg never again renewed her question; and he understood that his father-in-law had guessed his embarrassment and wished to spare it.

Ralph had never thought of looking for any delicacy of feeling under Mr. Spragg's large lazy irony, and the incident drew the two men nearer together. Mrs. Spragg, for her part, was certainly not delicate; but she was simple and without malice, and Ralph liked her for her silent acceptance of her diminished state. Sometimes, as he sat between the lonely primitive old couple, he wondered from what source Undine's voracious ambitions had been drawn: all she cared for, and attached importance to, was as remote from her parents' conception of life as her impatient greed from their passive stoicism.

One hot afternoon toward the end of June Ralph suddenly wondered if Clare Van Degen were still in town. She had dined in Washington Square some ten days earlier, and he remembered her saying that she had sent the children down to Long Island, but that she herself meant to stay on in town till the heat grew unbearable. She hated her big showy place on Long Island, she was tired of the spring trip to London and Paris, where one met at every turn the faces one had grown sick of seeing all winter, and she declared that in the early summer New York was the only place in which one could escape from New Yorkers... She put the case amusingly, and it was like her to take up any attitude that went against the habits of her set; but she lived at the mercy of her moods, and one could never tell how long any one of them would rule her.

As he sat in his office, with the noise and glare of the endless afternoon rising up in hot waves from the street, there wandered into Ralph's mind a vision of her shady drawing-room. All day it hung before him like the mirage of a spring before a dusty traveller: he felt a positive thirst for her presence, for the sound of her voice, the wide spaces and luxurious silences surrounding her.

It was perhaps because, on that particular day, a spiral pain was twisting around in the back of his head, and digging in a little deeper with each twist, and because the figures on the balance sheet before him were hopping about like black imps in an infernal forward-and-back, that the picture hung there so persistently. It was a long time since he had wanted anything as much as, at that particular moment, he wanted to be with Clare and hear her voice; and as soon as he had ground out the day's measure of work he rang up the Van Degen palace and learned that she was still in town.

The lowered awnings of her inner drawing-room cast a luminous shadow on old cabinets and consoles, and on the pale flowers scattered here and there in vases of bronze and porcelain. Clare's taste was as capricious as her moods, and the rest of the house was not in harmony with this room. There was, in particular, another drawing-room, which she now described as Peter's creation, but which Ralph knew to be partly hers: a heavily decorated apartment, where Popple's portrait of her throned over a waste of gilt furniture. It was characteristic that to-day she had had Ralph shown in by another

way; and that, as she had spared him the polyphonic drawing-room, so she had skilfully adapted her own appearance to her soberer background. She sat near the window, reading, in a clear cool dress: and at his entrance she merely slipped a finger between the pages and looked up at him.

Her way of receiving him made him feel that restlessness and stridency were as unlike her genuine self as the gilded drawing-room, and that this quiet creature was the only real Clare, the Clare who had once been so nearly his, and who seemed to want him to know that she had never wholly been any one else's.

"Why didn't you let me know you were still in town?" he asked, as he sat down in the sofa-corner near her chair.

Her dark smile deepened. "I hoped you'd come and see."

"One never knows, with you."

He was looking about the room with a kind of confused pleasure in its pale shadows and spots of dark rich colour. The old lacquer screen behind Clare's head looked like a lustreless black pool with gold leaves floating on it; and another piece, a little table at her elbow, had the brown bloom and the pear-like curves of an old violin.

"I like to be here," Ralph said.

She did not make the mistake of asking: "Then why do you never come?" Instead, she turned away and drew an inner curtain across the window to shut out the sunlight which was beginning to slant in under the awning.

The mere fact of her not answering, and the final touch of well-being which her gesture gave, reminded him of other summer days they had spent together long rambling boy-and-girl days in the hot woods and fields, when they had never thought of talking to each other unless there was something they particularly wanted to say. His tired fancy strayed off for a second to the thought of what it would have been like come back, at the end of the day, to such a sweet community of silence; but his mind was too crowded with importunate facts for any lasting view of visionary distances. The thought faded, and he merely felt how restful it was to have her near...

"I'm glad you stayed in town: you must let me come again," he said.

"I suppose you can't always get away," she answered; and she began to listen, with grave intelligent eyes, to his description of his tedious days.

With her eyes on him he felt the exquisite relief of talking about himself as he had not dared to talk to any one since his marriage. He would not for the world have confessed his discouragement, his consciousness of incapacity; to Undine and in Washington Square any hint of failure would have been taken as a criticism of what his wife demanded of him. Only to Clare Van Degen could he cry out his present despondency and his loathing of the interminable task ahead.

"A man doesn't know till he tries it how killing uncongenial work is, and how it destroys the power of doing what one's fit for, even if there's time for both. But there's Paul to be looked out for, and I daren't chuck my job I'm in mortal terror of its chucking me..."

Little by little he slipped into a detailed recital of all his lesser worries, the most recent of which was his experience with the Lipscombs, who, after a two months' tenancy of the West End Avenue house, had decamped without paying their rent.

Clare laughed contemptuously. "Yes I heard he'd come to grief and been suspended from the Stock Exchange, and I see in the papers that his wife's retort has been to sue for a divorce."

Ralph knew that, like all their clan, his cousin regarded a divorce-suit as a vulgar and unnecessary way of taking the public into one's confidence. His mind flashed back to the family feast in Washington Square in celebration of his engagement. He recalled his grandfather's chance allusion to Mrs. Lipscomb, and Undine's answer, fluted out on her highest note: "Oh, I guess she'll get a divorce pretty soon. He's been a disappointment to her."

Ralph could still hear the horrified murmur with which his mother had rebuked his laugh. For he had laughed had thought Undine's speech fresh and natural! Now he felt the ironic rebound of her words. Heaven knew he had been a disappointment to her; and what was there in her own feeling, or in her inherited prejudices, to prevent her seeking the same redress as Mabel Lipscomb? He wondered if the same thought were in his cousin's mind...

They began to talk of other things: books, pictures, plays; and one by one the closed doors opened and light was let into dusty shuttered places. Clare's mind was neither keen nor deep: Ralph, in the past, had smiled at her rash ardours and vague intensities. But she had his own range of allusions, and a great gift of momentary understanding; and he had so long beaten his thoughts out against a blank wall of incomprehension that her sympathy seemed full of insight.

She began by a question about his writing, but the subject was distasteful to him, and he turned the talk to a new book in which he had been interested. She knew enough of it to slip in the right word here and there; and thence they wandered on to kindred topics. Under the warmth of her attention his torpid ideas awoke again, and his eyes took their fill of pleasure as she leaned forward, her thin brown hands clasped on her knees and her eager face reflecting all his feelings.

There was a moment when the two currents of sensation were merged in one, and he began to feel confusedly that he was young and she was kind, and that there was nothing he would like better than to go on sitting there, not much caring what she said or how he answered, if only she would let him look at her and give him one of her thin brown hands to hold. Then the corkscrew in the back of his head dug into him again with a deeper thrust, and she seemed suddenly to recede to a great distance and be divided from him by a fog of pain. The fog lifted after a minute, but it left him queerly remote from her, from the cool room with its scents and shadows, and from all the objects which, a moment before, had so sharply impinged upon his senses. It was as though he looked at it all through a rain-blurred pane, against which his hand would strike if he held it out to her...

That impression passed also, and he found himself thinking how tired he was and how little anything mattered. He recalled the unfinished piece of work on his desk, and for a moment had the odd illusion that it was there before him...

She exclaimed: "But are you going?" and her exclamation made him aware that he had left his seat and was standing in front of her... He fancied there was some kind of appeal in her brown eyes; but she was so dim and far off that he couldn't be sure of what she wanted, and the next moment he found himself shaking hands with her, and heard her saying something kind and cold about its having been so nice to see him...

Half way up the stairs little Paul, shining and rosy from supper, lurked in ambush for his evening game. Ralph was fond of stooping down to let the boy climb up his outstretched arms to his shoulders, but to-day, as he did so, Paul's hug seemed to crush him in a vice, and the shout of welcome that accompanied it racked his ears like an explosion of steam-whistles. The queer distance between himself and the rest of the world was annihilated again: everything stared and glared and clutched him. He tried to turn away his face from the child's hot kisses; and as he did so he caught sight of a mauve envelope among the hats and sticks on the hall table.

Instantly he passed Paul over to his nurse, stammered out a word about being tired, and sprang up the long flights to his study. The pain in his head had stopped, but his hands trembled as he tore open the envelope. Within it was a second letter bearing a French

stamp and addressed to himself. It looked like a business communication and had apparently been sent to Undine's hotel in Paris and forwarded to him by her hand. "Another bill!" he reflected grimly, as he threw it aside and felt in the outer envelope for her letter. There was nothing there, and after a first sharp pang of disappointment he picked up the enclosure and opened it.

Inside was a lithographed circular, headed "Confidential" and bearing the Paris address of a firm of private detectives who undertook, in conditions of attested and inviolable discretion, to investigate "delicate" situations, look up doubtful antecedents, and furnish reliable evidence of misconduct all on the most reasonable terms.

For a long time Ralph sat and stared at this document; then he began to laugh and tossed it into the scrap-basket. After that, with a groan, he dropped his head against the edge of his writing table.

XXII

When he woke, the first thing he remembered was the fact of having cried.

He could not think how he had come to be such a fool. He hoped to heaven no one had seen him. He supposed he must have been worrying about the unfinished piece of work at the office: where was it, by the way, he wondered? Why where he had left it the day before, of course! What a ridiculous thing to worry about but it seemed to follow him about like a dog...

He said to himself that he must get up presently and go down to the office. Presently when he could open his eyes. Just now there was a dead weight on them; he tried one after another in vain. The effort set him weakly trembling, and he wanted to cry again. Nonsense! He must get out of bed.

He stretched his arms out, trying to reach something to pull himself up by; but everything slipped away and evaded him. It was like trying to catch at bright short waves. Then suddenly his fingers clasped themselves about something firm and warm. A hand: a hand that gave back his pressure! The relief was inexpressible. He lay still and let the hand hold him, while mentally he went through the motions of getting up and beginning to dress. So indistinct were the boundaries between thought and action that he really felt himself moving about the room, in a queer disembodied way, as one treads the air in sleep. Then he felt the bedclothes over him and the pillows under his head.

"I MUST get up," he said, and pulled at the hand.

It pressed him down again: down into a dim deep pool of sleep. He lay there for a long time, in a silent blackness far below light and sound; then he gradually floated to the surface with the buoyancy of a dead body. But his body had never been more alive. Jagged strokes of pain tore through it, hands dragged at it with nails that bit like teeth. They wound thongs about him, bound him, tied weights to him, tried to pull him down with them; but still he floated, floated, danced on the fiery waves of pain, with barbed light pouring down on him from an arrowy sky.

Charmed intervals of rest, blue sailings on melodious seas, alternated with the anguish. He became a leaf on the air, a feather on a current, a straw on the tide, the spray of the wave spinning itself to sunshine as the wave toppled over into gulfs of blue...

He woke on a stony beach, his legs and arms still lashed to his sides and the thongs cutting into him; but the fierce sky was hidden, and hidden by his own languid lids. He

felt the ecstasy of decreasing pain, and courage came to him to open his eyes and look about him...

The beach was his own bed; the tempered light lay on familiar things, and some one was moving about in a shadowy way between bed and window. He was thirsty and some one gave him a drink. His pillow burned, and some one turned the cool side out. His brain was clear enough now for him to understand that he was ill, and to want to talk about it; but his tongue hung in his throat like a clapper in a bell. He must wait till the rope was pulled...

So time and life stole back on him, and his thoughts laboured weakly with dim fears. Slowly he cleared a way through them, adjusted himself to his strange state, and found out that he was in his own room, in his grandfather's house, that alternating with the white-capped faces about him were those of his mother and sister, and that in a few days if he took his beef-tea and didn't fret Paul would be brought up from Long Island, whither, on account of the great heat, he had been carried off by Clare Van Degen.

No one named Undine to him, and he did not speak of her. But one day, as he lay in bed in the summer twilight, he had a vision of a moment, a long way behind him at the beginning of his illness, it must have been when he had called out for her in his anguish, and some one had said: "She's coming: she'll be here next week."

Could it be that next week was not yet here? He supposed that illness robbed one of all sense of time, and he lay still, as if in ambush, watching his scattered memories come out one by one and join themselves together. If he watched long enough he was sure he should recognize one that fitted into his picture of the day when he had asked for Undine. And at length a face came out of the twilight: a freckled face, benevolently bent over him under a starched cap. He had not seen the face for a long time, but suddenly it took shape and fitted itself into the picture...

Laura Fairford sat near by, a book on her knee. At the sound of his voice she looked up.

"What was the name of the first nurse?"

"The first ?"

"The one that went away."

"Oh Miss Hicks, you mean?"

"How long is it since she went?"

"It must be three weeks. She had another case."

He thought this over carefully; then he spoke again. "Call Undine."

She made no answer, and he repeated irritably: "Why don't you call her?
I want to speak to her."
Mrs. Fairford laid down her book and came to him.

"She's not here just now."

He dealt with this also, laboriously. "You mean she's out she's not in the house?"

"I mean she hasn't come yet."

As she spoke Ralph felt a sudden strength and hardness in his brain and body. Everything in him became as clear as noon.

"But it was before Miss Hicks left that you told me you'd sent for her, and that she'd be here the following week. And you say Miss Hicks has been gone three weeks."

This was what he had worked out in his head, and what he meant to say to his sister; but something seemed to snap shut in his throat, and he closed his eyes without speaking.

Even when Mr. Spragg came to see him he said nothing. They talked about his illness, about the hot weather, about the rumours that Harmon B. Driscoll was again threatened with indictment; and then Mr. Spragg pulled himself out of his chair and said: "I presume you'll call round at the office before you leave the city."

"Oh, yes: as soon as I'm up," Ralph answered. They understood each other.

Clare had urged him to come down to Long Island and complete his convalescence there, but he preferred to stay in Washington Square till he should be strong enough for the journey to the Adirondacks, whither Laura had already preceded him with Paul. He did not want to see any one but his mother and grandfather till his legs could carry him to Mr. Spragg's office. It was an oppressive day in mid-August, with a yellow mist of heat in the sky, when at last he entered the big office-building. Swirls of dust lay on the mosaic floor, and a stale smell of decayed fruit and salt air and steaming asphalt filled the place like a fog. As he shot up in the elevator some one slapped him on the back, and turning he saw Elmer Moffatt at his side, smooth and rubicund under a new straw hat.

Moffatt was loudly glad to see him. "I haven't laid eyes on you for months. At the old stand still?"

"So am I," he added, as Ralph assented. "Hope to see you there again some day. Don't forget it's MY turn this time: glad if I can be any use to you. So long." Ralph's weak bones ached under his handshake.

"How's Mrs. Marvell?" he turned back from his landing to call out; and
Ralph answered: "Thanks; she's very well."
Mr. Spragg sat alone in his murky inner office, the fly-blown engraving of Daniel Webster above his head and the congested scrap-basket beneath his feet. He looked fagged and sallow, like the day.

Ralph sat down on the other side of the desk. For a moment his throat contracted as it had when he had tried to question his sister; then he asked: "Where's Undine?"

Mr. Spragg glanced at the calendar that hung from a hat-peg on the door. Then he released the Masonic emblem from his grasp, drew out his watch and consulted it critically.

"If the train's on time I presume she's somewhere between Chicago and
Omaha round about now."
Ralph stared at him, wondering if the heat had gone to his head. "I don't understand."

"The Twentieth Century's generally considered the best route to Dakota," explained Mr. Spragg, who pronounced the word ROWT.

"Do you mean to say Undine's in the United States?"

Mr. Spragg's lower lip groped for the phantom tooth-pick. "Why, let me see: hasn't Dakota been a state a year or two now?"

"Oh, God " Ralph cried, pushing his chair back violently and striding across the narrow room.

As he turned, Mr. Spragg stood up and advanced a few steps. He had given up the quest for the tooth-pick, and his drawn-in lips were no more than a narrow depression in his beard. He stood before Ralph, absently shaking the loose change in his trouser-pockets.

Ralph felt the same hardness and lucidity that had come to him when he had heard his sister's answer.

"She's gone, you mean? Left me? With another man?"

Mr. Spragg drew himself up with a kind of slouching majesty. "My daughter is not that style. I understand Undine thinks there have been mistakes on both sides. She considers the tie was formed too hastily. I believe desertion is the usual plea in such cases."

Ralph stared about him, hardly listening. He did not resent his father-in-law's tone. In a dim way he guessed that Mr. Spragg was suffering hardly less than himself. But nothing was clear to him save the monstrous fact suddenly upheaved in his path. His wife had left him, and the plan for her evasion had been made and executed while he lay helpless: she had seized the opportunity of his illness to keep him in ignorance of her design. The humour of it suddenly struck him and he laughed.

"Do you mean to tell me that Undine's divorcing ME?"

"I presume that's her plan," Mr. Spragg admitted.

"For desertion?" Ralph pursued, still laughing.

His father-in-law hesitated a moment; then he answered: "You've always done all you could for my daughter. There wasn't any other plea she could think of. She presumed this would be the most agreeable to your family."

"It was good of her to think of that!"

Mr. Spragg's only comment was a sigh.

"Does she imagine I won't fight it?" Ralph broke out with sudden passion.

His father-in-law looked at him thoughtfully. "I presume you realize it ain't easy to change Undine, once she's set on a thing."

"Perhaps not. But if she really means to apply for a divorce I can make it a little less easy for her to get."

"That's so," Mr. Spragg conceded. He turned back to his revolving chair, and seating himself in it began to drum on the desk with cigar-stained fingers.

"And by God, I will!" Ralph thundered. Anger was the only emotion in him now. He had been fooled, cheated, made a mock of; but the score was not settled yet. He turned back and stood before Mr. Spragg.

"I suppose she's gone with Van Degen?"

"My daughter's gone alone, sir. I saw her off at the station. I understood she was to join a lady friend."

At every point Ralph felt his hold slip off the surface of his father-in-law's impervious fatalism.

"Does she suppose Van Degen's going to marry her?"

"Undine didn't mention her future plans to me." After a moment Mr. Spragg appended: "If she had, I should have declined to discuss them with her." Ralph looked at him curiously, perceiving that he intended in this negative way to imply his disapproval of his daughter's course.

"I shall fight it I shall fight it!" the young man cried again. "You may tell her I shall fight it to the end!"

Mr. Spragg pressed the nib of his pen against the dust-coated inkstand. "I suppose you would have to engage a lawyer. She'll know it that way," he remarked.

"She'll know it you may count on that!"

Ralph had begun to laugh again. Suddenly he heard his own laugh and it pulled him up. What was he laughing about? What was he talking about? The thing was to act to hold his tongue and act. There was no use uttering windy threats to this broken-spirited old man.

A fury of action burned in Ralph, pouring light into his mind and strength into his muscles. He caught up his hat and turned to the door.

As he opened it Mr. Spragg rose again and came forward with his slow shambling step. He laid his hand on Ralph's arm.

"I'd 'a' given anything anything short of my girl herself not to have this happen to you, Ralph Marvell."

"Thank you, sir," said Ralph.

They looked at each other for a moment; then Mr. Spragg added: "But it HAS happened, you know. Bear that in mind. Nothing you can do will change it. Time and again, I've found that a good thing to remember."

XXIII

In the Adirondacks Ralph Marvell sat day after day on the balcony of his little house above the lake, staring at the great white cloud-reflections in the water and at the dark line of trees that closed them in. Now and then he got into the canoe and paddled himself through a winding chain of ponds to some lonely clearing in the forest; and there he lay on his back in the pine-needles and watched the great clouds form and dissolve themselves above his head.

All his past life seemed to be symbolized by the building-up and breaking-down of those fluctuating shapes, which incalculable wind-currents perpetually shifted and remodelled or swept from the zenith like a pinch of dust. His sister told him that he looked well better than he had in years; and there were moments when his listlessness, his stony insensibility to the small pricks and frictions of daily life, might have passed for the serenity of recovered health.

There was no one with whom he could speak of Undine. His family had thrown over the whole subject a pall of silence which even Laura Fairford shrank from raising. As for his mother, Ralph had seen at once that the idea of talking over the situation was positively frightening to her. There was no provision for such emergencies in the moral order of Washington Square. The affair was a "scandal," and it was not in the Dagonet tradition to acknowledge the existence of scandals. Ralph recalled a dim memory of his childhood, the tale of a misguided friend of his mother's who had left her husband for a more congenial companion, and who, years later, returning ill and friendless to New York, had appealed for sympathy to Mrs. Marvell. The latter had not refused to give it; but she had put on her black cashmere and two veils when she went to see her unhappy friend, and had never mentioned these errands of mercy to her husband.

Ralph suspected that the constraint shown by his mother and sister was partly due to their having but a dim and confused view of what had happened. In their vocabulary the word "divorce" was wrapped in such a dark veil of innuendo as no ladylike hand would care to lift. They had not reached the point of differentiating divorces, but classed them indistinctively as disgraceful incidents, in which the woman was always to blame, but the man, though her innocent victim, was yet inevitably contaminated. The time involved in the "proceedings" was viewed as a penitential season during which it behoved the family of the persons concerned to behave as if they were dead; yet any open allusion to the reason for adopting such an attitude would have been regarded as the height of indelicacy.

Mr. Dagonet's notion of the case was almost as remote from reality. All he asked was that his grandson should "thrash" somebody, and he could not be made to understand that the modern drama of divorce is sometimes cast without a Lovelace.

"You might as well tell me there was nobody but Adam in the garden when Eve picked the apple. You say your wife was discontented? No woman ever knows she's discontented till some man tells her so. My God! I've seen smash-ups before now; but I never yet saw a marriage dissolved like a business partnership. Divorce without a lover? Why, it's it's as unnatural as getting drunk on lemonade."

After this first explosion Mr. Dagonet also became silent; and Ralph perceived that what annoyed him most was the fact of the "scandal's" not being one in any gentlemanly sense of the word. It was like some nasty business mess, about which Mr. Dagonet couldn't pretend to have an opinion, since such things didn't happen to men of his kind. That such a thing should have happened to his only grandson was probably the bitterest experience of his pleasantly uneventful life; and it added a touch of irony to Ralph's unhappiness to know how little, in the whole affair, he was cutting the figure Mr. Dagonet expected him to cut.

At first he had chafed under the taciturnity surrounding him: had passionately longed to cry out his humiliation, his rebellion, his despair. Then he began to feel the tonic effect of silence; and the next stage was reached when it became clear to him that there was nothing to say. There were thoughts and thoughts: they bubbled up perpetually from the black springs of his hidden misery, they stole on him in the darkness of night, they blotted out the light of day; but when it came to putting them into words and applying them to the external facts of the case, they seemed totally unrelated to it. One more white and sun-touched glory had gone from his sky; but there seemed no way of connecting that with such practical issues as his being called on to decide whether Paul was to be put in knickerbockers or trousers, and whether he should go back to Washington Square for the winter or hire a small house for himself and his son.

The latter question was ultimately decided by his remaining under his grandfather's roof. November found him back in the office again, in fairly good health, with an outer skin of indifference slowly forming over his lacerated soul. There had been a hard minute to live through when he came back to his old brown room in Washington Square. The walls and tables were covered with photographs of Undine: effigies of all shapes and sizes, expressing every possible sentiment dear to the photographic tradition. Ralph had gathered them all up when he had moved from West End Avenue after Undine's departure for Europe, and they throned over his other possessions as her image had throned over his future the night he had sat in that very room and dreamed of soaring up with her into the blue...

It was impossible to go on living with her photographs about him; and one evening, going up to his room after dinner, he began to unhang them from the walls, and to gather them up from book-shelves and mantel-piece and tables. Then he looked about for some place in which to hide them. There were drawers under his book-cases; but they were full of old discarded things, and even if he emptied the drawers, the photographs, in their heavy frames, were almost all too large to fit into them. He turned next to the top shelf of his cupboard; but here the nurse had stored Paul's old toys, his sand-pails, shovels and croquet-box. Every corner was packed with the vain impedimenta of living, and the mere thought of clearing a space in the chaos was too great an effort.

He began to replace the pictures one by one; and the last was still in his hand when he heard his sister's voice outside. He hurriedly put the portrait back in its usual place on his writing-table, and Mrs. Fairford, who had been dining in Washington Square, and had come up to bid him good night, flung her arms about him in a quick embrace and went down to her carriage.

The next afternoon, when he came home from the office, he did not at first see any change in his room; but when he had lit his pipe and thrown himself into his arm-chair he noticed that the photograph of his wife's picture by Popple no longer faced him from the mantel-piece. He turned to his writing-table, but her image had vanished from there too; then his eye, making the circuit of the walls, perceived that they also had been stripped. Not a single photograph of Undine was left; yet so adroitly had the work of elimination been done, so ingeniously the remaining objects readjusted, that the change attracted no attention.

Ralph was angry, sore, ashamed. He felt as if Laura, whose hand he instantly detected, had taken a cruel pleasure in her work, and for an instant he hated her for it. Then a sense of relief stole over him. He was glad he could look about him without meeting Undine's eyes, and he understood that what had been done to his room he must do to his memory and his imagination: he must so readjust his mind that, whichever way he turned his thoughts, her face should no longer confront him. But that was a task that Laura could not perform for him, a task to be accomplished only by the hard continuous tension of his will.

With the setting in of the mood of silence all desire to fight his wife's suit died out. The idea of touching publicly on anything that had passed between himself and Undine had become unthinkable. Insensibly he had been subdued to the point of view about him, and the idea of calling on the law to repair his shattered happiness struck him as even

more grotesque than it was degrading. Nevertheless, some contradictory impulse of his divided spirit made him resent, on the part of his mother and sister, a too-ready acceptance of his attitude. There were moments when their tacit assumption that his wife was banished and forgotten irritated him like the hushed tread of sympathizers about the bed of an invalid who will not admit that he suffers.

His irritation was aggravated by the discovery that Mrs. Marvell and Laura had already begun to treat Paul as if he were an orphan. One day, coming unnoticed into the nursery, Ralph heard the boy ask when his mother was coming back; and Mrs. Fairford, who was with him, answered: "She's not coming back, dearest; and you're not to speak of her to father."

Ralph, when the boy was out of hearing, rebuked his sister for her answer. "I don't want you to talk of his mother as if she were dead. I don't want you to forbid Paul to speak of her."

Laura, though usually so yielding, defended herself. "What's the use of encouraging him to speak of her when he's never to see her? The sooner he forgets her the better."

Ralph pondered. "Later if she asks to see him I shan't refuse."

Mrs. Fairford pressed her lips together to check the answer: "She never will!"

Ralph heard it, nevertheless, and let it pass. Nothing gave him so profound a sense of estrangement from his former life as the conviction that his sister was probably right. He did not really believe that Undine would ever ask to see her boy; but if she did he was determined not to refuse her request.

Time wore on, the Christmas holidays came and went, and the winter continued to grind out the weary measure of its days. Toward the end of January Ralph received a registered letter, addressed to him at his office, and bearing in the corner of the envelope the names of a firm of Sioux Falls attorneys. He instantly divined that it contained the legal notification of his wife's application for divorce, and as he wrote his name in the postman's book he smiled grimly at the thought that the stroke of his pen was doubtless signing her release. He opened the letter, found it to be what he had expected, and locked it away in his desk without mentioning the matter to any one.

He supposed that with the putting away of this document he was thrusting the whole subject out of sight; but not more than a fortnight later, as he sat in the Subway on his way down-town, his eye was caught by his own name on the first page of the heavily head-lined paper which the unshaved occupant of the next seat held between grimy

fists. The blood rushed to Ralph's forehead as he looked over the man's arm and read: "Society Leader Gets Decree," and beneath it the subordinate clause: "Says Husband Too Absorbed In Business To Make Home Happy." For weeks afterward, wherever he went, he felt that blush upon his forehead. For the first time in his life the coarse fingering of public curiosity had touched the secret places of his soul, and nothing that had gone before seemed as humiliating as this trivial comment on his tragedy. The paragraph continued on its way through the press, and whenever he took up a newspaper he seemed to come upon it, slightly modified, variously developed, but always reverting with a kind of unctuous irony to his financial preoccupations and his wife's consequent loneliness. The phrase was even taken up by the paragraph writer, called forth excited letters from similarly situated victims, was commented on in humorous editorials and served as a text for pulpit denunciations of the growing craze for wealth; and finally, at his dentist's, Ralph came across it in a Family Weekly, as one of the "Heart problems" propounded to subscribers, with a Gramophone, a Straight-front Corset and a Vanity-box among the prizes offered for its solution.

XXIV

"If you'd only had the sense to come straight to me, Undine Spragg!
There isn't a tip I couldn't have given you not one!"
This speech, in which a faintly contemptuous compassion for her friend's case was blent with the frankest pride in her own, probably represented the nearest approach to "tact" that Mrs. James J. Rolliver had yet acquired. Undine was impartial enough to note in it a distinct advance on the youthful methods of Indiana Frusk; yet it required a good deal of self-control to take the words to herself with a smile, while they seemed to be laying a visible scarlet welt across the pale face she kept valiantly turned to her friend. The fact that she must permit herself to be pitied by Indiana Frusk gave her the uttermost measure of the depth to which her fortunes had fallen. This abasement was inflicted on her in the staring gold apartment of the Hotel Nouveau Luxe in which the Rollivers had established themselves on their recent arrival in Paris. The vast drawing-room, adorned only by two high-shouldered gilt baskets of orchids drooping on their wires, reminded Undine of the "Looey suite" in which the opening scenes of her own history had been enacted; and the resemblance and the difference were emphasized by the fact that the image of her past self was not inaccurately repeated in the triumphant presence of Indiana Rolliver.

"There isn't a tip I couldn't have given you not one!" Mrs. Rolliver reproachfully repeated; and all Undine's superiorities and discriminations seemed to shrivel up in the crude blaze of the other's solid achievement.

There was little comfort in noting, for one's private delectation, that Indiana spoke of her husband as "Mr. Rolliver," that she twanged a piercing R, that one of her shoulders was still higher than the other, and that her striking dress was totally unsuited to the hour, the place and the occasion. She still did and was all that Undine had so sedulously learned not to be and to do; but to dwell on these obstacles to her success was but to be more deeply impressed by the fact that she had nevertheless succeeded.

Not much more than a year had elapsed since Undine Marvell, sitting in the drawing-room of another Parisian hotel, had heard the immense orchestral murmur of Paris rise through the open windows like the ascending movement of her own hopes. The immense murmur still sounded on, deafening and implacable as some elemental force; and the discord in her fate no more disturbed it than the motor wheels rolling by under the windows were disturbed by the particles of dust that they ground to finer powder as they passed.

"I could have told you one thing right off," Mrs. Rolliver went on with her ringing energy. "And that is, to get your divorce first thing. A divorce is always a good thing to

have: you never can tell when you may want it. You ought to have attended to that before you even BEGAN with Peter Van Degen."

Undine listened, irresistibly impressed. "Did YOU?" she asked; but Mrs. Rolliver, at this, grew suddenly veiled and sibylline. She wound her big bejewelled hand through her pearls there were ropes and ropes of them and leaned back, modestly sinking her lids.

"I'm here, anyhow," she rejoined, with "CIRCUMSPICE!" in look and tone.

Undine, obedient to the challenge, continued to gaze at the pearls. They were real; there was no doubt about that. And so was Indiana's marriage if she kept out of certain states.

"Don't you see," Mrs. Rolliver continued, "that having to leave him when you did, and rush off to Dakota for six months, was was giving him too much time to think; and giving it at the wrong time, too?" "Oh, I see. But what could I do? I'm not an immoral woman."

"Of course not, dearest. You were merely thoughtless that's what I meant by saying you ought to have had your divorce ready."

A flicker of self-esteem caused Undine to protest. "It wouldn't have made any difference. His wife would never have given him up."

"She's so crazy about him?"

"No: she hates him so. And she hates me too, because she's in love with my husband."

Indiana bounced out of her lounging attitude and struck her hands together with a rattle of rings.

"In love with your husband? What's the matter, then? Why on earth didn't the four of you fix it up together?"

"You don't understand." (It was an undoubted relief to be able, at last, to say that to Indiana!) "Clare Van Degen thinks divorce wrong or rather awfully vulgar."

"VULGAR?" Indiana flamed. "If that isn't just too much! A woman who's in love with another woman's husband? What does she think refined, I'd like to know? Having a lover, I suppose like the women in these nasty French plays? I've told Mr. Rolliver I won't go to the theatre with him again in Paris it's too utterly low. And the swell society's just as bad: it's simply rotten. Thank goodness I was brought up in a place where there's

some sense of decency left!" She looked compassionately at Undine. "It was New York that demoralized you and I don't blame you for it. Out at Apex you'd have acted different. You never NEVER would have given way to your feelings before you'd got your divorce."

A slow blush rose to Undine's forehead.

"He seemed so unhappy " she murmured.

"Oh, I KNOW!" said Indiana in a tone of cold competence. She gave Undine an impatient glance. "What was the understanding between you, when you left Europe last August to go out to Dakota?"

"Peter was to go to Reno in the autumn so that it wouldn't look too much as if we were acting together. I was to come to Chicago to see him on his way out there."

"And he never came?"

"No."

"And he stopped writing?"

"Oh, he never writes."

Indiana heaved a deep sigh of intelligence. "There's one perfectly clear rule: never let out of your sight a man who doesn't write."

"I know. That's why I stayed with him those few weeks last summer...."

Indiana sat thinking, her fine shallow eyes fixed unblinkingly on her friend's embarrassed face.

"I suppose there isn't anybody else ?"

"Anybody ?"

"Well now you've got your divorce: anybody else it would come in handy for?"

This was harder to bear than anything that had gone before: Undine could not have borne it if she had not had a purpose. "Mr. Van Degen owes it to me " she began with an air of wounded dignity.

"Yes, yes: I know. But that's just talk. If there IS anybody else "

"I can't imagine what you think of me, Indiana!"

Indiana, without appearing to resent this challenge, again lost herself in meditation.

"Well, I'll tell him he's just GOT to see you," she finally emerged from it to say.

Undine gave a quick upward look: this was what she had been waiting for ever since she had read, a few days earlier, in the columns of her morning journal, that Mr. Peter Van Degen and Mr. and Mrs. James J. Rolliver had been fellow-passengers on board the Semantic. But she did not betray her expectations by as much as the tremor of an eye-lash. She knew her friend well enough to pour out to her the expected tribute of surprise.

"Why, do you mean to say you know him, Indiana?"

"Mercy, yes! He's round here all the time. He crossed on the steamer with us, and Mr. Rolliver's taken a fancy to him," Indiana explained, in the tone of the absorbed bride to whom her husband's preferences are the sole criterion.

Undine turned a tear-suffused gaze on her. "Oh, Indiana, if I could only see him again I know it would be all right! He's awfully, awfully fond of me; but his family have influenced him against me "

"I know what THAT is!" Mrs. Rolliver interjected.

"But perhaps," Undine continued, "it would be better if I could meet him first without his knowing beforehand without your telling him ... I love him too much to reproach him!" she added nobly.

Indiana pondered: it was clear that, though the nobility of the sentiment impressed her, she was disinclined to renounce the idea of taking a more active part in her friend's rehabilitation. But Undine went on: "Of course you've found out by this time that he's just a big spoiled baby. Afterward when I've seen him if you'd talk to him; or it you'd only just let him BE with you, and see how perfectly happy you and Mr. Rolliver are!"

Indiana seized on this at once. "You mean that what he wants is the influence of a home like ours? Yes, yes, I understand. I tell you what I'll do: I'll just ask him round to dine, and let you know the day, without telling him beforehand that you're coming."

"Oh, Indiana!" Undine held her in a close embrace, and then drew away to say: "I'm so glad I found you. You must go round with me everywhere. There are lots of people here I want you to know."

Mrs. Rolliver's expression changed from vague sympathy to concentrated interest. "I suppose it's awfully gay here? Do you go round a great deal with the American set?"

Undine hesitated for a fraction of a moment. "There are a few of them who are rather jolly. But I particularly want you to meet my friend the Marquis Roviano he's from Rome; and a lovely Austrian woman, Baroness Adelschein."

Her friend's face was brushed by a shade of distrust. "I don't know as I care much about meeting foreigners," she said indifferently.

Undine smiled: it was agreeable at last to be able to give Indiana a "point" as valuable as any of hers on divorce.

"Oh, some of them are awfully attractive; and THEY'LL make you meet the Americans."

Indiana caught this on the bound: one began to see why she had got on in spite of everything.

"Of course I'd love to know your friends," she said, kissing Undine; who answered, giving back the kiss:

"You know there's nothing on earth I wouldn't do for you."

Indiana drew back to look at her with a comic grimace under which a shade of anxiety was visible. "Well, that's a pretty large order. But there's just one thing you CAN do, dearest: please to let Mr. Rolliver alone!"

"Mr. Rolliver, my dear?" Undine's laugh showed that she took this for unmixed comedy. "That's a nice way to remind me that you're heaps and heaps better-looking than I am!"

Indiana gave her an acute glance. "Millard Binch didn't think so not even at the very end."

"Oh, poor Millard!" The women's smiles mingled easily over the common reminiscence, and once again, on the threshold. Undine enfolded her friend. In the light of the autumn afternoon she paused a moment at the door of the Nouveau Luxe, and looked aimlessly forth at the brave spectacle in which she seemed no longer to have a stake.

Many of her old friends had already returned to Paris: the Harvey Shallums, May Beringer, Dicky Bowles and other westward-bound nomads lingering on for a glimpse of the autumn theatres and fashions before hurrying back to inaugurate the New York season. A year ago Undine would have had no difficulty in introducing Indiana Rolliver to this group a group above which her own aspirations already beat an impatient wing. Now her place in it had become too precarious for her to force an entrance for her protectress. Her New York friends were at no pains to conceal from her that in their opinion her divorce had been a blunder. Their logic was that of Apex reversed. Since she had not been "sure" of Van Degen, why in the world, they asked, had she thrown away a position she WAS sure of? Mrs. Harvey Shallum, in particular, had not scrupled to put the question squarely. "Chelles was awfully taken he would have introduced you everywhere. I thought you were wild to know smart French people; I thought Harvey and I weren't good enough for you any longer. And now you've done your best to spoil everything! Of course I feel for you tremendously that's the reason why I'm talking so frankly. You must be horribly depressed. Come and dine to-night or no, if you don't mind I'd rather you chose another evening. I'd forgotten that I'd asked the Jim Driscolls, and it might be uncomfortable for YOU...."

In another world she was still welcome, at first perhaps even more so than before: the world, namely, to which she had proposed to present Indiana Rolliver. Roviano, Madame Adelschein, and a few of the freer spirits of her old St. Moritz band, reappearing in Paris with the close of the watering-place season, had quickly discovered her and shown a keen interest in her liberation. It appeared in some mysterious way to make her more available for their purpose, and she found that, in the character of the last American divorcee, she was even regarded as eligible to the small and intimate inner circle of their loosely-knit association. At first she could not make out what had entitled her to this privilege, and increasing enlightenment produced a revolt of the Apex puritanism which, despite some odd accommodations and compliances, still carried its head so high in her.

Undine had been perfectly sincere in telling Indiana Rolliver that she was not "an Immoral woman." The pleasures for which her sex took such risks had never attracted her, and she did not even crave the excitement of having it thought that they did. She wanted, passionately and persistently, two things which she believed should subsist together in any well-ordered life: amusement and respectability; and despite her surface-sophistication her notion of amusement was hardly less innocent than when she had hung on the plumber's fence with Indiana Frusk. It gave her, therefore, no satisfaction to find herself included among Madame Adelschein's intimates. It embarrassed her to feel that she was expected to be "queer" and "different," to respond to pass-words and talk in innuendo, to associate with the equivocal and the

subterranean and affect to despise the ingenuous daylight joys which really satisfied her soul. But the business shrewdness which was never quite dormant in her suggested that this was not the moment for such scruples. She must make the best of what she could get and wait her chance of getting something better; and meanwhile the most practical use to which she could put her shady friends was to flash their authentic nobility in the dazzled eyes of Mrs. Rolliver.

With this object in view she made haste, in a fashionable tea-room of the rue de Rivoli, to group about Indiana the most titled members of the band; and the felicity of the occasion would have been unmarred had she not suddenly caught sight of Raymond de Chelles sitting on the other side of the room.

She had not seen Chelles since her return to Paris. It had seemed preferable to leave their meeting to chance and the present chance might have served as well as another but for the fact that among his companions were two or three of the most eminent ladies of the proud quarter beyond the Seine. It was what Undine, in moments of discouragement, characterized as "her luck" that one of these should be the hated Miss Wincher of Potash Springs, who had now become the Marquise de Trezac. Undine knew that Chelles and his compatriots, however scandalized at her European companions, would be completely indifferent to Mrs. Rolliver's appearance; but one gesture of Madame de Trezac's eye-glass would wave Indiana to her place and thus brand the whole party as "wrong."

All this passed through Undine's mind in the very moment of her noting the change of expression with which Chelles had signalled his recognition. If their encounter could have occurred in happier conditions it might have had far-reaching results. As it was, the crowded state of the tea-room, and the distance between their tables, sufficiently excused his restricting his greeting to an eager bow; and Undine went home heavy-hearted from this first attempt to reconstruct her past.

Her spirits were not lightened by the developments of the next few days. She kept herself well in the foreground of Indiana's life, and cultivated toward the rarely-visible Rolliver a manner in which impersonal admiration for the statesman was tempered with the politest indifference to the man. Indiana seemed to do justice to her efforts and to be reassured by the result; but still there came no hint of a reward. For a time Undine restrained the question on her lips; but one afternoon, when she had inducted Indiana into the deepest mysteries of Parisian complexion-making, the importance of the service and the confidential mood it engendered seemed to warrant a discreet allusion to their bargain.

Indiana leaned back among her cushions with an embarrassed laugh.

"Oh, my dear, I've been meaning to tell you it's off, I'm afraid. The dinner is, I mean. You see, Mr. Van Degen has seen you 'round with me, and the very minute I asked him to come and dine he guessed "

"He guessed and he wouldn't?"

"Well, no. He wouldn't. I hate to tell you."

"Oh " Undine threw off a vague laugh. "Since you're intimate enough for him to tell you THAT he must, have told you more told you something to justify his behaviour. He couldn't even Peter Van Degen couldn't just simply have said to you: 'I wont see her.'"

Mrs. Rolliver hesitated, visibly troubled to the point of regretting her intervention.

"He DID say more?" Undine insisted. "He gave you a reason?

"He said you'd know."

"Oh how base how base!" Undine was trembling with one of her little-girl rages, the storms of destructive fury before which Mr. and Mrs. Spragg had cowered when she was a charming golden-curled cherub. But life had administered some of the discipline which her parents had spared her, and she pulled herself together with a gasp of pain. "Of course he's been turned against me. His wife has the whole of New York behind her, and I've no one; but I know it would be all right if I could only see him."

Her friend made no answer, and Undine pursued, with an irrepressible outbreak of her old vehemence: "Indiana Rolliver, if you won't do it for me I'll go straight off to his hotel this very minute. I'll wait there in the hall till he sees me!"

Indiana lifted a protesting hand. "Don't, Undine not that!"

"Why not?"

"Well I wouldn't, that's all."

"You wouldn't? Why wouldn't you? You must have a reason." Undine faced her with levelled brows. "Without a reason you can't have changed so utterly since our last talk. You were positive enough then that I had a right to make him see me."

Somewhat to her surprise, Indiana made no effort to elude the challenge. "Yes, I did think so then. But I know now that it wouldn't do you the least bit of good."

"Have they turned him so completely against me? I don't care if they have! I know him I can get him back."

"That's the trouble." Indiana shed on her a gaze of cold compassion. "It's not that any one has turned him against you. It's worse than that "

"What can be?"

"You'll hate me if I tell you."

"Then you'd better make him tell me himself!"

"I can't. I tried to. The trouble is that it was YOU something you did,
I mean. Something he found out about you "
Undine, to restrain a spring of anger, had to clutch both arms of her chair. "About me? How fearfully false! Why, I've never even LOOKED at anybody !"

"It's nothing of that kind." Indiana's mournful head-shake seemed to deplore, in Undine, an unsuspected moral obtuseness. "It's the way you acted to your own husband."

"I my to Ralph? HE reproaches me for that? Peter Van Degen does?" "Well, for one particular thing. He says that the very day you went off with him last year you got a cable from New York telling you to come back at once to Mr. Marvell, who was desperately ill."

"How on earth did he know?" The cry escaped Undine before she could repress it.

"It's true, then?" Indiana exclaimed. "Oh, Undine "

Undine sat speechless and motionless, the anger frozen to terror on her lips.

Mrs. Rolliver turned on her the reproachful gaze of the deceived benefactress. "I didn't believe it when he told me; I'd never have thought it of you. Before you'd even applied for your divorce!"

Undine made no attempt to deny the charge or to defend herself. For a moment she was lost in the pursuit of an unseizable clue the explanation of this monstrous last perversity of fate. Suddenly she rose to her feet with a set face.

"The Marvells must have told him the beasts!" It relieved her to be able to cry it out.

"It was your husband's sister what did you say her name was? When you didn't answer her cable, she cabled Mr. Van Degen to find out where you were and tell you to come straight back."

Undine stared. "He never did!"

"No."

"Doesn't that show you the story's all trumped up?"

Indiana shook her head. "He said nothing to you about it because he was with you when you received the first cable, and you told him it was from your sister-in-law, just worrying you as usual to go home; and when he asked if there was anything else in it you said there wasn't another thing."

Undine, intently following her, caught at this with a spring. "Then he knew it all along he admits that? And it made no earthly difference to him at the time?" She turned almost victoriously on her friend. "Did he happen to explain THAT, I wonder?"

"Yes." Indiana's longanimity grew almost solemn. "It came over him gradually, he said. One day when he wasn't feeling very well he thought to himself: 'Would she act like that to ME if I was dying?' And after that he never felt the same to you." Indiana lowered her empurpled lids. "Men have their feelings too even when they're carried away by passion." After a pause she added: "I don't know as I can blame him. Undine. You see, you were his ideal."

XXV

Undine Marvell, for the next few months, tasted all the accumulated bitterness of failure. After January the drifting hordes of her compatriots had scattered to the four quarters of the globe, leaving Paris to resume, under its low grey sky, its compacter winter personality. Noting, from her more and more deserted corner, each least sign of the social revival, Undine felt herself as stranded and baffled as after the ineffectual summers of her girlhood. She was not without possible alternatives; but the sense of what she had lost took the savour from all that was left. She might have attached herself to some migratory group winged for Italy or Egypt; but the prospect of travel did not in itself appeal to her, and she was doubtful of its social benefit. She lacked the adventurous curiosity which seeks its occasion in the unknown; and though she could work doggedly for a given object the obstacles to be overcome had to be as distinct as the prize. Her one desire was to get back an equivalent of the precise value she had lost in ceasing to be Ralph Marvell's wife. Her new visiting-card, bearing her Christian name in place of her husband's, was like the coin of a debased currency testifying to her diminished trading capacity. Her restricted means, her vacant days, all the minor irritations of her life, were as nothing compared to this sense of a lost advantage. Even in the narrowed field of a Parisian winter she might have made herself a place in some more or less extra-social world; but her experiments in this line gave her no pleasure proportioned to the possible derogation. She feared to be associated with "the wrong people," and scented a shade of disrespect in every amicable advance. The more pressing attentions of one or two men she had formerly known filled her with a glow of outraged pride, and for the first time in her life she felt that even solitude might be preferable to certain kinds of society. Since ill health was the most plausible pretext for seclusion, it was almost a relief to find that she was really growing "nervous" and sleeping badly. The doctor she summoned advised her trying a small quiet place on the Riviera, not too near the sea; and thither in the early days of December, she transported herself with her maid and an omnibus-load of luggage.

The place disconcerted her by being really small and quiet, and for a few days she struggled against the desire for flight. She had never before known a world as colourless and negative as that of the large white hotel where everybody went to bed at nine, and donkey-rides over stony hills were the only alternative to slow drives along dusty roads. Many of the dwellers in this temple of repose found even these exercises too stimulating, and preferred to sit for hours under the palms in the garden, playing Patience, embroidering, or reading odd volumes of Tauchnitz. Undine, driven by despair to an inspection of the hotel book-shelves, discovered that scarcely any work they contained was complete; but this did not seem to trouble the readers, who continued to feed their leisure with mutilated fiction, from which they occasionally raised their eyes to glance mistrustfully at the new arrival sweeping the garden gravel with her frivolous draperies.

The inmates of the hotel were of different nationalities, but their racial differences were levelled by the stamp of a common mediocrity. All differences of tongue, of custom, of physiognomy, disappeared in this deep community of insignificance, which was like some secret bond, with the manifold signs and pass-words of its ignorances and its imperceptions. It was not the heterogeneous mediocrity of the American summer hotel where the lack of any standard is the nearest approach to a tie, but an organized codified dulness, in conscious possession of its rights, and strong in the voluntary ignorance of any others.

It took Undine a long time to accustom herself to such an atmosphere, and meanwhile she fretted, fumed and flaunted, or abandoned herself to long periods of fruitless brooding. Sometimes a flame of anger shot up in her, dismally illuminating the path she had travelled and the blank wall to which it led. At other moments past and present were enveloped in a dull fog of rancour which distorted and faded even the image she presented to her morning mirror. There were days when every young face she saw left in her a taste of poison. But when she compared herself with the specimens of her sex who plied their languid industries under the palms, or looked away as she passed them in hall or staircase, her spirits rose, and she rang for her maid and dressed herself in her newest and vividest. These were unprofitable triumphs, however. She never made one of her attacks on the organized disapproval of the community without feeling she had lost ground by it; and the next day she would lie in bed and send down capricious orders for food, which her maid would presently remove untouched, with instructions to transmit her complaints to the landlord.

Sometimes the events of the past year, ceaselessly revolving through her brain, became no longer a subject for criticism or justification but simply a series of pictures monotonously unrolled. Hour by hour, in such moods, she re-lived the incidents of her flight with Peter Van Degen: the part of her career that, since it had proved a failure, seemed least like herself and most difficult to justify. She had gone away with him, and had lived with him for two months: she, Undine Marvell, to whom respectability was the breath of life, to whom such follies had always been unintelligible and therefore inexcusable. She had done this incredible thing, and she had done it from a motive that seemed, at the time, as clear, as logical, as free from the distorting mists of sentimentality, as any of her father's financial enterprises. It had been a bold move, but it had been as carefully calculated as the happiest Wall Street "stroke." She had gone away with Peter because, after the decisive scene in which she had put her power to the test, to yield to him seemed the surest means of victory. Even to her practical intelligence it was clear that an immediate dash to Dakota might look too calculated; and she had preserved her self-respect by telling herself that she was really his wife, and in no way to blame if the law delayed to ratify the bond. She was still persuaded of the justness of her reasoning; but she now saw that it had left certain risks out of account.

Her life with Van Degen had taught her many things. The two had wandered from place to place, spending a great deal of money, always more and more money; for the first time in her life she had been able to buy everything she wanted. For a while this had kept her amused and busy; but presently she began to perceive that her companion's view of their relation was not the same as hers. She saw that he had always meant it to be an unavowed tie, screened by Mrs. Shallum's companionship and Clare's careless tolerance; and that on those terms he would have been ready to shed on their adventure the brightest blaze of notoriety. But since Undine had insisted on being carried off like a sentimental school-girl he meant to shroud the affair in mystery, and was as zealous in concealing their relation as she was bent on proclaiming it. In the "powerful" novels which Popple was fond of lending her she had met with increasing frequency the type of heroine who scorns to love clandestinely, and proclaims the sanctity of passion and the moral duty of obeying its call. Undine had been struck by these arguments as justifying and even ennobling her course, and had let Peter understand that she had been actuated by the highest motives in openly associating her life with his; but he had opposed a placid insensibility to these allusions, and had persisted in treating her as though their journey were the kind of escapade that a man of the world is bound to hide. She had expected him to take her to all the showy places where couples like themselves are relieved from a too sustained contemplation of nature by the distractions of the restaurant and the gaming-table; but he had carried her from one obscure corner of Europe to another, shunning fashionable hotels and crowded watering-places, and displaying an ingenuity in the discovery of the unvisited and the out-of-season that gave their journey an odd resemblance to her melancholy wedding-tour.

She had never for a moment ceased to remember that the Dakota divorce-court was the objective point of this later honeymoon, and her allusions to the fact were as frequent as prudence permitted. Peter seemed in no way disturbed by them. He responded with expressions of increasing tenderness, or the purchase of another piece of jewelry; and though Undine could not remember his ever voluntarily bringing the subject of their marriage he did not shrink from her recurring mention of it. He seemed merely too steeped in present well-being to think of the future, and she ascribed this to the fact that his faculty of enjoyment could not project itself beyond the moment. Her business was to make each of their days so agreeable that when the last came he should be conscious of a void to be bridged over as rapidly as possible and when she thought this point had been reached she packed her trunks and started for Dakota.

The next picture to follow was that of the dull months in the western divorce-town, where, to escape loneliness and avoid comment, she had cast in her lot with Mabel Lipscomb, who had lately arrived there on the same errand.

Undine, at the outset, had been sorry for the friend whose new venture seemed likely to result so much less brilliantly than her own; but compassion had been replaced by irritation as Mabel's unpruned vulgarities, her enormous encroaching satisfaction with herself and her surroundings, began to pervade every corner of their provisional household. Undine, during the first months of her exile, had been sustained by the fullest confidence in her future. When she had parted from Van Degen she had felt sure he meant to marry her, and the fact that Mrs. Lipscomb was fortified by no similar hope made her easier to bear with. Undine was almost ashamed that the unwooed Mabel should be the witness of her own felicity, and planned to send her off on a trip to Denver when Peter should announce his arrival; but the weeks passed, and Peter did not come. Mabel, on the whole, behaved well in this contingency. Undine, in her first exultation, had confided all her hopes and plans to her friend, but Mabel took no undue advantage of the confidence. She was even tactful in her loud fond clumsy way, with a tact that insistently boomed and buzzed about its victim's head. But one day she mentioned that she had asked to dinner a gentleman from Little Rock who had come to Dakota with the same object as themselves, and whose acquaintance she had made through her lawyer.

The gentleman from Little Rock came to dine, and within a week Undine understood that Mabel's future was assured. If Van Degen had been at hand Undine would have smiled with him at poor Mabel's infatuation and her suitor's crudeness. But Van Degen was not there. He made no sign, he sent no excuse; he simply continued to absent himself; and it was Undine who, in due course, had to make way for Mrs. Lipscomb's caller, and sit upstairs with a novel while the drawing-room below was given up to the enacting of an actual love-story.

Even then, even to the end, Undine had to admit that Mabel had behaved "beautifully." But it is comparatively easy to behave beautifully when one is getting what one wants, and when some one else, who has not always been altogether kind, is not. The net result of Mrs. Lipscomb's magnanimity was that when, on the day of parting, she drew Undine to her bosom with the hand on which her new engagement-ring blazed, Undine hated her as she hated everything else connected with her vain exile in the wilderness.

XXVI

The next phase in the unrolling vision was the episode of her return to New York. She had gone to the Malibran, to her parents for it was a moment in her career when she clung passionately to the conformities, and when the fact of being able to say: "I'm here with my father and mother" was worth paying for even in the discomfort of that grim abode. Nevertheless, it was another thorn in her pride that her parents could not for the meanest of material reasons transfer themselves at her coming to one of the big Fifth Avenue hotels. When she had suggested it Mr. Spragg had briefly replied that, owing to the heavy expenses of her divorce suit, he couldn't for the moment afford anything better; and this announcement cast a deeper gloom over the future.

It was not an occasion for being "nervous," however; she had learned too many hard facts in the last few months to think of having recourse to her youthful methods. And something told her that if she made the attempt it would be useless. Her father and mother seemed much older, seemed tired and defeated, like herself.

Parents and daughter bore their common failure in a common silence, broken only by Mrs. Spragg's occasional tentative allusions to her grandson. But her anecdotes of Paul left a deeper silence behind them. Undine did not want to talk of her boy. She could forget him when, as she put it, things were "going her way," but in moments of discouragement the thought of him was an added bitterness, subtly different from her other bitter thoughts, and harder to quiet. It had not occurred to her to try to gain possession of the child. She was vaguely aware that the courts had given her his custody; but she had never seriously thought of asserting this claim. Her parents' diminished means and her own uncertain future made her regard the care of Paul as an additional burden, and she quieted her scruples by thinking of him as "better off" with Ralph's family, and of herself as rather touchingly disinterested in putting his welfare before her own. Poor Mrs. Spragg was pining for him, but Undine rejected her artless suggestion that Mrs. Heeny should be sent to "bring him round." "I wouldn't ask them a favour for the world they're just waiting for a chance to be hateful to me," she scornfully declared; but it pained her that her boy, should be so near, yet inaccessible, and for the first time she was visited by unwonted questionings as to her share in the misfortunes that had befallen her. She had voluntarily stepped out of her social frame, and the only person on whom she could with any satisfaction have laid the blame was the person to whom her mind now turned with a belated tenderness. It was thus, in fact, that she thought of Ralph. His pride, his reserve, all the secret expressions of his devotion, the tones of his voice, his quiet manner, even his disconcerting irony: these seemed, in contrast to what she had since known, the qualities essential to her happiness. She could console herself only by regarding it as part of her sad lot that poverty and the relentless animosity of his family, should have put an end to so perfect a union: she gradually began to look on

herself and Ralph as the victims of dark machinations, and when she mentioned him she spoke forgivingly, and implied that "everything might have been different" if "people" had not "come between" them. She had arrived in New York in midseason, and the dread of seeing familiar faces kept her shut up in her room at the Malibran, reading novels and brooding over possibilities of escape. She tried to avoid the daily papers, but they formed the staple diet of her parents, and now and then she could not help taking one up and turning to the "Society Column." Its perusal produced the impression that the season must be the gayest New York had ever known. The Harmon B. Driscolls, young Jim and his wife, the Thurber Van Degens, the Chauncey Ellings, and all the other Fifth Avenue potentates, seemed to have their doors perpetually open to a stream of feasters among whom the familiar presences of Grace Beringer, Bertha Shallum, Dicky Bowles and Claud Walsingham Popple came and went with the irritating sameness of the figures in a stage-procession.

Among them also Peter Van Degen presently appeared. He had been on a tour around the world, and Undine could not look at a newspaper without seeing some allusion to his progress. After his return she noticed that his name was usually coupled with his wife's: he and Clare seemed to be celebrating his home-coming in a series of festivities, and Undine guessed that he had reasons for wishing to keep before the world the evidences of his conjugal accord.

Mrs. Heeny's clippings supplied her with such items as her own reading missed; and one day the masseuse appeared with a long article from the leading journal of Little Rock, describing the brilliant nuptials of Mabel Lipscomb now Mrs. Homer Branney and her departure for "the Coast" in the bridegroom's private car. This put the last touch to Undine's irritation, and the next morning she got up earlier than usual, put on her most effective dress, went for a quick walk around the Park, and told her father when she came in that she wanted him to take her to the opera that evening.

Mr. Spragg stared and frowned. "You mean you want me to go round and hire a box for you?"

"Oh, no." Undine coloured at the infelicitous allusion: besides, she knew now that the smart people who were "musical" went in stalls.

"I only want two good seats. I don't see why I should stay shut up. I want you to go with me," she added.

Her father received the latter part of the request without comment: he seemed to have gone beyond surprise. But he appeared that evening at dinner in a creased and loosely fitting dress-suit which he had probably not put on since the last time he had dined with

his son-in-law, and he and Undine drove off together, leaving Mrs. Spragg to gaze after them with the pale stare of Hecuba.

Their stalls were in the middle of the house, and around them swept the great curve of boxes at which Undine had so often looked up in the remote Stentorian days. Then all had been one indistinguishable glitter, now the scene was full of familiar details: the house was thronged with people she knew, and every box seemed to contain a parcel of her past. At first she had shrunk from recognition; but gradually, as she perceived that no one noticed her, that she was merely part of the invisible crowd out of range of the exploring opera glasses, she felt a defiant desire to make herself seen. When the performance was over her father wanted to leave the house by the door at which they had entered, but she guided him toward the stockholders' entrance, and pressed her way among the furred and jewelled ladies waiting for their motors. "Oh, it's the wrong door never mind, we'll walk to the corner and get a cab," she exclaimed, speaking loudly enough to be overheard. Two or three heads turned, and she met Dicky Bowles's glance, and returned his laughing bow. The woman talking to him looked around, coloured slightly, and made a barely perceptible motion of her head. Just beyond her, Mrs. Chauncey Elling, plumed and purple, stared, parted her lips, and turned to say something important to young Jim Driscoll, who looked up involuntarily and then squared his shoulders and gazed fixedly at a distant point, as people do at a funeral. Behind them Undine caught sight of Clare Van Degen; she stood alone, and her face was pale and listless. "Shall I go up and speak to her?" Undine wondered. Some intuition told her that, alone of all the women present, Clare might have greeted her kindly; but she hung back, and Mrs. Harmon Driscoll surged by on Popple's arm. Popple crimsoned, coughed, and signalled despotically to Mrs. Driscoll's footman. Over his shoulder Undine received a bow from Charles Bowen, and behind Bowen she saw two or three other men she knew, and read in their faces surprise, curiosity, and the wish to show their pleasure at seeing her. But she grasped her father's arm and drew him out among the entangled motors and vociferating policemen.

Neither she nor Mr. Spragg spoke a word on the way home; but when they reached the Malibran her father followed her up to her room. She had dropped her cloak and stood before the wardrobe mirror studying her reflection when he came up behind her and she saw that he was looking at it too.

"Where did that necklace come from?"

Undine's neck grew pink under the shining circlet. It was the first time since her return to New York that she had put on a low dress and thus uncovered the string of pearls she always wore. She made no answer, and Mr. Spragg continued: "Did your husband give them to you?"

"RALPH!" She could not restrain a laugh.

"Who did, then?"

Undine remained silent. She really had not thought about the pearls, except in so far as she consciously enjoyed the pleasure of possessing them; and her father, habitually so unobservant, had seemed the last person likely to raise the awkward question of their origin.

"Why " she began, without knowing what she meant to say.

"I guess you better send 'em back to the party they belong to," Mr.
Spragg continued, in a voice she did not know.
"They belong to me!" she flamed up. He looked at her as if she had grown suddenly small and insignificant. "You better send 'em back to Peter Van Degen the first thing to-morrow morning," he said as he went out of the room. As far as Undine could remember, it was the first time in her life that he had ever ordered her to do anything; and when the door closed on him she had the distinct sense that the question had closed with it, and that she would have to obey. She took the pearls off and threw them from her angrily. The humiliation her father had inflicted on her was merged with the humiliation to which she had subjected herself in going to the opera, and she had never before hated her life as she hated it then.

All night she lay sleepless, wondering miserably what to do; and out of her hatred of her life, and her hatred of Peter Van Degen, there gradually grew a loathing of Van Degen's pearls. How could she have kept them; how have continued to wear them about her neck! Only her absorption in other cares could have kept her from feeling the humiliation of carrying about with her the price of her shame. Her novel-reading had filled her mind with the vocabulary of outraged virtue, and with pathetic allusions to woman's frailty, and while she pitied herself she thought her father heroic. She was proud to think that she had such a man to defend her, and rejoiced that it was in her power to express her scorn of Van Degen by sending back his jewels.

But her righteous ardour gradually cooled, and she was left once more to face the dreary problem of the future. Her evening at the opera had shown her the impossibility of remaining in New York. She had neither the skill nor the power to fight the forces of indifference leagued against her: she must get away at once, and try to make a fresh start. But, as usual, the lack of money hampered her. Mr. Spragg could no longer afford to make her the allowance she had intermittently received from him during the first years of her marriage, and since she was now without child or household she could

hardly make it a grievance that he had reduced her income. But what he allowed her, even with the addition of her alimony, was absurdly insufficient. Not that she looked far ahead; she had always felt herself predestined to ease and luxury, and the possibility of a future adapted to her present budget did not occur to her. But she desperately wanted enough money to carry her without anxiety through the coming year.

When her breakfast tray was brought in she sent it away untouched and continued to lie in her darkened room. She knew that when she got up she must send back the pearls; but there was no longer any satisfaction in the thought, and she lay listlessly wondering how she could best transmit them to Van Degen.

As she lay there she heard Mrs. Heeny's voice in the passage. Hitherto she had avoided the masseuse, as she did every one else associated with her past. Mrs. Heeny had behaved with extreme discretion, refraining from all direct allusions to Undine's misadventure; but her silence was obviously the criticism of a superior mind. Once again Undine had disregarded her injunction to "go slow," with results that justified the warning. Mrs. Heeny's very reserve, however, now marked her as a safe adviser; and Undine sprang up and called her in. "My sakes. Undine! You look's if you'd been setting up all night with a remains!" the masseuse exclaimed in her round rich tones.

Undine, without answering, caught up the pearls and thrust them into
Mrs. Heeny's hands.
"Good land alive!" The masseuse dropped into a chair and let the twist slip through her fat flexible fingers. "Well, you got a fortune right round your neck whenever you wear them, Undine Spragg."

Undine murmured something indistinguishable. "I want you to take them " she began.

"Take 'em? Where to?"

"Why, to " She was checked by the wondering simplicity of Mrs. Heeny's stare. The masseuse must know where the pearls had come from, yet it had evidently not occurred to her that Mrs. Marvell was about to ask her to return them to their donor. In the light of Mrs. Heeny's unclouded gaze the whole episode took on a different aspect, and Undine began to be vaguely astonished at her immediate submission to her father's will. The pearls were hers, after all!

"To be re-strung?" Mrs. Heeny placidly suggested. "Why, you'd oughter to have it done right here before your eyes, with pearls that are worth what these are."

As Undine listened, a new thought shaped itself. She could not continue to wear the pearls: the idea had become intolerable. But for the first time she saw what they might be converted into, and what they might rescue her from; and suddenly she brought out: "Do you suppose I could get anything for them?"

"Get anything? Why, what "

"Anything like what they're worth, I mean. They cost a lot of money: they came from the biggest place in Paris." Under Mrs. Heeny's simplifying eye it was comparatively easy to make these explanations. "I want you to try and sell them for me I want you to do the best you can with them. I can't do it myself but you must swear you'll never tell a soul," she pressed on breathlessly.

"Why, you poor child it ain't the first time," said Mrs. Heeny, coiling the pearls in her big palm. "It's a pity too: they're such beauties. But you'll get others," she added, as the necklace vanished into her bag.

A few days later there appeared from the same receptacle a bundle of banknotes considerable enough to quiet Undine's last scruples. She no longer understood why she had hesitated. Why should she have thought it necessary to give back the pearls to Van Degen? His obligation to her represented far more than the relatively small sum she had been able to realize on the necklace. She hid the money in her dress, and when Mrs. Heeny had gone on to Mrs. Spragg's room she drew the packet out, and counting the bills over, murmured to herself: "Now I can get away!"

Her one thought was to return to Europe; but she did not want to go alone. The vision of her solitary figure adrift in the spring mob of trans-Atlantic pleasure-seekers depressed and mortified her. She would be sure to run across acquaintances, and they would infer that she was in quest of a new opportunity, a fresh start, and would suspect her of trying to use them for the purpose. The thought was repugnant to her newly awakened pride, and she decided that if she went to Europe her father and mother must go with her. The project was a bold one, and when she broached it she had to run the whole gamut of Mr. Spragg's irony. He wanted to know what she expected to do with him when she got him there; whether she meant to introduce him to "all those old Kings," how she thought he and her mother would look in court dress, and how she supposed he was going to get on without his New York paper. But Undine had been aware of having what he himself would have called "a pull" over her father since, the day after their visit to the opera, he had taken her aside to ask: "You sent back those pearls?" and she had answered coldly: "Mrs. Heeny's taken them."

After a moment of half-bewildered resistance her parents, perhaps secretly flattered by this first expression of her need for them, had yielded to her entreaty, packed their trunks, and stoically set out for the unknown. Neither Mr. Spragg nor his wife had ever before been out of their country; and Undine had not understood, till they stood beside her tongue-tied and helpless on the dock at Cherbourg, the task she had undertaken in uprooting them. Mr. Spragg had never been physically active, but on foreign shores he was seized by a strange restlessness, and a helpless dependence on his daughter. Mrs. Spragg's long habit of apathy was overcome by her dread of being left alone when her husband and Undine went out, and she delayed and impeded their expeditions by insisting on accompanying them; so that, much as Undine disliked sightseeing, there seemed no alternative between "going round" with her parents and shutting herself up with them in the crowded hotels to which she successively transported them.

The hotels were the only European institutions that really interested Mr. Spragg. He considered them manifestly inferior to those at home; but he was haunted by a statistical curiosity as to their size, their number, their cost and their capacity for housing and feeding the incalculable hordes of his countrymen. He went through galleries, churches and museums in a stolid silence like his daughter's; but in the hotels he never ceased to enquire and investigate, questioning every one who could speak English, comparing bills, collecting prospectuses and computing the cost of construction and the probable return on the investment. He regarded the non-existence of the cold-storage system as one more proof of European inferiority, and no longer wondered, in the absence of the room-to-room telephone, that foreigners hadn't yet mastered the first principles of time-saving.

After a few weeks it became evident to both parents and daughter that their unnatural association could not continue much longer. Mrs. Spragg's shrinking from everything new and unfamiliar had developed into a kind of settled terror, and Mr. Spragg had begun to be depressed by the incredible number of the hotels and their simply incalculable housing capacity.

"It ain't that they're any great shakes in themselves, any one of 'em; but there's such a darned lot of 'em: they're as thick as mosquitoes, every place you go." And he began to reckon up, on slips of paper, on the backs of bills and the margins of old newspapers, the number of travellers who could be simultaneously lodged, bathed and boarded on the continent of Europe. "Five hundred bedrooms three hundred bathrooms no; three hundred and fifty bathrooms, that one has: that makes, supposing two-thirds of 'em double up do you s'pose as many as that do, Undie? That porter at Lucerne told me the Germans slept three in a room well, call it eight hundred people; and three meals a day per head; no, four meals, with that afternoon tea they take; and the last place we were at

'way up on that mountain there why, there were seventy-five hotels in that one spot alone, and all jam full well, it beats me to know where all the people come from..."

He had gone on in this fashion for what seemed to his daughter an endless length of days; and then suddenly he had roused himself to say: "See here, Undie, I got to go back and make the money to pay for all this."

There had been no question on the part of any of the three of Undine's returning with them; and after she had conveyed them to their steamer, and seen their vaguely relieved faces merged in the handkerchief-waving throng along the taffrail, she had returned alone to Paris and made her unsuccessful attempt to enlist the aid of Indiana Rolliver.

XXVII

She was still brooding over this last failure when one afternoon, as she loitered on the hotel terrace, she was approached by a young woman whom she had seen sitting near the wheeled chair of an old lady wearing a crumpled black bonnet under a funny fringed parasol with a jointed handle.

The young woman, who was small, slight and brown, was dressed with a disregard of the fashion which contrasted oddly with the mauve powder on her face and the traces of artificial colour in her dark untidy hair. She looked as if she might have several different personalities, and as if the one of the moment had been hanging up a long time in her wardrobe and been hurriedly taken down as probably good enough for the present occasion.

With her hands in her jacket pockets, and an agreeable smile on her boyish face, she strolled up to Undine and asked, in a pretty variety of Parisian English, if she had the pleasure of speaking to Mrs. Marvell.

On Undine's assenting, the smile grew more alert and the lady continued:
"I think you know my friend Sacha Adelschein?"
No question could have been less welcome to Undine. If there was one point on which she was doggedly and puritanically resolved, it was that no extremes of social adversity should ever again draw her into the group of people among whom Madame Adelschein too conspicuously figured. Since her unsuccessful attempt to win over Indiana by introducing her to that group, Undine had been righteously resolved to remain aloof from it; and she was drawing herself up to her loftiest height of disapproval when the stranger, as if unconscious of it, went on: "Sacha speaks of you so often she admires you so much. I think you know also my cousin Chelles," she added, looking into Undine's eyes. "I am the Princess Estradina. I've come here with my mother for the air."

The murmur of negation died on Undine's lips. She found herself grappling with a new social riddle, and such surprises were always stimulating. The name of the untidy-looking young woman she had been about to repel was one of the most eminent in the impregnable quarter beyond the Seine. No one figured more largely in the Parisian chronicle than the Princess Estradina, and no name more impressively headed the list at every marriage, funeral and philanthropic entertainment of the Faubourg Saint Germain than that of her mother, the Duchesse de Dordogne, who must be no other than the old woman sitting in the Bath-chair with the crumpled bonnet and the ridiculous sunshade.

But it was not the appearance of the two ladies that surprised Undine. She knew that social gold does not always glitter, and that the lady she had heard spoken of as Lili

Estradina was notoriously careless of the conventions; but that she should boast of her intimacy with Madame Adelschein, and use it as a pretext for naming herself, overthrew all Undine's hierarchies.

"Yes it's hideously dull here, and I'm dying of it. Do come over and speak to my mother. She's dying of it too; but don't tell her so, because she hasn't found it out. There were so many things our mothers never found out," the Princess rambled on, with her half-mocking half-intimate smile; and in another moment Undine, thrilled at having Mrs. Spragg thus coupled with a Duchess, found herself seated between mother and daughter, and responding by a radiant blush to the elder lady's amiable opening: "You know my nephew Raymond he's your great admirer."

How had it happened, whither would it lead, how long could it last? The questions raced through Undine's brain as she sat listening to her new friends they seemed already too friendly to be called acquaintances! replying to their enquiries, and trying to think far enough ahead to guess what they would expect her to say, and what tone it would be well to take. She was used to such feats of mental agility, and it was instinctive with her to become, for the moment, the person she thought her interlocutors expected her to be; but she had never had quite so new a part to play at such short notice. She took her cue, however, from the fact that the Princess Estradina, in her mother's presence, made no farther allusion to her dear friend Sacha, and seemed somehow, though she continued to chat on in the same easy strain, to look differently and throw out different implications. All these shades of demeanour were immediately perceptible to Undine, who tried to adapt herself to them by combining in her manner a mixture of Apex dash and New York dignity; and the result was so successful that when she rose to go the Princess, with a hand on her arm, said almost wistfully: "You're staying on too? Then do take pity on us! We might go on some trips together; and in the evenings we could make a bridge."

A new life began for Undine. The Princess, chained her mother's side, and frankly restive under her filial duty, clung to her new acquaintance with a persistence too flattering to be analyzed. "My dear, I was on the brink of suicide when I saw your name in the visitors' list," she explained; and Undine felt like answering that she had nearly reached the same pass when the Princess's thin little hand had been held out to her. For the moment she was dizzy with the effect of that random gesture. Here she was, at the lowest ebb of her fortunes, miraculously rehabilitated, reinstated, and restored to the old victorious sense of her youth and her power! Her sole graces, her unaided personality, had worked the miracle; how should she not trust in them hereafter?

Aside from her feeling of concrete attainment. Undine was deeply interested in her new friends. The Princess and her mother, in their different ways, were different from any

one else she had known. The Princess, who might have been of any age between twenty and forty, had a small triangular face with caressing impudent eyes, a smile like a silent whistle and the gait of a baker's boy balancing his basket. She wore either baggy shabby clothes like a man's, or rich draperies that looked as if they had been rained on; and she seemed equally at ease in either style of dress, and carelessly unconscious of both. She was extremely familiar and unblushingly inquisitive, but she never gave Undine the time to ask her any questions or the opportunity to venture on any freedom with her. Nevertheless she did not scruple to talk of her sentimental experiences, and seemed surprised, and rather disappointed, that Undine had so few to relate in return. She playfully accused her beautiful new friend of being cachottiere, and at the sight of Undine's blush cried out: "Ah, you funny Americans! Why do you all behave as if love were a secret infirmity?"

The old Duchess was even more impressive, because she fitted better into Undine's preconceived picture of the Faubourg Saint Germain, and was more like the people with whom she pictured the former Nettie Wincher as living in privileged intimacy. The Duchess was, indeed, more amiable and accessible than Undine's conception of a Duchess, and displayed a curiosity as great as her daughter's, and much more puerile, concerning her new friend's history and habits. But through her mild prattle, and in spite of her limited perceptions. Undine felt in her the same clear impenetrable barrier that she ran against occasionally in the Princess; and she was beginning to understand that this barrier represented a number of things about which she herself had yet to learn. She would not have known this a few years earlier, nor would she have seen in the Duchess anything but the ruin of an ugly woman, dressed in clothes that Mrs. Spragg wouldn't have touched. The Duchess certainly looked like a ruin; but Undine now saw that she looked like the ruin of a castle.

The Princess, who was unofficially separated from her husband, had with her her two little girls. She seemed extremely attached to both though avowing for the younger a preference she frankly ascribed to the interesting accident of its parentage and she could not understand that Undine, as to whose domestic difficulties she minutely informed herself, should have consented to leave her child to strangers. "For, to one's child every one but one's self is a stranger; and whatever your egarements " she began, breaking off with a stare when Undine interrupted her to explain that the courts had ascribed all the wrongs in the case to her husband. "But then but then " murmured the Princess, turning away from the subject as if checked by too deep an abyss of difference.

The incident had embarrassed Undine, and though she tried to justify herself by allusions to her boy's dependence on his father's family, and to the duty of not standing in his way, she saw that she made no impression. "Whatever one's errors, one's child belongs to one," her hearer continued to repeat; and Undine, who was frequently

scandalized by the Princess's conversation, now found herself in the odd position of having to set a watch upon her own in order not to scandalize the Princess.

Each day, nevertheless, strengthened her hold on her new friends. After her first flush of triumph she began indeed to suspect that she had been a slight disappointment to the Princess, had not completely justified the hopes raised by the doubtful honour of being one of Sacha Adelschein's intimates. Undine guessed that the Princess had expected to find her more amusing, "queerer," more startling in speech and conduct. Though by instinct she was none of these things, she was eager to go as far as was expected; but she felt that her audacities were on lines too normal to be interesting, and that the Princess thought her rather school-girlish and old-fashioned. Still, they had in common their youth, their boredom, their high spirits and their hunger for amusement; and Undine was making the most of these ties when one day, coming back from a trip to Monte-Carlo with the Princess, she was brought up short by the sight of a lady evidently a new arrival who was seated in an attitude of respectful intimacy beside the old Duchess's chair. Undine, advancing unheard over the fine gravel of the garden path, recognized at a glance the Marquise de Trezac's drooping nose and disdainful back, and at the same moment heard her say: " And her husband?"

"Her husband? But she's an American she's divorced," the Duchess replied, as if she were merely stating the same fact in two different ways; and Undine stopped short with a pang of apprehension.

The Princess came up behind her. "Who's the solemn person with Mamma? Ah, that old bore of a Trezac!" She dropped her long eye-glass with a laugh. "Well, she'll be useful she'll stick to Mamma like a leech and we shall get away oftener. Come, let's go and be charming to her."

She approached Madame de Trezac effusively, and after an interchange of exclamations Undine heard her say "You know my friend Mrs. Marvell? No? How odd! Where do you manage to hide yourself, chere Madame? Undine, here's a compatriot who hasn't the pleasure "

"I'm such a hermit, dear Mrs. Marvell the Princess shows me what I miss," the Marquise de Trezac murmured, rising to give her hand to Undine, and speaking in a voice so different from that of the supercilious Miss Wincher that only her facial angle and the droop of her nose linked her to the hated vision of Potash Springs.

Undine felt herself dancing on a flood-tide of security. For the first time the memory of Potash Springs became a thing to smile at, and with the Princess's arm through hers she shone back triumphantly on Madame de Trezac, who seemed to have grown suddenly

obsequious and insignificant, as though the waving of the Princess's wand had stripped her of all her false advantages.

But upstairs, in her own room. Undine's courage fell. Madame de Trezac had been civil, effusive even, because for the moment she had been taken off her guard by finding Mrs. Marvell on terms of intimacy with the Princess Estradina and her mother. But the force of facts would reassert itself. Far from continuing to see Undine through her French friends' eyes she would probably invite them to view her compatriot through the searching lens of her own ampler information. "The old hypocrite she'll tell them everything," Undine murmured, wincing at the recollection of the dentist's assistant from Deposit, and staring miserably at her reflection in the dressing-table mirror. Of what use were youth and grace and good looks, if one drop of poison distilled from the envy of a narrow-minded woman was enough to paralyze them? Of course Madame de Trezac knew and remembered, and, secure in her own impregnable position, would never rest till she had driven out the intruder.

XXVIII

"What do you say to Nice to-morrow, dearest?" the Princess suggested a few evenings later as she followed Undine upstairs after a languid evening at bridge with the Duchess and Madame de Trezac.

Half-way down the passage she stopped to open a door and, putting her finger to her lip, signed to Undine to enter. In the taper-lit dimness stood two small white beds, each surmounted by a crucifix and a palm branch, and each containing a small brown sleeping child with a mop of hair and a curiously finished little face. As the Princess stood gazing on their innocent slumbers she seemed for a moment like a third little girl scarcely bigger and browner than the others; and the smile with which she watched them was as clear as theirs. "Ah, si seulement je pouvais choisir leurs amants!" she sighed as she turned away.

" Nice to-morrow," she repeated, as she and Undine walked on to their rooms with linked arms. "We may as well make hay while the Trezac shines. She bores Mamma frightfully, but Mamma won't admit it because they belong to the same oeuvres. Shall it be the eleven train, dear? We can lunch at the Royal and look in the shops we may meet somebody amusing. Anyhow, it's better than staying here!"

Undine was sure the trip to Nice would be delightful. Their previous expeditions had shown her the Princess's faculty for organizing such adventures. At Monte-Carlo, a few days before, they had run across two or three amusing but unassorted people, and the Princess, having fused them in a jolly lunch, had followed it up by a bout at baccarat, and, finally hunting down an eminent composer who had just arrived to rehearse a new production, had insisted on his asking the party to tea, and treating them to fragments of his opera.

A few days earlier, Undine's hope of renewing such pleasures would have been clouded by the dread of leaving Madame de Trezac alone with the Duchess. But she had no longer any fear of Madame de Trezac. She had discovered that her old rival of Potash Springs was in actual dread of her disfavour, and nervously anxious to conciliate her, and the discovery gave her such a sense of the heights she had scaled, and the security of her footing, that all her troubled past began to seem like the result of some providential "design," and vague impulses of piety stirred in her as she and the Princess whirled toward Nice through the blue and gold glitter of the morning.

They wandered about the lively streets, they gazed into the beguiling shops, the Princess tried on hats and Undine bought them, and they lunched at the Royal on all sorts of succulent dishes prepared under the head-waiter's special supervision. But as they were

savouring their "double" coffee and liqueurs, and Undine was wondering what her companion would devise for the afternoon, the Princess clapped her hands together and cried out: "Dearest, I'd forgotten! I must desert you."

She explained that she'd promised the Duchess to look up a friend who was ill a poor wretch who'd been sent to Cimiez for her lungs and that she must rush off at once, and would be back as soon as possible well, if not in an hour, then in two at latest. She was full of compunction, but she knew Undine would forgive her, and find something amusing to fill up the time: she advised her to go back and buy the black hat with the osprey, and try on the crepe de Chine they'd thought so smart: for any one as good-looking as herself the woman would probably alter it for nothing; and they could meet again at the Palace Tea-Rooms at four. She whirled away in a cloud of explanations, and Undine, left alone, sat down on the Promenade des Anglais. She did not believe a word the Princess had said. She had seen in a flash why she was being left, and why the plan had not been divulged to her before-hand; and she quivered with resentment and humiliation. "That's what she's wanted me for...that's why she made up to me. She's trying it to-day, and after this it'll happen regularly...she'll drag me over here every day or two...at least she thinks she will!"

A sincere disgust was Undine's uppermost sensation. She was as much ashamed as Mrs. Spragg might have been at finding herself used to screen a clandestine adventure.

"I'll let her see... I'll make her understand," she repeated angrily; and for a moment she was half-disposed to drive to the station and take the first train back. But the sense of her precarious situation withheld her; and presently, with bitterness in her heart, she got up and began to stroll toward the shops.

To show that she was not a dupe, she arrived at the designated meeting-place nearly an hour later than the time appointed; but when she entered the Tea-Rooms the Princess was nowhere to be seen. The rooms were crowded, and Undine was guided toward a small inner apartment where isolated couples were absorbing refreshments in an atmosphere of intimacy that made it seem incongruous to be alone. She glanced about for a face she knew, but none was visible, and she was just giving up the search when she beheld Elmer Moffatt shouldering his way through the crowd.

The sight was so surprising that she sat gazing with unconscious fixity at the round black head and glossy reddish face which kept appearing and disappearing through the intervening jungle of aigrettes. It was long since she had either heard of Moffatt or thought about him, and now, in her loneliness and exasperation, she took comfort in the sight of his confident capable face, and felt a longing to hear his voice and unbosom her woes to him. She had half risen to attract his attention when she saw him turn back and

make way for a companion, who was cautiously steering her huge feathered hat between the tea-tables. The woman was of the vulgarest type; everything about her was cheap and gaudy. But Moffatt was obviously elated: he stood aside with a flourish to usher her in, and as he followed he shot out a pink shirt-cuff with jewelled links, and gave his moustache a gallant twist. Undine felt an unreasoning irritation: she was vexed with him both for not being alone and for being so vulgarly accompanied. As the couple seated themselves she caught Moffatt's glance and saw him redden to the edge of his white forehead; but he elaborately avoided her eye he evidently wanted her to see him do it and proceeded to minister to his companion's wants with an air of experienced gallantry.

The incident, trifling as it was, filled up the measure of Undine's bitterness. She thought Moffatt pitiably ridiculous, and she hated him for showing himself in such a light at that particular moment. Her mind turned back to her own grievance, and she was just saying to herself that nothing on earth should prevent her letting the Princess know what she thought of her, when the lady in question at last appeared. She came hurriedly forward and behind her Undine perceived the figure of a slight quietly dressed man, as to whom her immediate impression was that he made every one else in the room look as common as Moffatt. An instant later the colour had flown to her face and her hand was in Raymond de Chelles, while the Princess, murmuring: "Cimiez's such a long way off; but you WILL forgive me?" looked into her eyes with a smile that added: "See how I pay for what I get!"

Her first glance showed Undine how glad Raymond de Chelles was to see her. Since their last meeting his admiration for her seemed not only to have increased but to have acquired a different character. Undine, at an earlier stage in her career, might not have known exactly what the difference signified; but it was as clear to her now as if the Princess had said what her beaming eyes seemed, in fact, to convey "I'm only too glad to do my cousin the same kind of turn you're doing me."

But Undine's increased experience, if it had made her more vigilant, had also given her a clearer measure of her power. She saw at once that Chelles, in seeking to meet her again, was not in quest of a mere passing adventure. He was evidently deeply drawn to her, and her present situation, if it made it natural to regard her as more accessible, had not altered the nature of his feeling. She saw and weighed all this in the first five minutes during which, over tea and muffins, the Princess descanted on her luck in happening to run across her cousin, and Chelles, his enchanted eyes on Undine, expressed his sense of his good fortune. He was staying, it appeared, with friends at Beaulieu, and had run over to Nice that afternoon by the merest chance: he added that, having just learned of his aunt's presence in the neighbourhood, he had already planned to present his homage to her.

"Oh, don't come to us we're too dull!" the Princess exclaimed. "Let us run over occasionally and call on you: we're dying for a pretext, aren't we?" she added, smiling at Undine.

The latter smiled back vaguely, and looked across the room. Moffatt, looking flushed and foolish, was just pushing back his chair. To carry off his embarrassment he put an additional touch of importance; and as he swaggered out behind his companion, Undine said to herself, with a shiver: "If he'd been alone they would have found me taking tea with him."

Undine, during the ensuing weeks, returned several times to Nice with the Princess; but, to the latter's surprise, she absolutely refused to have Raymond de Chelles included in their luncheon-parties, or even apprised in advance of their expeditions.

The Princess, always impatient of unnecessary dissimulation, had not attempted to keep up the feint of the interesting invalid at Cimiez. She confessed to Undine that she was drawn to Nice by the presence there of the person without whom, for the moment, she found life intolerable, and whom she could not well receive under the same roof with her little girls and her mother. She appealed to Undine's sisterly heart to feel for her in her difficulty, and implied that as her conduct had already proved she would always be ready to render her friend a like service. It was at this point that Undine checked her by a decided word. "I understand your position, and I'm very sorry for you, of course," she began (the Princess stared at the "sorry"). "Your secret's perfectly safe with me, and I'll do anything I can for you...but if I go to Nice with you again you must promise not to ask your cousin to meet us."

The Princess's face expressed the most genuine astonishment. "Oh, my dear, do forgive me if I've been stupid! He admires you so tremendously; and I thought "

"You'll do as I ask, please won't you?" Undine went on, ignoring the interruption and looking straight at her under level brows; and the Princess, with a shrug, merely murmured: "What a pity! I fancied you liked him."

XXIX

The early spring found Undine once more in Paris.

She had every reason to be satisfied with the result of the course she had pursued since she had pronounced her ultimatum on the subject of Raymond de Chelles. She had continued to remain on the best of terms with the Princess, to rise in the estimation of the old Duchess, and to measure the rapidity of her ascent in the upward gaze of Madame de Trezac; and she had given Chelles to understand that, if he wished to renew their acquaintance, he must do so in the shelter of his venerable aunt's protection.

To the Princess she was careful to make her attitude equally clear. "I like your cousin very much he's delightful, and if I'm in Paris this spring I hope I shall see a great deal of him. But I know how easy it is for a woman in my position to get talked about and I have my little boy to consider."

Nevertheless, whenever Chelles came over from Beaulieu to spend a day with his aunt and cousin an excursion he not infrequently repeated Undine was at no pains to conceal her pleasure. Nor was there anything calculated in her attitude. Chelles seemed to her more charming than ever, and the warmth of his wooing was in flattering contrast to the cool reserve of his manners. At last she felt herself alive and young again, and it became a joy to look in her glass and to try on her new hats and dresses...

The only menace ahead was the usual one of the want of money. While she had travelled with her parents she had been at relatively small expense, and since their return to America Mr. Spragg had sent her allowance regularly; yet almost all the money she had received for the pearls was already gone, and she knew her Paris season would be far more expensive than the quiet weeks on the Riviera.

Meanwhile the sense of reviving popularity, and the charm of Chelles' devotion, had almost effaced the ugly memories of failure, and refurbished that image of herself in other minds which was her only notion of self-seeing. Under the guidance of Madame de Trezac she had found a prettily furnished apartment in a not too inaccessible quarter, and in its light bright drawing-room she sat one June afternoon listening, with all the forbearance of which she was capable, to the counsels of her newly-acquired guide.

"Everything but marriage " Madame de Trezac was repeating, her long head slightly tilted, her features wearing the rapt look of an adept reciting a hallowed formula.

Raymond de Chelles had not been mentioned by either of the ladies, and the former Miss Wincher was merely imparting to her young friend one of the fundamental dogmas

of her social creed; but Undine was conscious that the air between them vibrated with an unspoken name. She made no immediate answer, but her glance, passing by Madame de Trezac's dull countenance, sought her own reflection in the mirror behind her visitor's chair. A beam of spring sunlight touched the living masses of her hair and made the face beneath as radiant as a girl's. Undine smiled faintly at the promise her own eyes gave her, and then turned them back to her friend. "What can such women know about anything?" she thought compassionately.

"There's everything against it," Madame de Trezac continued in a tone of patient exposition. She seemed to be doing her best to make the matter clear. "In the first place, between people in society a religious marriage is necessary; and, since the Church doesn't recognize divorce, that's obviously out of the question. In France, a man of position who goes through the form of civil marriage with a divorced woman is simply ruining himself and her. They might much better from her point of view as well as his be 'friends,' as it's called over here: such arrangements are understood and allowed for. But when a Frenchman marries he wants to marry as his people always have. He knows there are traditions he can't fight against and in his heart he's glad there are."

"Oh, I know: they've so much religious feeling. I admire that in them: their religion's so beautiful." Undine looked thoughtfully at her visitor. "I suppose even money a great deal of money wouldn't make the least bit of difference?"

"None whatever, except to make matters worse," Madame de Trezac decisively rejoined. She returned Undine's look with something of Miss Wincher's contemptuous authority. "But," she added, softening to a smile, "between ourselves I can say it, since we're neither of us children a woman with tact, who's not in a position to remarry, will find society extremely indulgent... provided, of course, she keeps up appearances..."

Undine turned to her with the frown of a startled Diana. "We don't look at things that way out at Apex," she said coldly; and the blood rose in Madame de Trezac's sallow cheek.

"Oh, my dear, it's so refreshing to hear you talk like that! Personally, of course, I've never quite got used to the French view "

"I hope no American woman ever does," said Undine.

She had been in Paris for about two months when this conversation took place, and in spite of her reviving self-confidence she was beginning to recognize the strength of the forces opposed to her. It had taken a long time to convince her that even money could not prevail against them; and, in the intervals of expressing her admiration for the

Catholic creed, she now had violent reactions of militant Protestantism, during which she talked of the tyranny of Rome and recalled school stories of immoral Popes and persecuting Jesuits.

Meanwhile her demeanour to Chelles was that of the incorruptible but fearless American woman, who cannot even conceive of love outside of marriage, but is ready to give her devoted friendship to the man on whom, in happier circumstances, she might have bestowed her hand. This attitude was provocative of many scenes, during which her suitor's unfailing powers of expression his gift of looking and saying all the desperate and devoted things a pretty woman likes to think she inspires gave Undine the thrilling sense of breathing the very air of French fiction. But she was aware that too prolonged tension of these cords usually ends in their snapping, and that Chelles' patience was probably in inverse ratio to his ardour.

When Madame de Trezac had left her these thoughts remained in her mind. She understood exactly what each of her new friends wanted of her. The Princess, who was fond of her cousin, and had the French sense of family solidarity, would have liked to see Chelles happy in what seemed to her the only imaginable way. Madame de Trezac would have liked to do what she could to second the Princess's efforts in this or any other line; and even the old Duchess though piously desirous of seeing her favourite nephew married would have thought it not only natural but inevitable that, while awaiting that happy event, he should try to induce an amiable young woman to mitigate the drawbacks of celibacy. Meanwhile, they might one and all weary of her if Chelles did; and a persistent rejection of his suit would probably imperil her scarcely-gained footing among his friends. All this was clear to her, yet it did not shake her resolve. She was determined to give up Chelles unless he was willing to marry her; and the thought of her renunciation moved her to a kind of wistful melancholy.

In this mood her mind reverted to a letter she had just received from her mother. Mrs. Spragg wrote more fully than usual, and the unwonted flow of her pen had been occasioned by an event for which she had long yearned. For months she had pined for a sight of her grandson, had tried to screw up her courage to write and ask permission to visit him, and, finally breaking through her sedentary habits, had begun to haunt the neighbourhood of Washington Square, with the result that one afternoon she had had the luck to meet the little boy coming out of the house with his nurse. She had spoken to him, and he had remembered her and called her "Granny"; and the next day she had received a note from Mrs. Fairford saying that Ralph would be glad to send Paul to see her. Mrs. Spragg enlarged on the delights of the visit and the growing beauty and cleverness of her grandson. She described to Undine exactly how Paul was dressed, how he looked and what he said, and told her how he had examined everything in the room, and, finally coming upon his mother's photograph, had asked who the lady was; and, on

being told, had wanted to know if she was a very long way off, and when Granny thought she would come back.

As Undine re-read her mother's pages, she felt an unusual tightness in her throat and two tears rose to her eyes. It was dreadful that her little boy should be growing up far away from her, perhaps dressed in clothes she would have hated; and wicked and unnatural that when he saw her picture he should have to be told who she was. "If I could only meet some good man who would give me a home and be a father to him," she thought and the tears overflowed and ran down.

Even as they fell, the door was thrown open to admit Raymond de Chelles, and the consciousness of the moisture still glistening on her cheeks perhaps strengthened her resolve to resist him, and thus made her more imperiously to be desired. Certain it is that on that day her suitor first alluded to a possibility which Madame de Trezac had prudently refrained from suggesting, there fell upon Undine's attentive ears the magic phrase "annulment of marriage."

Her alert intelligence immediately set to work in this new direction; but almost at the same moment she became aware of a subtle change of tone in the Princess and her mother, a change reflected in the corresponding decline of Madame de Trezac's cordiality. Undine, since her arrival in Paris, had necessarily been less in the Princess's company, but when they met she had found her as friendly as ever. It was manifestly not a failing of the Princess's to forget past favours, and though increasingly absorbed by the demands of town life she treated her new friend with the same affectionate frankness, and Undine was given frequent opportunities to enlarge her Parisian acquaintance, not only in the Princess's intimate circle but in the majestic drawing-rooms of the Hotel de Dordogne. Now, however, there was a perceptible decline in these signs of hospitality, and Undine, on calling one day on the Duchess, noticed that her appearance sent a visible flutter of discomfort through the circle about her hostess's chair. Two or three of the ladies present looked away from the new-comer and at each other, and several of them seemed spontaneously to encircle without approaching her, while another grey-haired, elderly and slightly frightened with an "Adieu, ma bonne tante" to the Duchess, was hastily aided in her retreat down the long line of old gilded rooms.

The incident was too mute and rapid to have been noticeable had it not been followed by the Duchess's resuming her conversation with the ladies nearest her as though Undine had just gone out of the room instead of entering it. The sense of having been thus rendered invisible filled Undine with a vehement desire to make herself seen, and an equally strong sense that all attempts to do so would be vain; and when, a few minutes later, she issued from the portals of the Hotel de Dordogne it was with the fixed resolve not to enter them again till she had had an explanation with the Princess.

She was spared the trouble of seeking one by the arrival, early the next morning, of Madame de Trezac, who, entering almost with the breakfast tray, mysteriously asked to be allowed to communicate something of importance.

"You'll understand, I know, the Princess's not coming herself " Madame de Trezac began, sitting up very straight on the edge of the arm-chair over which Undine's lace dressing-gown hung.

"If there's anything she wants to say to me, I don't," Undine answered, leaning back among her rosy pillows, and reflecting compassionately that the face opposite her was just the colour of the café au lait she was pouring out.

"There are things that are...that might seem too pointed...if one said them one's self," Madame de Trezac continued. "Our dear Lili's so good-natured... she so hates to do anything unfriendly; but she naturally thinks first of her mother..."

"Her mother? What's the matter with her mother?"

"I told her I knew you didn't understand. I was sure you'd take it in good part..."

Undine raised herself on her elbow. "What did Lili tell you to tell me?"

"Oh, not to TELL you...simply to ask if, just for the present, you'd mind avoiding the Duchess's Thursdays ...calling on any other day, that is."

"Any other day? She's not at home on any other. Do you mean she doesn't want me to call?"

"Well not while the Marquise de Chelles is in Paris. She's the Duchess's favourite niece and of course they all hang together. That kind of family feeling is something you naturally don't "

Undine had a sudden glimpse of hidden intricacies.

"That was Raymond de Chelles' mother I saw there yesterday? The one they hurried out when I came in?"

"It seems she was very much upset. She somehow heard your name."

"Why shouldn't she have heard my name? And why in the world should it upset her?"

Madame de Trezac heaved a hesitating sigh. "Isn't it better to be frank?
She thinks she has reason to feel badly they all do."
"To feel badly? Because her son wants to marry me?"

"Of course they know that's impossible." Madame de Trezac smiled compassionately. "But they're afraid of your spoiling his other chances."

Undine paused a moment before answering, "It won't be impossible when my marriage is annulled," she said.

The effect of this statement was less electrifying than she had hoped. Her visitor simply broke into a laugh. "My dear child! Your marriage annulled? Who can have put such a mad idea into your head?"

Undine's gaze followed the pattern she was tracing with a lustrous nail on her embroidered bedspread. "Raymond himself," she let fall.

This time there was no mistaking the effect she produced. Madame de Trezac, with a murmured "Oh," sat gazing before her as if she had lost the thread of her argument; and it was only after a considerable interval that she recovered it sufficiently to exclaim: "They'll never hear of it absolutely never!"

"But they can't prevent it, can they?"

"They can prevent its being of any use to you."

"I see," Undine pensively assented.

She knew the tone she had taken was virtually a declaration of war; but she was in a mood when the act of defiance, apart from its strategic value, was a satisfaction in itself. Moreover, if she could not gain her end without a fight it was better that the battle should be engaged while Raymond's ardour was at its height. To provoke immediate hostilities she sent for him the same afternoon, and related, quietly and without comment, the incident of her visit to the Duchess, and the mission with which Madame de Trezac had been charged. In the circumstances, she went on to explain, it was manifestly impossible that she should continue to receive his visits; and she met his wrathful comments on his relatives by the gently but firmly expressed resolve not to be the cause of any disagreement between himself and his family.

XXX

A few days after her decisive conversation with Raymond de Chelles, Undine, emerging from the doors of the Nouveau Luxe, where she had been to call on the newly-arrived Mrs. Homer Branney, once more found herself face to face with Elmer Moffatt.

This time there was no mistaking his eagerness to be recognized. He stopped short as they met, and she read such pleasure in his eyes that she too stopped, holding out her hand.

"I'm glad you're going to speak to me," she said, and Moffatt reddened at the allusion.

"Well, I very nearly didn't. I didn't know you. You look about as old as you did when I first landed at Apex remember?"

He turned back and began to walk at her side in the direction of the
Champs Elysees.
"Say this is all right!" he exclaimed; and she saw that his glance had left her and was ranging across the wide silvery square ahead of them to the congregated domes and spires beyond the river.

"Do you like Paris?" she asked, wondering what theatres he had been to.

"It beats everything." He seemed to be breathing in deeply the impression of fountains, sculpture, leafy' avenues and long-drawn architectural distances fading into the afternoon haze.

"I suppose you've been to that old church over there?" he went on, his gold-topped stick pointing toward the towers of Notre Dame.

"Oh, of course; when I used to sightsee. Have you never been to Paris before?"

"No, this is my first look-round. I came across in March."

"In March?" she echoed inattentively. It never occurred to her that other people's lives went on when they were out of her range of vision, and she tried in vain to remember what she had last heard of Moffatt. "Wasn't that a bad time to leave Wall Street?"

"Well, so-so. Fact is, I was played out: needed a change." Nothing in his robust mien confirmed the statement, and he did not seem inclined to develop it. "I presume you're settled here now?" he went on. "I saw by the papers "

"Yes," she interrupted; adding, after a moment: "It was all a mistake from the first."

"Well, I never thought he was your form," said Moffatt.

His eyes had come back to her, and the look in them struck her as something she might use to her advantage; but the next moment he had glanced away with a furrowed brow, and she felt she had not wholly fixed his attention.

"I live at the other end of Paris. Why not come back and have tea with me?" she suggested, half moved by a desire to know more of his affairs, and half by the thought that a talk with him might help to shed some light on hers.

In the open taxi-cab he seemed to recover his sense of well-being, and leaned back, his hands on the knob of his stick, with the air of a man pleasantly aware of his privileges. "This Paris is a thundering good place," he repeated once or twice as they rolled on through the crush and glitter of the afternoon; and when they had descended at Undine's door, and he stood in her drawing-room, and looked out on the horse-chestnut trees rounding their green domes under the balcony, his satisfaction culminated in the comment: "I guess this lays out West End Avenue!"

His eyes met Undine's with their old twinkle, and their expression encouraged her to murmur: "Of course there are times when I'm very lonely."

She sat down behind the tea-table, and he stood at a little distance, watching her pull off her gloves with a queer comic twitch of his elastic mouth. "Well, I guess it's only when you want to be," he said, grasping a lyre-backed chair by its gilt cords, and sitting down astride of it, his light grey trousers stretching too tightly over his plump thighs. Undine was perfectly aware that he was a vulgar over-dressed man, with a red crease of fat above his collar and an impudent swaggering eye; yet she liked to see him there, and was conscious that he stirred the fibres of a self she had forgotten but had not ceased to understand.

She had fancied her avowal of loneliness might call forth some sentimental phrase; but though Moffatt was clearly pleased to be with her she saw that she was not the centre of his thoughts, and the discovery irritated her.

"I don't suppose YOU'VE known what it is to be lonely since you've been in Europe?" she continued as she held out his tea-cup.

"Oh," he said jocosely, "I don't always go round with a guide"; and she rejoined on the same note: "Then perhaps I shall see something of you."

"Why, there's nothing would suit me better; but the fact is, I'm probably sailing next week."

"Oh, are you? I'm sorry." There was nothing feigned in her regret.

"Anything I can do for you across the pond?"

She hesitated. "There's something you can do for me right off."

He looked at her more attentively, as if his practised eve had passed through the surface of her beauty to what might be going on behind it. "Do you want my blessing again?" he asked with sudden irony.

Undine opened her eyes with a trustful look. "Yes I do."

"Well I'll be damned!" said Moffatt gaily.

"You've always been so awfully nice," she began; and he leaned back, grasping both sides of the chair-back, and shaking it a little with his laugh.

He kept the same attitude while she proceeded to unfold her case, listening to her with the air of sober concentration that his frivolous face took on at any serious demand on his attention. When she had ended he kept the same look during an interval of silent pondering. "Is it the fellow who was over at Nice with you that day?"

She looked at him with surprise. "How did you know?"

"Why, I liked his looks," said Moffatt simply. He got up and strolled toward the window. On the way he stopped before a table covered with showy trifles, and after looking at them for a moment singled out a dim old brown and golden book which Chelles had given her. He examined it lingeringly, as though it touched the spring of some choked-up sensibility for which he had no language. "Say " he began: it was the usual prelude to his enthusiasms; but he laid the book down and turned back.

"Then you think if you had the cash you could fix it up all right with the Pope?"

Her heart began to beat. She remembered that he had once put a job in Ralph's way, and had let her understand that he had done it partly for her sake.

"Well," he continued, relapsing into hyperbole, "I wish I could send the old gentleman my cheque to-morrow morning: but the fact is I'm high and dry." He looked at her with a sudden odd intensity. "If I WASN'T, I dunno but what " The phrase was lost in his familiar whistle. "That's an awfully fetching way you do your hair," he said. It was a disappointment to Undine to hear that his affairs were not prospering, for she knew that in his world "pull" and solvency were closely related, and that such support as she had hoped he might give her would be contingent on his own situation. But she had again a fleeting sense of his mysterious power of accomplishing things in the teeth of adversity; and she answered: "What I want is your advice."

He turned away and wandered across the room, his hands in his pockets. On her ornate writing desk he saw a photograph of Paul, bright-curled and sturdy-legged, in a manly reefer, and bent over it with a murmur of approval. "Say what a fellow! Got him with you?"

Undine coloured. "No " she began; and seeing his look of surprise, she embarked on her usual explanation. "I can't tell you how I miss him," she ended, with a ring of truth that carried conviction to her own ears if not to Moffatt's.

"Why don't you get him back, then?"

"Why, I "

Moffatt had picked up the frame and was looking at the photograph more closely. "Pants!" he chuckled. "I declare!"

He turned back to Undine. "Who DOES he belong to, anyhow?"

"Belong to?"

"Who got him when you were divorced? Did you?"

"Oh, I got everything," she said, her instinct of self-defense on the alert.

"So I thought." He stood before her, stoutly planted on his short legs, and speaking with an aggressive energy. "Well, I know what I'd do if he was mine."

"If he was yours?"

"And you tried to get him away from me. Fight you to a finish! If it cost me down to my last dollar I would."

The conversation seemed to be wandering from the point, and she answered, with a touch of impatience: "It wouldn't cost you anything like that. I haven't got a dollar to fight back with."

"Well, you ain't got to fight. Your decree gave him to you, didn't it? Why don't you send right over and get him? That's what I'd do if I was you."

Undine looked up. "But I'm awfully poor; I can't afford to have him here."

"You couldn't, up to now; but now you're going to get married. You're going to be able to give him a home and a father's care and the foreign languages. That's what I'd say if I was you...His father takes considerable stock in him, don't he?"

She coloured, a denial on her lips; but she could not shape it. "We're both awfully fond of him, of course... His father'd never give him up!"

"Just so." Moffatt's face had grown as sharp as glass. "You've got the Marvells running. All you've got to do's to sit tight and wait for their cheque." He dropped back to his equestrian seat on the lyre-backed chair.

Undine stood up and moved uneasily toward the window. She seemed to see her little boy as though he were in the room with her; she did not understand how she could have lived so long without him...She stood for a long time without speaking, feeling behind her the concentrated irony of Moffatt's gaze.

"You couldn't lend me the money manage to borrow it for me, I mean?" she finally turned back to ask. He laughed. "If I could manage to borrow any money at this particular minute well, I'd have to lend every dollar of it to Elmer Moffatt, Esquire. I'm stone-broke, if you want to know. And wanted for an Investigation too. That's why I'm over here improving my mind."

"Why, I thought you were going home next week?"

He grinned. "I am, because I've found out there's a party wants me to stay away worse than the courts want me back. Making the trip just for my private satisfaction there won't be any money in it, I'm afraid."

Leaden disappointment descended on Undine. She had felt almost sure of Moffatt's helping her, and for an instant she wondered if some long-smouldering jealousy had flamed up under its cold cinders. But another look at his face denied her this solace; and his evident indifference was the last blow to her pride. The twinge it gave her prompted her to ask: "Don't you ever mean to get married?"

Moffatt gave her a quick look. "Why, I shouldn't wonder one of these days. Millionaires always collect something; but I've got to collect my millions first."

He spoke coolly and half-humorously, and before he had ended she had lost all interest in his reply. He seemed aware of the fact, for he stood up and held out his hand. "Well, so long, Mrs. Marvell. It's been uncommonly pleasant to see you; and you'd better think over what I've said."

She laid her hand sadly in his. "You've never had a child," she replied.

XXXI

Nearly two years had passed since Ralph Marvell, waking from his long sleep in the hot summer light of Washington Square, had found that the face of life was changed for him.

In the interval he had gradually adapted himself to the new order of things; but the months of adaptation had been a time of such darkness and confusion that, from the vantage-ground of his recovered lucidity, he could not yet distinguish the stages by which he had worked his way out; and even now his footing was not secure.

His first effort had been to readjust his values to take an inventory of them, and reclassify them, so that one at least might be made to appear as important as those he had lost; otherwise there could be no reason why he should go on living. He applied himself doggedly to this attempt; but whenever he thought he had found a reason that his mind could rest in, it gave way under him, and the old struggle for a foothold began again. His two objects in life were his boy and his book. The boy was incomparably the stronger argument, yet the less serviceable in filling the void. Ralph felt his son all the while, and all through his other feelings; but he could not think about him actively and continuously, could not forever exercise his eager empty dissatisfied mind on the relatively simple problem of clothing, educating and amusing a little boy of six. Yet Paul's existence was the all-sufficient reason for his own; and he turned again, with a kind of cold fervour, to his abandoned literary dream. Material needs obliged him to go on with his regular business; but, the day's work over, he was possessed of a leisure as bare and as blank as an unfurnished house, yet that was at least his own to furnish as he pleased.

Meanwhile he was beginning to show a presentable face to the world, and to be once more treated like a man in whose case no one is particularly interested. His men friends ceased to say: "Hallo, old chap, I never saw you looking fitter!" and elderly ladies no longer told him they were sure he kept too much to himself, and urged him to drop in any afternoon for a quiet talk. People left him to his sorrow as a man is left to an incurable habit, an unfortunate tie: they ignored it, or looked over its head if they happened to catch a glimpse of it at his elbow.

These glimpses were given to them more and more rarely. The smothered springs of life were bubbling up in Ralph, and there were days when he was glad to wake and see the sun in his window, and when he began to plan his book, and to fancy that the planning really interested him. He could even maintain the delusion for several days for intervals each time appreciably longer before it shrivelled up again in a scorching blast of disenchantment. The worst of it was that he could never tell when these hot gusts of

anguish would overtake him. They came sometimes just when he felt most secure, when he was saying to himself: "After all, things are really worth while " sometimes even when he was sitting with Clare Van Degen, listening to her voice, watching her hands, and turning over in his mind the opening chapters of his book.

"You ought to write"; they had one and all said it to him from the first; and he fancied he might have begun sooner if he had not been urged on by their watchful fondness. Everybody wanted him to write everybody had decided that he ought to, that he would, that he must be persuaded to; and the incessant imperceptible pressure of encouragement the assumption of those about him that because it would be good for him to write he must naturally be able to acted on his restive nerves as a stronger deterrent than disapproval.

Even Clare had fallen into the same mistake; and one day, as he sat talking with her on the verandah of Laura Fairford's house on the Sound where they now most frequently met Ralph had half-impatiently rejoined: "Oh, if you think it's literature I need !"

Instantly he had seen her face change, and the speaking hands tremble on her knee. But she achieved the feat of not answering him, or turning her steady eyes from the dancing mid-summer water at the foot of Laura's lawn. Ralph leaned a little nearer, and for an instant his hand imagined the flutter of hers. But instead of clasping it he drew back, and rising from his chair wandered away to the other end of the verandah...No, he didn't feel as Clare felt. If he loved her as he sometimes thought he did it was not in the same way. He had a great tenderness for her, he was more nearly happy with her than with any one else; he liked to sit and talk with her, and watch her face and her hands, and he wished there were some way some different way of letting her know it; but he could not conceive that tenderness and desire could ever again be one for him: such a notion as that seemed part of the monstrous sentimental muddle on which his life had gone aground.

"I shall write of course I shall write some day," he said, turning back to his seat. "I've had a novel in the back of my head for years; and now's the time to pull it out."

He hardly knew what he was saying; but before the end of the sentence he saw that Clare had understood what he meant to convey, and henceforth he felt committed to letting her talk to him as much as she pleased about his book. He himself, in consequence, took to thinking about it more consecutively; and just as his friends ceased to urge him to write, he sat down in earnest to begin.

The vision that had come to him had no likeness to any of his earlier imaginings. Two or three subjects had haunted him, pleading for expression, during the first years of his marriage; but these now seemed either too lyrical or too tragic. He no longer saw life on the heroic scale: he wanted to do something in which men should look no bigger than the insects they were. He contrived in the course of time to reduce one of his old subjects to these dimensions, and after nights of brooding he made a dash at it, and wrote an opening chapter that struck him as not too bad. In the exhilaration of this first attempt he spent some pleasant evenings revising and polishing his work; and gradually a feeling of authority and importance developed in him. In the morning, when he woke, instead of his habitual sense of lassitude, he felt an eagerness to be up and doing, and a conviction that his individual task was a necessary part of the world's machinery. He kept his secret with the beginner's deadly fear of losing his hold on his half-real creations if he let in any outer light on them; but he went about with a more assured step, shrank less from meeting his friends, and even began to dine out again, and to laugh at some of the jokes he heard.

Laura Fairford, to get Paul away from town, had gone early to the country; and Ralph, who went down to her every Saturday, usually found Clare Van Degen there. Since his divorce he had never entered his cousin's pinnacled palace; and Clare had never asked him why he stayed away. This mutual silence had been their sole allusion to Van Degen's share in the catastrophe, though Ralph had spoken frankly of its other aspects. They talked, however, most often of impersonal subjects books, pictures, plays, or whatever the world that interested them was doing and she showed no desire to draw him back to his own affairs. She was again staying late in town to have a pretext, as he guessed, for coming down on Sundays to the Fairfords' and they often made the trip together in her motor; but he had not yet spoken to her of having begun his book. One May evening, however, as they sat alone in the verandah, he suddenly told her that he was writing. As he spoke his heart beat like a boy's; but once the words were out they gave him a feeling of self-confidence, and he began to sketch his plan, and then to go into its details. Clare listened devoutly, her eyes burning on him through the dusk like the stars deepening above the garden; and when she got up to go in he followed her with a new sense of reassurance.

The dinner that evening was unusually pleasant. Charles Bowen, just back from his usual spring travels, had come straight down to his friends from the steamer; and the fund of impressions he brought with him gave Ralph a desire to be up and wandering. And why not when the book was done? He smiled across the table at Clare.

"Next summer you'll have to charter a yacht, and take us all off to the Aegean. We can't have Charles condescending to us about the out-of-the-way places he's been seeing."

Was it really he who was speaking, and his cousin who was sending him back her dusky smile? Well why not, again? The seasons renewed themselves, and he too was putting out a new growth. "My book my book my book," kept repeating itself under all his thoughts, as Undine's name had once perpetually murmured there. That night as he went up to bed he said to himself that he was actually ceasing to think about his wife...

As he passed Laura's door she called him in, and put her arms about him.

"You look so well, dear!"

"But why shouldn't I?" he answered gaily, as if ridiculing the fancy that he had ever looked otherwise. Paul was sleeping behind the next door, and the sense of the boy's nearness gave him a warmer glow. His little world was rounding itself out again, and once more he felt safe and at peace in its circle.

His sister looked as if she had something more to say; but she merely kissed him good night, and he went up whistling to his room. The next morning he was to take a walk with Clare, and while he lounged about the drawing-room, waiting for her to come down, a servant came in with the Sunday papers. Ralph picked one up, and was absently unfolding it when his eye fell on his own name: a sight he had been spared since the last echoes of his divorce had subsided. His impulse was to fling the paper down, to hurl it as far from him as he could; but a grim fascination tightened his hold and drew his eyes back to the hated head-line.

NEW YORK BEAUTY WEDS FRENCH NOBLEMAN MRS. UNDINE MARVELL CONFIDENT POPE WILL ANNUL PREVIOUS MARRIAGE MRS. MARVELL TALKS ABOUT HER CASE

There it was before him in all its long-drawn horror an "interview" an "interview" of Undine's about her coming marriage! Ah, she talked about her case indeed! Her confidences filled the greater part of a column, and the only detail she seemed to have omitted was the name of her future husband, who was referred to by herself as "my fiancé" and by the interviewer as "the Count" or "a prominent scion of the French nobility."

Ralph heard Laura's step behind him. He threw the paper aside and their eyes met.

"Is this what you wanted to tell me last night?"

"Last night? Is it in the papers?"

"Who told you? Bowen? What else has he heard?"

"Oh, Ralph, what does it matter what can it matter?"

"Who's the man? Did he tell you that?" Ralph insisted. He saw her growing agitation. "Why can't you answer? Is it any one I know?"

"He was told in Paris it was his friend Raymond de Chelles."

Ralph laughed, and his laugh sounded in his own ears like an echo of the dreary mirth with which he had filled Mr. Spragg's office the day he had learned that Undine intended to divorce him. But now his wrath was seasoned with a wholesome irony. The fact of his wife's having reached another stage in her ascent fell into its place as a part of the huge human buffoonery.

"Besides," Laura went on, "it's all perfect nonsense, of course. How in the world can she have her marriage annulled?"

Ralph pondered: this put the matter in another light. "With a great deal of money I suppose she might."

"Well, she certainly won't get that from Chelles. He's far from rich,
Charles tells me." Laura waited, watching him, before she risked:
"That's what convinces me she wouldn't have him if she could."
Ralph shrugged. "There may be other inducements. But she won't be able to manage it." He heard himself speaking quite collectedly. Had Undine at last lost her power of wounding him?

Clare came in, dressed for their walk, and under Laura's anxious eyes he picked up the newspaper and held it out with a careless: "Look at this!"

His cousin's glance flew down the column, and he saw the tremor of her lashes as she read. Then she lifted her head. "But you'll be free!" Her face was as vivid as a flower.

"Free? I'm free now, as far as that goes!"

"Oh, but it will go so much farther when she has another name when she's a different person altogether! Then you'll really have Paul to yourself."

"Paul?" Laura intervened with a nervous laugh. "But there's never been the least doubt about his having Paul!"

They heard the boy's laughter on the lawn, and she went out to join him.
Ralph was still looking at his cousin.
"You're glad, then?" came from him involuntarily; and she startled him by bursting into tears. He bent over and kissed her on the cheek.

XXXII

Ralph, as the days passed, felt that Clare was right: if Undine married again he would possess himself more completely, be more definitely rid of his past. And he did not doubt that she would gain her end: he knew her violent desires and her cold tenacity. If she had failed to capture Van Degen it was probably because she lacked experience of that particular type of man, of his huge immediate wants and feeble vacillating purposes; most of all, because she had not yet measured the strength of the social considerations that restrained him. It was a mistake she was not likely to repeat, and her failure had probably been a useful preliminary to success. It was a long time since Ralph had allowed himself to think of her, and as he did so the overwhelming fact of her beauty became present to him again, no longer as an element of his being but as a power dispassionately estimated. He said to himself: "Any man who can feel at all will feel it as I did"; and the conviction grew in him that Raymond de Chelles, of whom he had formed an idea through Bowen's talk, was not the man to give her up, even if she failed to obtain the release his religion exacted.

Meanwhile Ralph was gradually beginning to feel himself freer and lighter. Undine's act, by cutting the last link between them, seemed to have given him back to himself; and the mere fact that he could consider his case in all its bearings, impartially and ironically, showed him the distance he had travelled, the extent to which he had renewed himself. He had been moved, too, by Clare's cry of joy at his release. Though the nature of his feeling for her had not changed he was aware of a new quality in their friendship. When he went back to his book again his sense of power had lost its asperity, and the spectacle of life seemed less like a witless dangling of limp dolls. He was well on in his second chapter now.

This lightness of mood was still on him when, returning one afternoon to Washington Square, full of projects for a long evening's work, he found his mother awaiting him with a strange face. He followed her into the drawing-room, and she explained that there had been a telephone message she didn't understand something perfectly crazy about Paul of course it was all a mistake...

Ralph's first thought was of an accident, and his heart contracted. "Did
Laura telephone?"
"No, no; not Laura. It seemed to be a message from Mrs. Spragg: something about sending some one here to fetch him a queer name like Heeny to fetch him to a steamer on Saturday. I was to be sure to have his things packed...but of course it's a misunderstanding..." She gave an uncertain laugh, and looked up at Ralph as though entreating him to return the reassurance she had given him.

"Of course, of course," he echoed.

He made his mother repeat her statement; but the unforeseen always flurried her, and she was confused and inaccurate. She didn't actually know who had telephoned: the voice hadn't sounded like Mrs. Spragg's... A woman's voice; yes oh, not a lady's! And there was certainly something about a steamer...but he knew how the telephone bewildered her...and she was sure she was getting a little deaf. Hadn't he better call up the Malibran? Of course it was all a mistake but... well, perhaps he HAD better go there himself...

As he reached the front door a letter clinked in the box, and he saw his name on an ordinary looking business envelope. He turned the door-handle, paused again, and stooped to take out the letter. It bore the address of the firm of lawyers who had represented Undine in the divorce proceedings and as he tore open the envelope Paul's name started out at him.

Mrs. Marvell had followed him into the hall, and her cry broke the silence. "Ralph Ralph is it anything she's done?"

"Nothing it's nothing." He stared at her. "What's the day of the week?"

"Wednesday. Why, what ?" She suddenly seemed to understand. "She's not going to take him away from us?"

Ralph dropped into a chair, crumpling the letter in his hand. He had been in a dream, poor fool that he was a dream about his child! He sat gazing at the type-written phrases that spun themselves out before him. "My client's circumstances now happily permitting... at last in a position to offer her son a home...long separation...a mother's feelings...every social and educational advantage"...and then, at the end, the poisoned dart that struck him speechless: "The courts having awarded her the sole custody..."

The sole custody! But that meant that Paul was hers, hers only, hers for always: that his father had no more claim on him than any casual stranger in the street! And he, Ralph Marvell, a sane man, young, able-bodied, in full possession of his wits, had assisted at the perpetration of this abominable wrong, had passively forfeited his right to the flesh of his body, the blood of his being! But it couldn't be of course it couldn't be. The preposterousness of it proved that it wasn't true. There was a mistake somewhere; a mistake his own lawyer would instantly rectify. If a hammer hadn't been drumming in his head he could have recalled the terms of the decree but for the moment all the details of the agonizing episode were lost in a blur of uncertainty.

To escape his mother's silent anguish of interrogation he stood up and said: "I'll see Mr. Spragg of course it's a mistake." But as he spoke he retravelled the hateful months during the divorce proceedings, remembering his incomprehensible lassitude, his acquiescence in his family's determination to ignore the whole episode, and his gradual lapse into the same state of apathy. He recalled all the old family catchwords, the full and elaborate vocabulary of evasion: "delicacy," "pride," "personal dignity," "preferring not to know about such things"; Mrs. Marvell's: "All I ask is that you won't mention the subject to your grandfather," Mr. Dagonet's: "Spare your mother, Ralph, whatever happens," and even Laura's terrified: "Of course, for Paul's sake, there must be no scandal."

For Paul's sake! And it was because, for Paul's sake, there must be no scandal, that he, Paul's father, had tamely abstained from defending his rights and contesting his wife's charges, and had thus handed the child over to her keeping!

As his cab whirled him up Fifth Avenue, Ralph's whole body throbbed with rage against the influences that had reduced him to such weakness. Then, gradually, he saw that the weakness was innate in him. He had been eloquent enough, in his free youth, against the conventions of his class; yet when the moment came to show his contempt for them they had mysteriously mastered him, deflecting his course like some hidden hereditary failing. As he looked back it seemed as though even his great disaster had been conventionalized and sentimentalized by this inherited attitude: that the thoughts he had thought about it were only those of generations of Dagonets, and that there had been nothing real and his own in his life but the foolish passion he had been trying so hard to think out of existence.

Halfway to the Malibran he changed his direction, and drove to the house of the lawyer he had consulted at the time of his divorce. The lawyer had not yet come up town, and Ralph had a half hour of bitter meditation before the sound of a latch-key brought him to his feet. The visit did not last long. His host, after an affable greeting, listened without surprise to what he had to say, and when he had ended reminded him with somewhat ironic precision that, at the time of the divorce, he had asked for neither advice nor information had simply declared that he wanted to "turn his back on the whole business" (Ralph recognized the phrase as one of his grandfather's), and, on hearing that in that case he had only to abstain from action, and was in no need of legal services, had gone away without farther enquiries.

"You led me to infer you had your reasons " the slighted counsellor concluded; and, in reply to Ralph's breathless question, he subjoined, "Why, you see, the case is closed, and I don't exactly know on what ground you can re-open it unless, of course, you can bring evidence showing that the irregularity of the mother's life is such..."

"She's going to marry again," Ralph threw in.

"Indeed? Well, that in itself can hardly be described as irregular. In fact, in certain circumstances it might be construed as an advantage to the child."

"Then I'm powerless?"

"Why unless there's an ulterior motive through which pressure might be brought to bear."

"You mean that the first thing to do is to find out what she's up to?"

"Precisely. Of course, if it should prove to be a genuine case of maternal feeling, I won't conceal from you that the outlook's bad. At most, you could probably arrange to see your boy at stated intervals."

To see his boy at stated intervals! Ralph wondered how a sane man could sit there, looking responsible and efficient, and talk such rubbish...As he got up to go the lawyer detained him to add: "Of course there's no immediate cause for alarm. It will take time to enforce the provision of the Dakota decree in New York, and till it's done your son can't be taken from you. But there's sure to be a lot of nasty talk in the papers; and you're bound to lose in the end."

Ralph thanked him and left.

He sped northward to the Malibran, where he learned that Mr. and Mrs. Spragg were at dinner. He sent his name down to the subterranean restaurant, and Mr. Spragg presently appeared between the limp portieres of the "Adam" writing-room. He had grown older and heavier, as if illness instead of health had put more flesh on his bones, and there were greyish tints in the hollows of his face.

"What's this about Paul?" Ralph exclaimed. "My mother's had a message we can't make out."

Mr. Spragg sat down, with the effect of immersing his spinal column in the depths of the arm-chair he selected. He crossed his legs, and swung one foot to and fro in its high wrinkled boot with elastic sides.

"Didn't you get a letter?" he asked.

"From my from Undine's lawyers? Yes." Ralph held it out. "It's queer reading. She hasn't hitherto been very keen to have Paul with her."

Mr. Spragg, adjusting his glasses, read the letter slowly, restored it to the envelope and gave it back. "My daughter has intimated that she wishes these gentlemen to act for her. I haven't received any additional instructions from her," he said, with none of the curtness of tone that his stiff legal vocabulary implied.

"But the first communication I received was from you at least from Mrs.
Spragg."
Mr. Spragg drew his beard through his hand. "The ladies are apt to be a trifle hasty. I believe Mrs. Spragg had a letter yesterday instructing her to select a reliable escort for Paul; and I suppose she thought "

"Oh, this is all too preposterous!" Ralph burst out, springing from his seat. "You don't for a moment imagine, do you any of you that I'm going to deliver up my son like a bale of goods in answer to any instructions in God's world? Oh, yes, I know I let him go I abandoned my right to him...but I didn't know what I was doing...I was sick with grief and misery. My people were awfully broken up over the whole business, and I wanted to spare them. I wanted, above all, to spare my boy when he grew up. If I'd contested the case you know what the result would have been. I let it go by default I made no conditions all I wanted was to keep Paul, and never to let him hear a word against his mother!"

Mr. Spragg received this passionate appeal in a silence that implied not so much disdain or indifference, as the total inability to deal verbally with emotional crises. At length, he said, a slight unsteadiness in his usually calm tones: "I presume at the time it was optional with you to demand Paul's custody."

"Oh, yes it was optional," Ralph sneered.

Mr. Spragg looked at him compassionately. "I'm sorry you didn't do it," he said.

XXXIII

The upshot of Ralph's visit was that Mr. Spragg, after considerable deliberation, agreed, pending farther negotiations between the opposing lawyers, to undertake that no attempt should be made to remove Paul from his father's custody. Nevertheless, he seemed to think it quite natural that Undine, on the point of making a marriage which would put it in her power to give her child a suitable home, should assert her claim on him. It was more disconcerting to Ralph to learn that Mrs. Spragg, for once departing from her attitude of passive impartiality, had eagerly abetted her daughter's move; he had somehow felt that Undine's desertion of the child had established a kind of mute understanding between himself and his mother-in-law.

"I thought Mrs. Spragg would know there's no earthly use trying to take
Paul from me," he said with a desperate awkwardness of entreaty, and Mr.
Spragg startled him by replying: "I presume his grandma thinks he'll
belong to her more if we keep him in the family."
Ralph, abruptly awakened from his dream of recovered peace, found himself confronted on every side by. indifference or hostility: it was as though the June fields in which his boy was playing had suddenly opened to engulph him. Mrs. Marvell's fears and tremors were almost harder to bear than the Spraggs' antagonism; and for the next few days Ralph wandered about miserably, dreading some fresh communication from Undine's lawyers, yet racked by the strain of hearing nothing more from them. Mr. Spragg had agreed to cable his daughter asking her to await a letter before enforcing her demands; but on the fourth day after Ralph's visit to the Malibran a telephone message summoned him to his father-in-law's office.

Half an hour later their talk was over and he stood once more on the landing outside Mr. Spragg's door. Undine's answer had come and Paul's fate was sealed. His mother refused to give him up, refused to await the arrival of her lawyer's letter, and reiterated, in more peremptory language, her demand that the child should be sent immediately to Paris in Mrs. Heeny's care.

Mr. Spragg, in face of Ralph's entreaties, remained pacific but remote. It was evident that, though he had no wish to quarrel with Ralph, he saw no reason for resisting Undine. "I guess she's got the law on her side," he said; and in response to Ralph's passionate remonstrances he added fatalistically: "I presume you'll have to leave the matter to my daughter."

Ralph had gone to the office resolved to control his temper and keep on the watch for any shred of information he might glean; but it soon became clear that Mr. Spragg knew as little as himself of Undine's projects, or of the stage her plans had reached. All she

had apparently vouchsafed her parent was the statement that she intended to re-marry, and the command to send Paul over; and Ralph reflected that his own betrothal to her had probably been announced to Mr. Spragg in the same curt fashion.

The thought brought back an overwhelming sense of the past. One by one the details of that incredible moment revived, and he felt in his veins the glow of rapture with which he had first approached the dingy threshold he was now leaving. There came back to him with peculiar vividness the memory of his rushing up to Mr. Spragg's office to consult him about a necklace for Undine. Ralph recalled the incident because his eager appeal for advice had been received by Mr. Spragg with the very phrase he had just used: "I presume you'll have to leave the matter to my daughter."

Ralph saw him slouching in his chair, swung sideways from the untidy desk, his legs stretched out, his hands in his pockets, his jaws engaged on the phantom tooth-pick; and, in a corner of the office, the figure of a middle-sized red-faced young man who seemed to have been interrupted in the act of saying something disagreeable.

"Why, it must have been then that I first saw Moffatt," Ralph reflected; and the thought suggested the memory of other, subsequent meetings in the same building, and of frequent ascents to Moffatt's office during the ardent weeks of their mysterious and remunerative "deal."

Ralph wondered if Moffatt's office were still in the Ararat; and on the way out he paused before the black tablet affixed to the wall of the vestibule and sought and found the name in its familiar place.

The next moment he was again absorbed in his own cares. Now that he had learned the imminence of Paul's danger, and the futility of pleading for delay, a thousand fantastic projects were contending in his head. To get the boy away that seemed the first thing to do: to put him out of reach, and then invoke the law, get the case re-opened, and carry the fight from court to court till his rights should be recognized. It would cost a lot of money well, the money would have to be found. The first step was to secure the boy's temporary safety; after that, the question of ways and means would have to be considered...Had there ever been a time, Ralph wondered, when that question hadn't been at the root of all the others?

He had promised to let Clare Van Degen know the result of his visit, and half an hour later he was in her drawing-room. It was the first time he had entered it since his divorce; but Van Degen was tarpon-fishing in California and besides, he had to see Clare. His one relief was in talking to her, in feverishly turning over with her every possibility of delay and obstruction; and he marvelled at the intelligence and energy she

brought to the discussion of these questions. It was as if she had never before felt strongly enough about anything to put her heart or her brains into it; but now everything in her was at work for him.

She listened intently to what he told her; then she said: "You tell me it will cost a great deal; but why take it to the courts at all? Why not give the money to Undine instead of to your lawyers?"

Ralph looked at her in surprise, and she continued: "Why do you suppose she's suddenly made up her mind she must have Paul?"

"That's comprehensible enough to any one who knows her. She wants him because he'll give her the appearance of respectability. Having him with her will prove, as no mere assertions can, that all the rights are on her side and the 'wrongs' on mine."

Clare considered. "Yes; that's the obvious answer. But shall I tell you what I think, my dear? You and I are both completely out-of-date. I don't believe Undine cares a straw for 'the appearance of respectability.' What she wants is the money for her annulment."

Ralph uttered an incredulous exclamation. "But don't you see?" she hurried on. "It's her only hope her last chance. She's much too clever to burden herself with the child merely to annoy you. What she wants is to make you buy him back from her." She stood up and came to him with outstretched hands. "Perhaps I can be of use to you at last!"

"You?" He summoned up a haggard smile. "As if you weren't always letting me load you with all my bothers!"

"Oh, if only I've hit on the way out of this one! Then there wouldn't be any others left!" Her eyes followed him intently as he turned away to the window and stood staring down at the sultry prospect of Fifth Avenue. As he turned over her conjecture its probability became more and more apparent. It put into logical relation all the incoherencies of Undine's recent conduct, completed and defined her anew as if a sharp line had been drawn about her fading image.

"If it's that, I shall soon know," he said, turning back into the room. His course had instantly become plain. He had only to resist and Undine would have to show her hand. Simultaneously with this thought there sprang up in his mind the remembrance of the autumn afternoon in Paris when he had come home and found her, among her half-packed finery, desperately bewailing her coming motherhood. Clare's touch was on his arm. "If I'm right you WILL let me help?"

He laid his hand on hers without speaking, and she went on:

"It will take a lot of money: all these law-suits do. Besides, she'd be ashamed to sell him cheap. You must be ready to give her anything she wants. And I've got a lot saved up money of my own, I mean..."

"Your own?" As he looked at her the rare blush rose under her brown skin.

"My very own. Why shouldn't you believe me? I've been hoarding up my scrap of an income for years, thinking that some day I'd find I couldn't stand this any longer..." Her gesture embraced their sumptuous setting. "But now I know I shall never budge. There are the children; and besides, things are easier for me since " she paused, embarrassed.

"Yes, yes; I know." He felt like completing her phrase: "Since my wife has furnished you with the means of putting pressure on your husband " but he simply repeated: "I know."

"And you WILL let me help?"

"Oh, we must get at the facts first." He caught her hands in his with sudden energy. "As you say, when Paul's safe there won't be another bother left!"

XXXIV

The means of raising the requisite amount of money became, during the next few weeks, the anxious theme of all Ralph's thoughts. His lawyers' enquiries soon brought the confirmation of Clare's surmise, and it became clear that for reasons swathed in all the ingenuities of legal verbiage Undine might, in return for a substantial consideration, be prevailed on to admit that it was for her son's advantage to remain with his father.

The day this admission was communicated to Ralph his first impulse was to carry the news to his cousin. His mood was one of pure exaltation; he seemed to be hugging his boy to him as he walked. Paul and he were to belong to each other forever: no mysterious threat of separation could ever menace them again! He had the blissful sense of relief that the child himself might have had on waking out of a frightened dream and finding the jolly daylight in his room.

Clare at once renewed her entreaty to be allowed to aid in ransoming her little cousin, but Ralph tried to put her off by explaining that he meant to "look about."

"Look where? In the Dagonet coffers? Oh, Ralph, what's the use of pretending? Tell me what you've got to give her." It was amazing how his cousin suddenly dominated him. But as yet he couldn't go into the details of the bargain. That the reckoning between himself and Undine should be settled in dollars and cents seemed the last bitterest satire on his dreams: he felt himself miserably diminished by the smallness of what had filled his world.

Nevertheless, the looking about had to be done; and a day came when he found himself once more at the door of Elmer Moffatt's office. His thoughts had been drawn back to Moffatt by the insistence with which the latter's name had lately been put forward by the press in connection with a revival of the Ararat investigation. Moffatt, it appeared, had been regarded as one of the most valuable witnesses for the State; his return from Europe had been anxiously awaited, his unreadiness to testify caustically criticized; then at last he had arrived, had gone on to Washington and had apparently had nothing to tell.

Ralph was too deep in his own troubles to waste any wonder over this anticlimax; but the frequent appearance of Moffatt's name in the morning papers acted as an unconscious suggestion. Besides, to whom else could he look for help? The sum his wife demanded could be acquired only by "a quick turn," and the fact that Ralph had once rendered the same kind of service to Moffatt made it natural to appeal to him now. The market, moreover, happened to be booming, and it seemed not unlikely that so experienced a speculator might have a "good thing" up his sleeve.

Moffatt's office had been transformed since Ralph's last visit. Paint, varnish and brass railings gave an air of opulence to the outer precincts, and the inner room, with its mahogany bookcases containing morocco-bound "sets" and its wide blue leather arm-chairs, lacked only a palm or two to resemble the lounge of a fashionable hotel. Moffatt himself, as he came forward, gave Ralph the impression of having been done over by the same hand: he was smoother, broader, more supremely tailored, and his whole person exhaled the faintest whiff of an expensive scent. He installed his visitor in one of the blue arm-chairs, and sitting opposite, an elbow on his impressive "Washington" desk, listened attentively while Ralph made his request.

"You want to be put onto something good in a damned hurry?" Moffatt twisted his moustache between two plump square-tipped fingers with a little black growth on their lower joints. "I don't suppose," he remarked, "there's a sane man between here and San Francisco who isn't consumed by that yearning."

Having permitted himself this pleasantry he passed on to business. "Yes it's a first-rate time to buy: no doubt of that. But you say you want to make a quick turn-over? Heard of a soft thing that won't wait, I presume? That's apt to be the way with soft things all kinds of 'em. There's always other fellows after them." Moffatt's smile was playful. "Well, I'd go considerably out of my way to do you a good turn, because you did me one when I needed it mighty bad. 'In youth you sheltered me.' Yes, sir, that's the kind I am." He stood up, sauntered to the other side of the room, and took a small object from the top of the bookcase.

"Fond of these pink crystals?" He held the oriental toy against the light. "Oh, I ain't a judge but now and then I like to pick up a pretty thing." Ralph noticed that his eyes caressed it.

"Well now let's talk. You say you've got to have the funds for your your investment within three weeks. That's quick work. And you want a hundred thousand. Can you put up fifty?"

Ralph had been prepared for the question, but when it came he felt a moment's tremor. He knew he could count on half the amount from his grandfather; could possibly ask Fairford for a small additional loan but what of the rest? Well, there was Clare. He had always known there would be no other way. And after all, the money was Clare's it was Dagonet money. At least she said it was. All the misery of his predicament was distilled into the short silence that preceded his answer: "Yes I think so."

"Well, I guess I can double it for you." Moffatt spoke with an air of

Olympian modesty. "Anyhow, I'll try. Only don't tell the other girls!"
He proceeded to develop his plan to ears which Ralph tried to make alert and attentive, but in which perpetually, through the intricate concert of facts and figures, there broke the shout of a small boy racing across a suburban lawn. "When I pick him up to-night he'll be mine for good!" Ralph thought as Moffatt summed up: "There's the whole scheme in a nut-shell; but you'd better think it over. I don't want to let you in for anything you ain't quite sure about." "Oh, if you're sure " Ralph was already calculating the time it would take to dash up to Clare Van Degen's on his way to catch the train for the Fairfords'.

His impatience made it hard to pay due regard to Moffatt's parting civilities. "Glad to have seen you," he heard the latter assuring him with a final hand-grasp. "Wish you'd dine with me some evening at my club"; and, as Ralph murmured a vague acceptance: "How's that boy of yours, by the way?" Moffatt continued. "He was a stunning chap last time I saw him. Excuse me if I've put my foot in it; but I understood you kept him with you...? Yes: that's what I thought.... Well, so long."

Clare's inner sitting-room was empty; but the servant, presently returning, led Ralph into the gilded and tapestried wilderness where she occasionally chose to receive her visitors. There, under Popple's effigy of herself, she sat, small and alone, on a monumental sofa behind a tea-table laden with gold plate; while from his lofty frame, on the opposite wall Van Degen, portrayed by a "powerful" artist, cast on her the satisfied eye of proprietorship.

Ralph, swept forward on the blast of his excitement, felt as in a dream the frivolous perversity of her receiving him in such a setting instead of in their usual quiet corner; but there was no room in his mind for anything but the cry that broke from him: "I believe I've done it!"

He sat down and explained to her by what means, trying, as best he could, to restate the particulars of Moffatt's deal; and her manifest ignorance of business methods had the effect of making his vagueness appear less vague.

"Anyhow, he seems to be sure it's a safe thing. I understand he's in with Rolliver now, and Rolliver practically controls Apex. This is some kind of a scheme to buy up all the works of public utility at Apex. They're practically sure of their charter, and Moffatt tells me I can count on doubling my investment within a few weeks. Of course I'll go into the details if you like "

"Oh, no; you've made it all so clear to me!" She really made him feel he had. "And besides, what on earth does it matter? The great thing is that it's done." She lifted her sparkling eyes. "And now my share you haven't told me..."

He explained that Mr. Dagonet, to whom he had already named the amount demanded, had at once promised him twenty-five thousand dollars, to be eventually deducted from his share of the estate. His mother had something put by that she insisted on contributing; and Henley Fairford, of his own accord, had come forward with ten thousand: it was awfully decent of Henley...

"Even Henley!" Clare sighed. "Then I'm the only one left out?"

Ralph felt the colour in his face. "Well, you see, I shall need as much as fifty "

Her hands flew together joyfully. "But then you've got to let me help!
Oh, I'm so glad so glad! I've twenty thousand waiting."
He looked about the room, checked anew by all its oppressive implications. "You're a darling...but I couldn't take it."

"I've told you it's mine, every penny of it!"

"Yes; but supposing things went wrong?"

"Nothing CAN if you'll only take it..."

"I may lose it "

"I sha'n't, if I've given it to you!" Her look followed his about the room and then came back to him. "Can't you imagine all it will make up for?"

The rapture of the cry caught him up with it. Ah, yes, he could imagine it all! He stooped his head above her hands. "I accept," he said; and they stood and looked at each other like radiant children.

She followed him to the door, and as he turned to leave he broke into a laugh. "It's queer, though, its happening in this room!"

She was close beside him, her hand on the heavy tapestry curtaining the door; and her glance shot past him to her husband's portrait. Ralph caught the look, and a flood of old tendernesses and hates welled up in him. He drew her under the portrait and kissed her vehemently.

XXXV

Within forty-eight hours Ralph's money was in Moffatt's hands, and the interval of suspense had begun.

The transaction over, he felt the deceptive buoyancy that follows on periods of painful indecision. It seemed to him that now at last life had freed him from all trammelling delusions, leaving him only the best thing in its gift his boy.

The things he meant Paul to do and to be filled his fancy with happy pictures. The child was growing more and more interesting throwing out countless tendrils of feeling and perception that delighted Ralph but preoccupied the watchful Laura.

"He's going to be exactly like you, Ralph " she paused and then risked it: "For his own sake, I wish there were just a drop or two of Spragg in him."

Ralph laughed, understanding her. "Oh, the plodding citizen I've become will keep him from taking after the lyric idiot who begot him. Paul and I, between us, are going to turn out something first-rate."

His book too was spreading and throwing out tendrils, and he worked at it in the white heat of energy which his factitious exhilaration produced. For a few weeks everything he did and said seemed as easy and unconditioned as the actions in a dream.

Clare Van Degen, in the light of this mood, became again the comrade of his boyhood. He did not see her often, for she had gone down to the country with her children, but they communicated daily by letter or telephone, and now and then she came over to the Fairfords' for a night. There they renewed the long rambles of their youth, and once more the summer fields and woods seemed full of magic presences. Clare was no more intelligent, she followed him no farther in his flights; but some of the qualities that had become most precious to him were as native to her as its perfume to a flower. So, through the long June afternoons, they ranged together over many themes; and if her answers sometimes missed the mark it did not matter, because her silences never did.

Meanwhile Ralph, from various sources, continued to pick up a good deal of more or less contradictory information about Elmer Moffatt. It seemed to be generally understood that Moffatt had come back from Europe with the intention of testifying in the Ararat investigation, and that his former patron, the great Harmon B. Driscoll, had managed to silence him; and it was implied that the price of this silence, which was set

at a considerable figure, had been turned to account in a series of speculations likely to lift Moffatt to permanent eminence among the rulers of Wall Street. The stories as to his latest achievement, and the theories as to the man himself, varied with the visual angle of each reporter: and whenever any attempt was made to focus his hard sharp personality some guardian divinity seemed to throw a veil of mystery over him. His detractors, however, were the first to own that there was "something about him"; it was felt that he had passed beyond the meteoric stage, and the business world was unanimous in recognizing that he had "come to stay." A dawning sense of his stability was even beginning to make itself felt in Fifth Avenue. It was said that he had bought a house in Seventy-second Street, then that he meant to build near the Park; one or two people (always "taken by a friend") had been to his flat in the Pactolus, to see his Chinese porcelains and Persian rugs; now and then he had a few important men to dine at a Fifth Avenue restaurant; his name began to appear in philanthropic reports and on municipal committees (there were even rumours of its having been put up at a well-known club); and the rector of a wealthy parish, who was raising funds for a chantry, was known to have met him at dinner and to have stated afterward that "the man was not wholly a materialist."

All these converging proofs of Moffatt's solidity strengthened Ralph's faith in his venture. He remembered with what astuteness and authority Moffatt had conducted their real estate transaction how far off and unreal it all seemed! and awaited events with the passive faith of a sufferer in the hands of a skilful surgeon.

The days moved on toward the end of June, and each morning Ralph opened his newspaper with a keener thrill of expectation. Any day now he might read of the granting of the Apex charter: Moffatt had assured him it would "go through" before the close of the month. But the announcement did not appear, and after what seemed to Ralph a decent lapse of time he telephoned to ask for news. Moffatt was away, and when he came back a few days later he answered Ralph's enquiries evasively, with an edge of irritation in his voice. The same day Ralph received a letter from his lawyer, who had been reminded by Mrs. Marvell's representatives that the latest date agreed on for the execution of the financial agreement was the end of the following week.

Ralph, alarmed, betook himself at once to the Ararat, and his first glimpse of Moffatt's round common face and fastidiously dressed person gave him an immediate sense of reassurance. He felt that under the circle of baldness on top of that carefully brushed head lay the solution of every monetary problem that could beset the soul of man. Moffatt's voice had recovered its usual cordial note, and the warmth of his welcome dispelled Ralph's last apprehension.

"Why, yes, everything's going along first-rate. They thought they'd hung us up last week but they haven't. There may be another week's delay; but we ought to be opening a bottle of wine on it by the Fourth."

An office-boy came in with a name on a slip of paper, and Moffatt looked at his watch and held out a hearty hand. "Glad you came. Of course I'll keep you posted...No, this way...Look in again..." and he steered Ralph out by another door.

July came, and passed into its second week. Ralph's lawyer had obtained a postponement from the other side, but Undine's representatives had given him to understand that the transaction must be closed before the first of August. Ralph telephoned once or twice to Moffatt, receiving genially-worded assurances that everything was "going their way"; but he felt a certain embarrassment in returning again to the office, and let himself drift through the days in a state of hungry apprehension. Finally one afternoon Henley Fairford, coming back from town (which Ralph had left in the morning to join his boy over Sunday), brought word that the Apex consolidation scheme had failed to get its charter. It was useless to attempt to reach Moffatt on Sunday, and Ralph wore on as he could through the succeeding twenty-four hours. Clare Van Degen had come down to stay with her youngest boy, and in the afternoon she and Ralph took the two children for a sail. A light breeze brightened the waters of the Sound, and they ran down the shore before it and then tacked out toward the sunset, coming back at last, under a failing breeze, as the summer sky passed from blue to a translucid green and then into the accumulating greys of twilight.

As they left the landing and walked up behind the children across the darkening lawn, a sense of security descended again on Ralph. He could not believe that such a scene and such a mood could be the disguise of any impending evil, and all his doubts and anxieties fell away from him.

The next morning, he and Clare travelled up to town together, and at the station he put her in the motor which was to take her to Long Island, and hastened down to Moffatt's office. When he arrived he was told that Moffatt was "engaged," and he had to wait for nearly half an hour in the outer office, where, to the steady click of the type-writer and the spasmodic buzzing of the telephone, his thoughts again began their restless circlings. Finally the inner door opened, and he found himself in the sanctuary. Moffatt was seated behind his desk, examining another little crystal vase somewhat like the one he had shown Ralph a few weeks earlier. As his visitor entered, he held it up against the light, revealing on its dewy sides an incised design as frail as the shadow of grass-blades on water.

"Ain't she a peach?" He put the toy down and reached across the desk to shake hands. "Well, well," he went on, leaning back in his chair, and pushing out his lower lip in a half-comic pout, "they've got us in the neck this time and no mistake. Seen this morning's Radiator? I don't know how the thing leaked out but the reformers somehow got a smell of the scheme, and whenever they get swishing round something's bound to get spilt."

He talked gaily, genially, in his roundest tones and with his easiest gestures; never had he conveyed a completer sense of unhurried power; but Ralph noticed for the first time the crow's-feet about his eyes, and the sharpness of the contrast between the white of his forehead and the redness of the fold of neck above his collar.

"Do you mean to say it's not going through?"

"Not this time, anyhow. We're high and dry."

Something seemed to snap in Ralph's head, and he sat down in the nearest chair. "Has the common stock dropped a lot?"

"Well, you've got to lean over to see it." Moffatt pressed his finger-tips together and added thoughtfully: "But it's THERE all right. We're bound to get our charter in the end."

"What do you call the end?"

"Oh, before the Day of Judgment, sure: next year, I guess."

"Next year?" Ralph flushed. "What earthly good will that do me?"

"I don't say it's as pleasant as driving your best girl home by moonlight. But that's how it is. And the stuff's safe enough any way I've told you that right along."

"But you've told me all along I could count on a rise before August. You knew I had to have the money now."

"I knew you WANTED to have the money now; and so did I, and several of my friends. I put you onto it because it was the only thing in sight likely to give you the return you wanted."

"You ought at least to have warned me of the risk!"

"Risk? I don't call it much of a risk to lie back in your chair and wait another few months for fifty thousand to drop into your lap. I tell you the thing's as safe as a bank."

"How do I know it is? You've misled me about it from the first."

Moffatt's face grew dark red to the forehead: for the first time in their acquaintance Ralph saw him on the verge of anger. "Well, if you get stuck so do I. I'm in it a good deal deeper than you. That's about the best guarantee I can give; unless you won't take my word for that either." To control himself Moffatt spoke with extreme deliberation, separating his syllables like a machine cutting something into even lengths.

Ralph listened through a cloud of confusion; but he saw the madness of offending Moffatt, and tried to take a more conciliatory tone. "Of course I take your word for it. But I can't I simply can't afford to lose..."

"You ain't going to lose: I don't believe you'll even have to put up any margin. It's THERE safe enough, I tell you..."

"Yes, yes; I understand. I'm sure you wouldn't have advised me " Ralph's tongue seemed swollen, and he had difficulty in bringing out the words. "Only, you see I can't wait; it's not possible; and I want to know if there isn't a way "

Moffatt looked at him with a sort of resigned compassion, as a doctor looks at a despairing mother who will not understand what he has tried to imply without uttering the word she dreads. Ralph understood the look, but hurried on.

"You'll think I'm mad, or an ass, to talk like this; but the fact is, I must have the money." He waited and drew a hard breath. "I must have it: that's all. Perhaps I'd better tell you "

Moffatt, who had risen, as if assuming that the interview was over, sat down again and turned an attentive look on him. "Go ahead," he said, more humanly than he had hitherto spoken.

"My boy...you spoke of him the other day... I'm awfully fond of him " Ralph broke off, deterred by the impossibility of confiding his feeling for Paul to this coarse-grained man with whom he hadn't a sentiment in common.

Moffatt was still looking at him. "I should say you would be! He's as smart a little chap as I ever saw; and I guess he's the kind that gets better every day."

Ralph had collected himself, and went on with sudden resolution: "Well, you see when my wife and I separated, I never dreamed she'd want the boy: the question never came up. If it had, of course but she'd left him with me when she went away two years before, and at the time of the divorce I was a fool...I didn't take the proper steps..."

"You mean she's got sole custody?"

Ralph made a sign of assent, and Moffatt pondered. "That's bad bad."

"And now I understand she's going to marry again and of course I can't give up my son."

"She wants you to, eh?"

Ralph again assented.

Moffatt swung his chair about and leaned back in it, stretching out his plump legs and contemplating the tips of his varnished boots. He hummed a low tune behind inscrutable lips.

"That's what you want the money for?" he finally raised his head to ask.

The word came out of the depths of Ralph's anguish: "Yes."

"And why you want it in such a hurry. I see." Moffatt reverted to the study of his boots. "It's a lot of money."

"Yes. That's the difficulty. And I...she..."

Ralph's tongue was again too thick for his mouth. "I'm afraid she won't wait...or take less..."

Moffatt, abandoning the boots, was scrutinizing him through half-shut lids. "No," he said slowly, "I don't believe Undine Spragg'll take a single cent less."

Ralph felt himself whiten. Was it insolence or ignorance that had prompted Moffatt's speech? Nothing in his voice or face showed the sense of any shades of expression or of feeling: he seemed to apply to everything the measure of the same crude flippancy. But such considerations could not curb Ralph now. He said to himself "Keep your temper keep your temper " and his anger suddenly boiled over.

"Look here, Moffatt," he said, getting to his feet, "the fact that I've been divorced from Mrs. Marvell doesn't authorize any one to take that tone to me in speaking of her."

Moffatt met the challenge with a calm stare under which there were dawning signs of surprise and interest. "That so? Well, if that's the case I presume I ought to feel the same way: I've been divorced from her myself."

For an instant the words conveyed no meaning to Ralph; then they surged up into his brain and flung him forward with half-raised arm. But he felt the grotesqueness of the gesture and his arm dropped back to his side. A series of unimportant and irrelevant things raced through his mind; then obscurity settled down on it. "THIS man...THIS man..." was the one fiery point in his darkened consciousness.... "What on earth are you talking about?" he brought out.

"Why, facts," said Moffatt, in a cool half-humorous voice. "You didn't know? I understood from Mrs. Marvell your folks had a prejudice against divorce, so I suppose she kept quiet about that early episode. The truth is," he continued amicably, "I wouldn't have alluded to it now if you hadn't taken rather a high tone with me about our little venture; but now it's out I guess you may as well hear the whole story. It's mighty wholesome for a man to have a round now and then with a few facts. Shall I go on?"

Ralph had stood listening without a sign, but as Moffatt ended he made a slight motion of acquiescence. He did not otherwise change his attitude, except to grasp with one hand the back of the chair that Moffatt pushed toward him.

"Rather stand?..." Moffatt himself dropped back into his seat and took the pose of easy narrative. "Well, it was this way. Undine Spragg and I were made one at Opake, Nebraska, just nine years ago last month. My! She was a beauty then. Nothing much had happened to her before but being engaged for a year or two to a soft called Millard Binch; the same she passed on to Indiana Rolliver; and well, I guess she liked the change. We didn't have what you'd called a society wedding: no best man or bridesmaids or Voice that Breathed o'er Eden. Fact is, Pa and Ma didn't know about it till it was over. But it was a marriage fast enough, as they found out when they tried to undo it. Trouble was, they caught on too soon; we only had a fortnight. Then they hauled Undine back to Apex, and well, I hadn't the cash or the pull to fight 'em. Uncle Abner was a pretty big man out there then; and he had James J. Rolliver behind him. I always know when I'm licked; and I was licked that time. So we unlooped the loop, and they fixed it up for me to make a trip to Alaska. Let me see that was the year before they moved over to New York. Next time I saw Undine I sat alongside of her at the theatre the day your engagement was announced."

He still kept to his half-humorous minor key, as though he were in the first stages of an after-dinner speech; but as he went on his bodily presence, which hitherto had seemed to Ralph the mere average garment of vulgarity, began to loom, huge and portentous as some monster released from a magician's bottle. His redness, his glossiness, his baldness, and the carefully brushed ring of hair encircling it; the square line of his shoulders, the too careful fit of his clothes, the prominent lustre of his scarf-pin, the growth of short black hair on his manicured hands, even the tiny cracks and crows'-feet beginning to show in the hard close surface of his complexion: all these solid witnesses to his reality and his proximity pressed on Ralph with the mounting pang of physical nausea.

"THIS man...THIS man..." he couldn't get beyond the thought: whichever way he turned his haggard thought, there was Moffatt bodily blocking the perspective...Ralph's eyes roamed toward the crystal toy that stood on the desk beside Moffatt's hand. Faugh! That such a hand should have touched it!

Suddenly he heard himself speaking. "Before my marriage did you know they hadn't told me?"

"Why, I understood as much..."

Ralph pushed on: "You knew it the day I met you in Mr. Spragg's office?"

Moffatt considered a moment, as if the incident had escaped him. "Did we meet there?" He seemed benevolently ready for enlightenment. But Ralph had been assailed by another memory; he recalled that Moffatt had dined one night in his house, that he and the man who now faced him had sat at the same table, their wife between them... He was seized with another dumb gust of fury; but it died out and left him face to face with the uselessness, the irrelevance of all the old attitudes of appropriation and defiance. He seemed to be stumbling about in his inherited prejudices like a modern man in mediaeval armour... Moffatt still sat at his desk, unmoved and apparently uncomprehending. "He doesn't even know what I'm feeling," flashed through Ralph; and the whole archaic structure of his rites and sanctions tumbled down about him.

Through the noise of the crash he heard Moffatt's voice going on without perceptible change of tone: "About that other matter now...you can't feel any meaner about it than I do, I can tell you that... but all we've got to do is to sit tight..."

Ralph turned from the voice, and found himself outside on the landing, and then in the street below.

XXXVI

He stood at the corner of Wall Street, looking up and down its hot summer perspective. He noticed the swirls of dust in the cracks of the pavement, the rubbish in the gutters, the ceaseless stream of perspiring faces that poured by under tilted hats.

He found himself, next, slipping northward between the glazed walls of the Subway, another languid crowd in the seats about him and the nasal yelp of the stations ringing through the car like some repeated ritual wail. The blindness within him seemed to have intensified his physical perceptions, his sensitiveness to the heat, the noise, the smells of the dishevelled midsummer city; but combined with the acuter perception of these offenses was a complete indifference to them, as though he were some vivisected animal deprived of the power of discrimination.

Now he had turned into Waverly Place, and was walking westward toward Washington Square. At the corner he pulled himself up, saying half-aloud: "The office I ought to be at the office." He drew out his watch and stared at it blankly. What the devil had he taken it out for? He had to go through a laborious process of readjustment to find out what it had to say.... Twelve o'clock.... Should he turn back to the office? It seemed easier to cross the square, go up the steps of the old house and slip his key into the door....

The house was empty. His mother, a few days previously, had departed with Mr. Dagonet for their usual two months on the Maine coast, where Ralph was to join them with his boy.... The blinds were all drawn down, and the freshness and silence of the marble-paved hall laid soothing hands on him.... He said to himself: "I'll jump into a cab presently, and go and lunch at the club " He laid down his hat and stick and climbed the carpetless stairs to his room. When he entered it he had the shock of feeling himself in a strange place: it did not seem like anything he had ever seen before. Then, one by one, all the old stale usual things in it confronted him, and he longed with a sick intensity to be in a place that was really strange.

"How on earth can I go on living here?" he wondered.

A careless servant had left the outer shutters open, and the sun was beating on the window-panes. Ralph pushed open the windows, shut the shutters, and wandered toward his arm-chair. Beads of perspiration stood on his forehead: the temperature of the room reminded him of the heat under the ilexes of the Sienese villa where he and Undine had sat through a long July afternoon. He saw her before him, leaning against the tree-trunk in her white dress, limpid and inscrutable.... "We were made one at Opake, Nebraska...." Had she been thinking of it that afternoon at Siena, he wondered? Did she ever think of it at all?... It was she who had asked Moffatt to dine. She had said:

"Father brought him home one day at Apex.... I don't remember ever having seen him since" and the man she spoke of had had her in his arms ... and perhaps it was really all she remembered!

She had lied to him lied to him from the first ... there hadn't been a moment when she hadn't lied to him, deliberately, ingeniously and inventively. As he thought of it, there came to him, for the first time in months, that overwhelming sense of her physical nearness which had once so haunted and tortured him. Her freshness, her fragrance, the luminous haze of her youth, filled the room with a mocking glory; and he dropped his head on his hands to shut it out....

The vision was swept away by another wave of hurrying thoughts. He felt it was intensely important that he should keep the thread of every one of them, that they all represented things to be said or done, or guarded against; and his mind, with the unwondering versatility and tireless haste of the dreamer's brain, seemed to be pursuing them all simultaneously. Then they became as unreal and meaningless as the red specks dancing behind the lids against which he had pressed his fists clenched, and he had the feeling that if he opened his eyes they would vanish, and the familiar daylight look in on him....

A knock disturbed him. The old parlour-maid who was always left in charge of the house had come up to ask if he wasn't well, and if there was anything she could do for him. He told her no ... he was perfectly well ... or, rather, no, he wasn't ... he supposed it must be the heat; and he began to scold her for having forgotten to close the shutters.

It wasn't her fault, it appeared, but Eliza's: her tone implied that he knew what one had to expect of Eliza ... and wouldn't he go down to the nice cool shady dining-room, and let her make him an iced drink and a few sandwiches?

"I've always told Mrs. Marvell I couldn't turn my back for a second but what Eliza'd find a way to make trouble," the old woman continued, evidently glad of the chance to air a perennial grievance. "It's not only the things she FORGETS to do," she added significantly; and it dawned on Ralph that she was making an appeal to him, expecting him to take sides with her in the chronic conflict between herself and Eliza. He said to himself that perhaps she was right ... that perhaps there was something he ought to do ... that his mother was old, and didn't always see things; and for a while his mind revolved this problem with feverish intensity....

"Then you'll come down, sir?"

"Yes."

The door closed, and he heard her heavy heels along the passage.

"But the money where's the money to come from?" The question sprang out from some denser fold of the fog in his brain. The money how on earth was he to pay it back? How could he have wasted his time in thinking of anything else while that central difficulty existed?

"But I can't ... I can't ... it's gone ... and even if it weren't...." He dropped back in his chair and took his head between his hands. He had forgotten what he wanted the money for. He made a great effort to regain hold of the idea, but all the whirring, shuttling, flying had abruptly ceased in his brain, and he sat with his eyes shut, staring straight into darkness.... The clock struck, and he remembered that he had said he would go down to the dining-room. "If I don't she'll come up " He raised his head and sat listening for the sound of the old woman's step: it seemed to him perfectly intolerable that any one should cross the threshold of the room again.

"Why can't they leave me alone?" he groaned.... At length through the silence of the empty house, he fancied he heard a door opening and closing far below; and he said to himself: "She's coming."

He got to his feet and went to the door. He didn't feel anything now except the insane dread of hearing the woman's steps come nearer. He bolted the door and stood looking about the room. For a moment he was conscious of seeing it in every detail with a distinctness he had never before known; then everything in it vanished but the single narrow panel of a drawer under one of the bookcases. He went up to the drawer, knelt down and slipped his hand into it.

As he raised himself he listened again, and this time he distinctly heard the old servant's steps on the stairs. He passed his left hand over the side of his head, and down the curve of the skull behind the ear. He said to himself: "My wife ... this will make it all right for her...." and a last flash of irony twitched through him. Then he felt again, more deliberately, for the spot he wanted, and put the muzzle of his revolver against it.

XXXVII

In a drawing-room hung with portraits of high-nosed personages in perukes and orders, a circle of ladies and gentlemen, looking not unlike every-day versions of the official figures above their heads, sat examining with friendly interest a little boy in mourning.

The boy was slim, fair and shy, and his small black figure, islanded in the middle of the wide lustrous floor, looked curiously lonely and remote. This effect of remoteness seemed to strike his mother as something intentional, and almost naughty, for after having launched him from the door, and waited to judge of the impression he produced, she came forward and, giving him a slight push, said impatiently: "Paul! Why don't you go and kiss your new granny?"

The boy, without turning to her, or moving, sent his blue glance gravely about the circle. "Does she want me to?" he asked, in a tone of evident apprehension; and on his mother's answering: "Of course, you silly!" he added earnestly: "How many more do you think there'll be?"

Undine blushed to the ripples of her brilliant hair. "I never knew such a child! They've turned him into a perfect little savage!"

Raymond de Chelles advanced from behind his mother's chair.

"He won't be a savage long with me," he said, stooping down so that his fatigued finely-drawn face was close to Paul's. Their eyes met and the boy smiled. "Come along, old chap," Chelles continued in English, drawing the little boy after him.

"Il est bien beau," the Marquise de Chelles observed, her eyes turning from Paul's grave face to her daughter-in-law's vivid countenance.

"Do be nice, darling! Say, 'bonjour, Madame,'" Undine urged.

An odd mingling of emotions stirred in her while she stood watching Paul make the round of the family group under her husband's guidance. It was "lovely" to have the child back, and to find him, after their three years' separation, grown into so endearing a figure: her first glimpse of him when, in Mrs. Heeny's arms, he had emerged that morning from the steamer train, had shown what an acquisition he would be. If she had had any lingering doubts on the point, the impression produced on her husband would have dispelled them. Chelles had been instantly charmed, and Paul, in a shy confused way, was already responding to his advances. The Count and Countess Raymond had returned but a few weeks before from their protracted wedding journey, and were

staying as they were apparently to do whenever they came to Paris with the old Marquis, Raymond's father, who had amicably proposed that little Paul Marvell should also share the hospitality of the Hotel de Chelles. Undine, at first, was somewhat dismayed to find that she was expected to fit the boy and his nurse into a corner of her contracted entresol. But the possibility of a mother's not finding room for her son, however cramped her own quarters, seemed not to have occurred to her new relations, and the preparing of her dressing-room and boudoir for Paul's occupancy was carried on by the household with a zeal which obliged her to dissemble her lukewarmness.

Undine had supposed that on her marriage one of the great suites of the Hotel de Chelles would be emptied of its tenants and put at her husband's disposal; but she had since learned that, even had such a plan occurred to her parents-in-law, considerations of economy would have hindered it. The old Marquis and his wife, who were content, when they came up from Burgundy in the spring, with a modest set of rooms looking out on the court of their ancestral residence, expected their son and his wife to fit themselves into the still smaller apartment which had served as Raymond's bachelor lodging. The rest of the fine old mouldering house the tall-windowed premier on the garden, and the whole of the floor above had been let for years to old fashioned tenants who would have been more surprised than their landlord had he suddenly proposed to dispossess them. Undine, at first, had regarded these arrangements as merely provisional. She was persuaded that, under her influence, Raymond would soon convert his parents to more modern ideas, and meanwhile she was still in the flush of a completer well-being than she had ever known, and disposed, for the moment, to make light of any inconveniences connected with it. The three months since her marriage had been more nearly like what she had dreamed of than any of her previous experiments in happiness. At last she had what she wanted, and for the first time the glow of triumph was warmed by a deeper feeling. Her husband was really charming (it was odd how he reminded her of Ralph!), and after her bitter two years of loneliness and humiliation it was delicious to find herself once more adored and protected.

The very fact that Raymond was more jealous of her than Ralph had ever been or at any rate less reluctant to show it gave her a keener sense of recovered power. None of the men who had been in love with her before had been so frankly possessive, or so eager for reciprocal assurances of constancy. She knew that Ralph had suffered deeply from her intimacy with Van Degen, but he had betrayed his feeling only by a more studied detachment; and Van Degen, from the first, had been contemptuously indifferent to what she did or felt when she was out of his sight. As to her earlier experiences, she had frankly forgotten them: her sentimental memories went back no farther than the beginning of her New York career.

Raymond seemed to attach more importance to love, in all its manifestations, than was usual or convenient in a husband; and she gradually began to be aware that her domination over him involved a corresponding loss of independence. Since their return to Paris she had found that she was expected to give a circumstantial report of every hour she spent away from him. She had nothing to hide, and no designs against his peace of mind except those connected with her frequent and costly sessions at the dress-makers'; but she had never before been called upon to account to any one for the use of her time, and after the first amused surprise at Raymond's always wanting to know where she had been and whom she had seen she began to be oppressed by so exacting a devotion. Her parents, from her tenderest youth, had tacitly recognized her inalienable right to "go round," and Ralph though from motives which she divined to be different had shown the same respect for her freedom. It was therefore disconcerting to find that Raymond expected her to choose her friends, and even her acquaintances, in conformity not only with his personal tastes but with a definite and complicated code of family prejudices and traditions; and she was especially surprised to discover that he viewed with disapproval her intimacy with the Princess Estradina.

"My cousin's extremely amusing, of course, but utterly mad and very mal entourée. Most of the people she has about her ought to be in prison or Bedlam: especially that unspeakable Madame Adelschein, who's a candidate for both. My aunt's an angel, but she's been weak enough to let Lili turn the Hotel de Dordogne into an annex of Montmartre. Of course you'll have to show yourself there now and then: in these days families like ours must hold together. But go to the reunions de famille rather than to Lili's intimate parties; go with me, or with my mother; don't let yourself be seen there alone. You're too young and good-looking to be mixed up with that crew. A woman's classed or rather unclassed by being known as one of Lili's set."

Agreeable as it was to Undine that an appeal to her discretion should be based on the ground of her youth and good-looks, she was dismayed to find herself cut off from the very circle she had meant them to establish her in. Before she had become Raymond's wife there had been a moment of sharp tension in her relations with the Princess Estradina and the old Duchess. They had done their best to prevent her marrying their cousin, and had gone so far as openly to accuse her of being the cause of a breach between themselves and his parents. But Ralph Marvell's death had brought about a sudden change in her situation. She was now no longer a divorced woman struggling to obtain ecclesiastical sanction for her remarriage, but a widow whose conspicuous beauty and independent situation made her the object of lawful aspirations. The first person to seize on this distinction and make the most of it was her old enemy the Marquise de Trezac. The latter, who had been loudly charged by the house of Chelles with furthering her beautiful compatriot's designs, had instantly seen a chance of vindicating herself by taking the widowed Mrs. Marvell under her wing and favouring the attentions of other

suitors. These were not lacking, and the expected result had followed. Raymond de Chelles, more than ever infatuated as attainment became less certain, had claimed a definite promise from Undine, and his family, discouraged by his persistent bachelorhood, and their failure to fix his attention on any of the amiable maidens obviously designed to continue the race, had ended by withdrawing their opposition and discovering in Mrs. Marvell the moral and financial merits necessary to justify their change of front.

"A good match? If she isn't, I should like to know what the Chelles call one!" Madame de Trezac went about indefatigably proclaiming. "Related to the best people in New York well, by marriage, that is; and her husband left much more money than was expected. It goes to the boy, of course; but as the boy is with his mother she naturally enjoys the income. And her father's a rich man much richer than is generally known; I mean what WE call rich in America, you understand!"

Madame de Trezac had lately discovered that the proper attitude for the American married abroad was that of a militant patriotism; and she flaunted Undine Marvell in the face of the Faubourg like a particularly showy specimen of her national banner. The success of the experiment emboldened her to throw off the most sacred observances of her past. She took up Madame Adelschein, she entertained the James J. Rollivers, she resuscitated Creole dishes, she patronized negro melodists, she abandoned her weekly teas for impromptu afternoon dances, and the prim drawing-room in which dowagers had droned echoed with a cosmopolitan hubbub.

Even when the period of tension was over, and Undine had been officially received into the family of her betrothed, Madame de Trezac did not at once surrender. She laughingly professed to have had enough of the proprieties, and declared herself bored by the social rites she had hitherto so piously performed. "You'll always find a corner of home here, dearest, when you get tired of their ceremonies and solemnities," she said as she embraced the bride after the wedding breakfast; and Undine hoped that the devoted Nettie would in fact provide a refuge from the extreme domesticity of her new state. But since her return to Paris, and her taking up her domicile in the Hotel de Chelles, she had found Madame de Trezac less and less disposed to abet her in any assertion of independence.

"My dear, a woman must adopt her husband's nationality whether she wants to or not. It's the law, and it's the custom besides. If you wanted to amuse yourself with your Nouveau Luxe friends you oughtn't to have married Raymond but of course I say that only in joke. As if any woman would have hesitated who'd had your chance! Take my advice keep out of Lili's set just at first. Later ... well, perhaps Raymond won't be so particular; but meanwhile you'd make a great mistake to go against his people " and

Madame de Trezac, with a "Chere Madame," swept forward from her tea-table to receive the first of the returning dowagers.

It was about this time that Mrs. Heeny arrived with Paul; and for a while Undine was pleasantly absorbed in her boy. She kept Mrs. Heeny in Paris for a fortnight, and between her more pressing occupations it amused her to listen to the masseuse's New York gossip and her comments on the social organization of the old world. It was Mrs. Heeny's first visit to Europe, and she confessed to Undine that she had always wanted to "see something of the aristocracy" using the phrase as a naturalist might, with no hint of personal pretensions. Mrs. Heeny's democratic ease was combined with the strictest professional discretion, and it would never have occurred to her to regard herself, or to wish others to regard her, as anything but a manipulator of muscles; but in that character she felt herself entitled to admission to the highest circles.

"They certainly do things with style over here but it's kinder one-horse after New York, ain't it? Is this what they call their season? Why, you dined home two nights last week. They ought to come over to New York and see!" And she poured into Undine's half-envious ear a list of the entertainments which had illuminated the last weeks of the New York winter. "I suppose you'll begin to give parties as soon as ever you get into a house of your own. You're not going to have one? Oh, well, then you'll give a lot of big week-ends at your place down in the Shatter-country that's where the swells all go to in the summer time, ain't it? But I dunno what your ma would say if she knew you were going to live on with HIS folks after you're done honey-mooning. Why, we read in the papers you were going to live in some grand hotel or other oh, they call their houses HOTELS, do they? That's funny: I suppose it's because they let out part of 'em. Well, you look handsomer than ever. Undine; I'll take THAT back to your mother, anyhow. And he's dead in love, I can see that; reminds me of the way " but she broke off suddenly, as if something in Undine's look had silenced her.

Even to herself. Undine did not like to call up the image of Ralph Marvell; and any mention of his name gave her a vague sense of distress. His death had released her, had given her what she wanted; yet she could honestly say to herself that she had not wanted him to die at least not to die like that.... People said at the time that it was the hot weather his own family had said so: he had never quite got over his attack of pneumonia, and the sudden rise of temperature one of the fierce "heat-waves" that devastate New York in summer had probably affected his brain: the doctors said such cases were not uncommon.... She had worn black for a few weeks not quite mourning, but something decently regretful (the dress-makers were beginning to provide a special garb for such cases); and even since her remarriage, and the lapse of a year, she continued to wish that she could have got what she wanted without having had to pay that particular price for it.

This feeling was intensified by an incident in itself far from unwelcome which had occurred about three months after Ralph's death. Her lawyers had written to say that the sum of a hundred thousand dollars had been paid over to Marvell's estate by the Apex Consolidation Company; and as Marvell had left a will bequeathing everything he possessed to his son, this unexpected windfall handsomely increased Paul's patrimony. Undine had never relinquished her claim on her child; she had merely, by the advice of her lawyers, waived the assertion of her right for a few months after Marvell's death, with the express stipulation that her doing so was only a temporary concession to the feelings of her husband's family; and she had held out against all attempts to induce her to surrender Paul permanently. Before her marriage she had somewhat conspicuously adopted her husband's creed, and the Dagonets, picturing Paul as the prey of the Jesuits, had made the mistake of appealing to the courts for his custody. This had confirmed Undine's resistance, and her determination to keep the child. The case had been decided in her favour, and she had thereupon demanded, and obtained, an allowance of five thousand dollars, to be devoted to the bringing up and education of her son. This sum, added to what Mr. Spragg had agreed to give her, made up an income which had appreciably bettered her position, and justified Madame de Trezac's discreet allusions to her wealth. Nevertheless, it was one of the facts about which she least liked to think when any chance allusion evoked Ralph's image. The money was hers, of course; she had a right to it, and she was an ardent believer in "rights." But she wished she could have got it in some other way she hated the thought of it as one more instance of the perverseness with which things she was entitled to always came to her as if they had been stolen.

The approach of summer, and the culmination of the Paris season, swept aside such thoughts. The Countess Raymond de Chelles, contrasting her situation with that of Mrs. Undine Marvell, and the fulness and animation of her new life with the vacant dissatisfied days which had followed on her return from Dakota, forgot the smallness of her apartment, the inconvenient proximity of Paul and his nurse, the interminable round of visits with her mother-in-law, and the long dinners in the solemn hotels of all the family connection. The world was radiant, the lights were lit, the music playing; she was still young, and better-looking than ever, with a Countess's coronet, a famous chateau and a handsome and popular husband who adored her. And then suddenly the lights went out and the music stopped when one day Raymond, putting his arm about her, said in his tenderest tones: "And now, my dear, the world's had you long enough and it's my turn. What do you say to going down to Saint Desert?"

XXXVIII

In a window of the long gallery of the chateau de Saint Desert the new Marquise de Chelles stood looking down the poplar avenue into the November rain. It had been raining heavily and persistently for a longer time than she could remember. Day after day the hills beyond the park had been curtained by motionless clouds, the gutters of the long steep roofs had gurgled with a perpetual overflow, the opaque surface of the moat been peppered by a continuous pelting of big drops. The water lay in glassy stretches under the trees and along the sodden edges of the garden-paths, it rose in a white mist from the fields beyond, it exuded in a chill moisture from the brick flooring of the passages and from the walls of the rooms on the lower floor. Everything in the great empty house smelt of dampness: the stuffing of the chairs, the threadbare folds of the faded curtains, the splendid tapestries, that were fading too, on the walls of the room in which Undine stood, and the wide bands of crape which her husband had insisted on her keeping on her black dresses till the last hour of her mourning for the old Marquis.

The summer had been more than usually inclement, and since her first coming to the country Undine had lived through many periods of rainy weather; but none which had gone before had so completely epitomized, so summed up in one vast monotonous blur, the image of her long months at Saint Desert.

When, the year before, she had reluctantly suffered herself to be torn from the joys of Paris, she had been sustained by the belief that her exile would not be of long duration. Once Paris was out of sight, she had even found a certain lazy charm in the long warm days at Saint Desert. Her parents-in-law had remained in town, and she enjoyed being alone with her husband, exploring and appraising the treasures of the great half abandoned house, and watching her boy scamper over the June meadows or trot about the gardens on the poney his stepfather had given him. Paul, after Mrs. Heeny's departure, had grown fretful and restive, and Undine had found it more and more difficult to fit his small exacting personality into her cramped rooms and crowded life. He irritated her by pining for his Aunt Laura, his Marvell granny, and old Mr. Dagonet's funny stories about gods and fairies; and his wistful allusions to his games with Clare's children sounded like a lesson he might have been drilled in to make her feel how little he belonged to her. But once released from Paris, and blessed with rabbits, a poney and the freedom of the fields, he became again all that a charming child should be, and for a time it amused her to share in his romps and rambles. Raymond seemed enchanted at the picture they made, and the quiet weeks of fresh air and outdoor activity gave her back a bloom that reflected itself in her tranquillized mood. She was the more resigned to this interlude because she was so sure of its not lasting. Before they left Paris a doctor had been found to say that Paul who was certainly looking pale and pulled-down was in urgent need of sea air, and Undine had nearly convinced her husband of the expediency

of hiring a chalet at Deauville for July and August, when this plan, and with it every other prospect of escape, was dashed by the sudden death of the old Marquis.

Undine, at first, had supposed that the resulting change could not be other than favourable. She had been on too formal terms with her father-in-law a remote and ceremonious old gentleman to whom her own personality was evidently an insoluble enigma to feel more than the merest conventional pang at his death; and it was certainly "more fun" to be a marchioness than a countess, and to know that one's husband was the head of the house. Besides, now they would have the chateau to themselves or at least the old Marquise, when she came, would be there as a guest and not a ruler and visions of smart house-parties and big shoots lit up the first weeks of Undine's enforced seclusion. Then, by degrees, the inexorable conditions of French mourning closed in on her. Immediately after the long-drawn funeral observances the bereaved family mother, daughters, sons and sons-in-law came down to seclude themselves at Saint Desert; and Undine, through the slow hot crape-smelling months, lived encircled by shrouded images of woe in which the only live points were the eyes constantly fixed on her least movements. The hope of escaping to the seaside with Paul vanished in the pained stare with which her mother-in-law received the suggestion. Undine learned the next day that it had cost the old Marquise a sleepless night, and might have had more distressing results had it not been explained as a harmless instance of transatlantic oddness. Raymond entreated his wife to atone for her involuntary legereté by submitting with a good grace to the usages of her adopted country; and he seemed to regard the remaining months of the summer as hardly long enough for this act of expiation. As Undine looked back on them, they appeared to have been composed of an interminable succession of identical days, in which attendance at early mass (in the coroneted gallery she had once so glowingly depicted to Van Degen) was followed by a great deal of conversational sitting about, a great deal of excellent eating, an occasional drive to the nearest town behind a pair of heavy draft horses, and long evenings in a lamp-heated drawing-room with all the windows shut, and the stout cure making an asthmatic fourth at the Marquise's card-table.

Still, even these conditions were not permanent, and the discipline of the last years had trained Undine to wait and dissemble. The summer over, it was decided after a protracted family conclave that the state of the old Marquise's health made it advisable for her to spend the winter with the married daughter who lived near Pau. The other members of the family returned to their respective estates, and Undine once more found herself alone with her husband. But she knew by this time that there was to be no thought of Paris that winter, or even the next spring. Worse still, she was presently to discover that Raymond's accession of rank brought with it no financial advantages.

Having but the vaguest notion of French testamentary law, she was dismayed to learn that the compulsory division of property made it impossible for a father to benefit his eldest son at the expense of the others. Raymond was therefore little richer than before, and with the debts of honour of a troublesome younger brother to settle, and Saint Desert to keep up, his available income was actually reduced. He held out, indeed, the hope of eventual improvement, since the old Marquis had managed his estates with a lofty contempt for modern methods, and the application of new principles of agriculture and forestry were certain to yield profitable results. But for a year or two, at any rate, this very change of treatment would necessitate the owner's continual supervision, and would not in the meanwhile produce any increase of income.

To faire valoir the family acres had always, it appeared, been Raymond's deepest-seated purpose, and all his frivolities dropped from him with the prospect of putting his hand to the plough. He was not, indeed, inhuman enough to condemn his wife to perpetual exile. He meant, he assured her, that she should have her annual spring visit to Paris but he stared in dismay at her suggestion that they should take possession of the coveted premier of the Hotel de Chelles. He was gallant enough to express the wish that it were in his power to house her on such a scale; but he could not conceal his surprise that she had ever seriously expected it. She was beginning to see that he felt her constitutional inability to understand anything about money as the deepest difference between them. It was a proficiency no one had ever expected her to acquire, and the lack of which she had even been encouraged to regard as a grace and to use as a pretext. During the interval between her divorce and her remarriage she had learned what things cost, but not how to do without them; and money still seemed to her like some mysterious and uncertain stream which occasionally vanished underground but was sure to bubble up again at one's feet. Now, however, she found herself in a world where it represented not the means of individual gratification but the substance binding together whole groups of interests, and where the uses to which it might be put in twenty years were considered before the reasons for spending it on the spot. At first she was sure she could laugh Raymond out of his prudence or coax him round to her point of view. She did not understand how a man so romantically in love could be so unpersuadable on certain points. Hitherto she had had to contend with personal moods, now she was arguing against a policy; and she was gradually to learn that it was as natural to Raymond de Chelles to adore her and resist her as it had been to Ralph Marvell to adore her and let her have her way. At first, indeed, he appealed to her good sense, using arguments evidently drawn from accumulations of hereditary experience. But his economic plea was as unintelligible to her as the silly problems about pen-knives and apples in the "Mental Arithmetic" of her infancy; and when he struck a tenderer note and spoke of the duty of providing for the son he hoped for, she put her arms about him to whisper: "But then I oughtn't to be worried..."

After that, she noticed, though he was as charming as ever, he behaved as if the case were closed. He had apparently decided that his arguments were unintelligible to her, and under all his ardour she felt the difference made by the discovery. It did not make him less kind, but it evidently made her less important; and she had the half-frightened sense that the day she ceased to please him she would cease to exist for him. That day was a long way off, of course, but the chill of it had brushed her face; and she was no longer heedless of such signs. She resolved to cultivate all the arts of patience and compliance, and habit might have helped them to take root if they had not been nipped by a new cataclysm.

It was barely a week ago that her husband had been called to Paris to straighten out a fresh tangle in the affairs of the troublesome brother whose difficulties were apparently a part of the family tradition. Raymond's letters had been hurried, his telegrams brief and contradictory, and now, as Undine stood watching for the brougham that was to bring him from the station, she had the sense that with his arrival all her vague fears would be confirmed. There would be more money to pay out, of course since the funds that could not be found for her just needs were apparently always forthcoming to settle Hubert's scandalous prodigalities and that meant a longer perspective of solitude at Saint Desert, and a fresh pretext for postponing the hospitalities that were to follow on their period of mourning. The brougham a vehicle as massive and lumbering as the pair that drew itpresently rolled into the court, and Raymond's sable figure (she had never before seen a man travel in such black clothes) sprang up the steps to the door. Whenever Undine saw him after an absence she had a curious sense of his coming back from unknown distances and not belonging to her or to any state of things she understood. Then habit reasserted itself, and she began to think of him again with a querulous familiarity. But she had learned to hide her feelings, and as he came in she put up her face for a kiss.

"Yes everything's settled " his embrace expressed the satisfaction of the man returning from an accomplished task to the joys of his fireside.

"Settled?" Her face kindled. "Without your having to pay?"

He looked at her with a shrug. "Of course I've had to pay. Did you suppose Hubert's creditors would be put off with vanilla eclairs?"

"Oh, if THAT'S what you mean if Hubert has only to wire you at any time to be sure of his affairs being settled !"

She saw his lips narrow and a line come out between his eyes. "Wouldn't it be a happy thought to tell them to bring tea?" he suggested.

"In the library, then. It's so cold here and the tapestries smell so of rain."

He paused a moment to scrutinize the long walls, on which the fabulous blues and pinks of the great Boucher series looked as livid as withered roses. "I suppose they ought to be taken down and aired," he said.

She thought: "In THIS air much good it would do them!" But she had already repented her outbreak about Hubert, and she followed her husband into the library with the resolve not to let him see her annoyance. Compared with the long grey gallery the library, with its brown walls of books, looked warm and home-like, and Raymond seemed to feel the influence of the softer atmosphere. He turned to his wife and put his arm about her.

"I know it's been a trial to you, dearest; but this is the last time I shall have to pull the poor boy out."

In spite of herself she laughed incredulously: Hubert's "last times" were a household word.

But when tea had been brought, and they were alone over the fire, Raymond unfolded the amazing sequel. Hubert had found an heiress, Hubert was to be married, and henceforth the business of paying his debts (which might be counted on to recur as inevitably as the changes of the seasons) would devolve on his American bride the charming Miss Looty Arlington, whom Raymond had remained over in Paris to meet.

"An American? He's marrying an American?" Undine wavered between wrath and satisfaction. She felt a flash of resentment at any other intruder's venturing upon her territory ("Looty Arlington? Who is she? What a name!") but it was quickly superseded by the relief of knowing that henceforth, as Raymond said, Hubert's debts would be some one else's business. Then a third consideration prevailed. "But if he's engaged to a rich girl, why on earth do WE have to pull him out?"

Her husband explained that no other course was possible. Though General Arlington was immensely wealthy, ("her father's a general a General Manager, whatever that may be,") he had exacted what he called "a clean slate" from his future son-in-law, and Hubert's creditors (the boy was such a donkey!) had in their possession certain papers that made it possible for them to press for immediate payment.

"Your compatriots' views on such matters are so rigid and it's all to their credit that the marriage would have fallen through at once if the least hint of Hubert's mess had got out and then we should have had him on our hands for life."

Yes from that point of view it was doubtless best to pay up; but Undine obscurely wished that their doing so had not incidentally helped an unknown compatriot to what the American papers were no doubt already announcing as "another brilliant foreign alliance."

"Where on earth did your brother pick up anybody respectable? Do you know where her people come from? I suppose she's perfectly awful," she broke out with a sudden escape of irritation.

"I believe Hubert made her acquaintance at a skating rink. They come from some new state the general apologized for its not yet being on the map, but seemed surprised I hadn't heard of it. He said it was already known as one of 'the divorce states,' and the principal city had, in consequence, a very agreeable society. La petite n'est vraiment pas trop mal."

"I daresay not! We're all good-looking. But she must be horribly common."

Raymond seemed sincerely unable to formulate a judgment. "My dear, you have your own customs..."

"Oh, I know we're all alike to you!" It was one of her grievances that he never attempted to discriminate between Americans. "You see no difference between me and a girl one gets engaged to at a skating rink!"

He evaded the challenge by rejoining: "Miss Arlington's burning to know you. She says she's heard a great deal about you, and Hubert wants to bring her down next week. I think we'd better do what we can."

"Of course." But Undine was still absorbed in the economic aspect of the case. "If they're as rich as you say, I suppose Hubert means to pay you back by and bye?"

"Naturally. It's all arranged. He's given me a paper." He drew her hands into his. "You see we've every reason to be kind to Miss Arlington."

"Oh, I'll be as kind as you like!" She brightened at the prospect of repayment. Yes, they would ask the girl down... She leaned a little nearer to her husband. "But then after a while we shall be a good deal better off especially, as you say, with no more of Hubert's

debts to worry us." And leaning back far enough to give her upward smile, she renewed her plea for the premier in the Hotel de Chelles: "Because, really, you know, as the head of the house you ought to "

"Ah, my dear, as the head of the house I've so many obligations; and one of them is not to miss a good stroke of business when it comes my way."

Her hands slipped from his shoulders and she drew back. "What do you mean by a good stroke of business?

"Why, an incredible piece of luck it's what kept me on so long in Paris. Miss Arlington's father was looking for an apartment for the young couple, and I've let him the premier for twelve years on the understanding that he puts electric light and heating into the whole hotel. It's a wonderful chance, for of course we all benefit by it as much as Hubert."

"A wonderful chance... benefit by it as much as Hubert!" He seemed to be speaking a strange language in which familiar-sounding syllables meant something totally unknown. Did he really think she was going to coop herself up again in their cramped quarters while Hubert and his skating-rink bride luxuriated overhead in the coveted premier? All the resentments that had been accumulating in her during the long baffled months since her marriage broke into speech. "It's extraordinary of you to do such a thing without consulting me!"

"Without consulting you? But, my dear child, you've always professed the most complete indifference to business matters you've frequently begged me not to bore you with them. You may be sure I've acted on the best advice; and my mother, whose head is as good as a man's, thinks I've made a remarkably good arrangement."

"I daresay but I'm not always thinking about money, as you are."

As she spoke she had an ominous sense of impending peril; but she was too angry to avoid even the risks she saw. To her surprise Raymond put his arm about her with a smile. "There are many reasons why I have to think about money. One is that YOU don't; and another is that I must look out for the future of our son."

Undine flushed to the forehead. She had grown accustomed to such allusions and the thought of having a child no longer filled her with the resentful terror she had felt before Paul's birth. She had been insensibly influenced by a different point of view, perhaps also by a difference in her own feeling; and the vision of herself as the mother of the future Marquis de Chelles was softened to happiness by the thought of giving Raymond

a son. But all these lightly-rooted sentiments went down in the rush of her resentment, and she freed herself with a petulant movement. "Oh, my dear, you'd better leave it to your brother to perpetuate the race. There'll be more room for nurseries in their apartment!"

She waited a moment, quivering with the expectation of her husband's answer; then, as none came except the silent darkening of his face, she walked to the door and turned round to fling back: "Of course you can do what you like with your own house, and make any arrangements that suit your family, without consulting me; but you needn't think I'm ever going back to live in that stuffy little hole, with Hubert and his wife splurging round on top of our heads!"

"Ah " said Raymond de Chelles in a low voice.

XXXIX

Undine did not fulfil her threat. The month of May saw her back in the rooms she had declared she would never set foot in, and after her long sojourn among the echoing vistas of Saint Desert the exiguity of her Paris quarters seemed like cosiness.

In the interval many things had happened. Hubert, permitted by his anxious relatives to anticipate the term of the family mourning, had been showily and expensively united to his heiress; the Hotel de Chelles had been piped, heated and illuminated in accordance with the bride's requirements; and the young couple, not content with these utilitarian changes had moved doors, opened windows, torn down partitions, and given over the great trophied and pilastered dining-room to a decorative painter with a new theory of the human anatomy. Undine had silently assisted at this spectacle, and at the sight of the old Marquise's abject acquiescence; she had seen the Duchesse de Dordogne and the Princesse Estradina go past her door to visit Hubert's premier and marvel at the American bath-tubs and the Annamite bric-a-brac; and she had been present, with her husband, at the banquet at which Hubert had revealed to the astonished Faubourg the prehistoric episodes depicted on his dining-room walls. She had accepted all these necessities with the stoicism which the last months had developed in her; for more and more, as the days passed, she felt herself in the grasp of circumstances stronger than any effort she could oppose to them. The very absence of external pressure, of any tactless assertion of authority on her husband's part, intensified the sense of her helplessness. He simply left it to her to infer that, important as she might be to him in certain ways, there were others in which she did not weigh a feather.

Their outward relations had not changed since her outburst on the subject of Hubert's marriage. That incident had left her half-ashamed, half-frightened at her behaviour, and she had tried to atone for it by the indirect arts that were her nearest approach to acknowledging herself in the wrong. Raymond met her advances with a good grace, and they lived through the rest of the winter on terms of apparent understanding. When the spring approached it was he who suggested that, since his mother had consented to Hubert's marrying before the year of mourning was over, there was really no reason why they should not go up to Paris as usual; and she was surprised at the readiness with which he prepared to accompany her.

A year earlier she would have regarded this as another proof of her power; but she now drew her inferences less quickly. Raymond was as "lovely" to her as ever; but more than once, during their months in the country, she had had a startled sense of not giving him all he expected of her. She had admired him, before their marriage, as a model of social distinction; during the honeymoon he had been the most ardent of lovers; and with their settling down at Saint Desert she had prepared to resign herself to the society of a

country gentleman absorbed in sport and agriculture. But Raymond, to her surprise, had again developed a disturbing resemblance to his predecessor. During the long winter afternoons, after he had gone over his accounts with the bailiff, or written his business letters, he took to dabbling with a paint-box, or picking out new scores at the piano; after dinner, when they went to the library, he seemed to expect to read aloud to her from the reviews and papers he was always receiving; and when he had discovered her inability to fix her attention he fell into the way of absorbing himself in one of the old brown books with which the room was lined. At first he tried as Ralph had done to tell her about what he was reading or what was happening in the world; but her sense of inadequacy made her slip away to other subjects, and little by little their talk died down to monosyllables. Was it possible that, in spite of his books, the evenings seemed as long to Raymond as to her, and that he had suggested going back to Paris because he was bored at Saint Desert? Bored as she was herself, she resented his not finding her company all-sufficient, and was mortified by the discovery that there were regions of his life she could not enter.

But once back in Paris she had less time for introspection, and Raymond less for books. They resumed their dispersed and busy life, and in spite of Hubert's ostentatious vicinity, of the perpetual lack of money, and of Paul's innocent encroachments on her freedom, Undine, once more in her element, ceased to brood upon her grievances. She enjoyed going about with her husband, whose presence at her side was distinctly ornamental. He seemed to have grown suddenly younger and more animated, and when she saw other women looking at him she remembered how distinguished he was. It amused her to have him in her train, and driving about with him to dinners and dances, waiting for him on flower-decked landings, or pushing at his side through blazing theatre-lobbies, answered to her inmost ideal of domestic intimacy.

He seemed disposed to allow her more liberty than before, and it was only now and then that he let drop a brief reminder of the conditions on which it was accorded. She was to keep certain people at a distance, she was not to cheapen herself by being seen at vulgar restaurants and tea-rooms, she was to join with him in fulfilling certain family obligations (going to a good many dull dinners among the number); but in other respects she was free to fill her days as she pleased.

"Not that it leaves me much time," she admitted to Madame de Trezac; "what with going to see his mother every day, and never missing one of his sisters' jours, and showing myself at the Hotel de Dordogne whenever the Duchess gives a pay-up party to the stuffy people Lili Estradina won't be bothered with, there are days when I never lay eyes on Paul, and barely have time to be waved and manicured; but, apart from that, Raymond's really much nicer and less fussy than he was."

Undine, as she grew older, had developed her mother's craving for a confidante, and Madame de Trezac had succeeded in that capacity to Mabel Lipscomb and Bertha Shallum.

"Less fussy?" Madame de Trezac's long nose lengthened thoughtfully.
"H'm are you sure that's a good sign?"
Undine stared and laughed. "Oh, my dear, you're so quaint! Why, nobody's jealous any more."

"No; that's the worst of it." Madame de Trezac pondered. "It's a thousand pities you haven't got a son."

"Yes; I wish we had." Undine stood up, impatient to end the conversation. Since she had learned that her continued childlessness was regarded by every one about her as not only unfortunate but somehow vaguely derogatory to her, she had genuinely begun to regret it; and any allusion to the subject disturbed her.

"Especially," Madame de Trezac continued, "as Hubert's wife "

"Oh, if THAT'S all they want, it's a pity Raymond didn't marry Hubert's wife," Undine flung back; and on the stairs she murmured to herself: "Nettie has been talking to my mother-in-law."

But this explanation did not quiet her, and that evening, as she and Raymond drove back together from a party, she felt a sudden impulse to speak. Sitting close to him in the darkness of the carriage, it ought to have been easy for her to find the needed word; but the barrier of his indifference hung between them, and street after street slipped by, and the spangled blackness of the river unrolled itself beneath their wheels, before she leaned over to touch his hand.

"What is it, my dear?"

She had not yet found the word, and already his tone told her she was too late. A year ago, if she had slipped her hand in his, she would not have had that answer.

"Your mother blames me for our not having a child. Everybody thinks it's my fault."

He paused before answering, and she sat watching his shadowy profile against the passing lamps.

"My mother's ideas are old-fashioned; and I don't know that it's anybody's business but yours and mine."

"Yes, but "

"Here we are." The brougham was turning under the archway of the hotel, and the light of Hubert's tall windows fell across the dusky court. Raymond helped her out, and they mounted to their door by the stairs which Hubert had recarpeted in velvet, with a marble nymph lurking in the azaleas on the landing.

In the antechamber Raymond paused to take her cloak from her shoulders, and his eyes rested on her with a faint smile of approval.

"You never looked better; your dress is extremely becoming. Good-night, my dear," he said, kissing her hand as he turned away.

Undine kept this incident to herself: her wounded pride made her shrink from confessing it even to Madame de Trezac. She was sure Raymond would "come back"; Ralph always had, to the last. During their remaining weeks in Paris she reassured herself with the thought that once they were back at Saint Desert she would easily regain her lost hold; and when Raymond suggested their leaving Paris she acquiesced without a protest. But at Saint Desert she seemed no nearer to him than in Paris. He continued to treat her with unvarying amiability, but he seemed wholly absorbed in the management of the estate, in his books, his sketching and his music. He had begun to interest himself in politics and had been urged to stand for his department. This necessitated frequent displacements: trips to Beaune or Dijon and occasional absences in Paris. Undine, when he was away, was not left alone, for the dowager Marquise had established herself at Saint Desert for the summer, and relays of brothers and sisters-in-law, aunts, cousins and ecclesiastical friends and connections succeeded each other under its capacious roof. Only Hubert and his wife were absent. They had taken a villa at Deauville, and in the morning papers Undine followed the chronicle of Hubert's polo scores and of the Countess Hubert's racing toilets.

The days crawled on with a benumbing sameness. The old Marquise and the other ladies of the party sat on the terrace with their needle-work, the cure or one of the visiting uncles read aloud the Journal des Debats and prognosticated dark things of the Republic, Paul scoured the park and despoiled the kitchen-garden with the other children of the family, the inhabitants of the adjacent chateaux drove over to call, and occasionally the ponderous pair were harnessed to a landau as lumbering as the brougham, and the ladies of Saint Desert measured the dusty kilometres between themselves and their neighbours.

It was the first time that Undine had seriously paused to consider the conditions of her new life, and as the days passed she began to understand that so they would continue to succeed each other till the end. Every one about her took it for granted that as long as she lived she would spend ten months of every year at Saint Desert and the remaining two in Paris. Of course, if health required it, she might go to les eaux with her husband; but the old Marquise was very doubtful as to the benefit of a course of waters, and her uncle the Duke and her cousin the Canon shared her view. In the case of young married women, especially, the unwholesome excitement of the modern watering-place was more than likely to do away with the possible benefit of the treatment. As to travel had not Raymond and his wife been to Egypt and Asia Minor on their wedding-journey? Such reckless enterprise was unheard of in the annals of the house! Had they not spent days and days in the saddle, and slept in tents among the Arabs? (Who could tell, indeed, whether these imprudences were not the cause of the disappointment which it had pleased heaven to inflict on the young couple?) No one in the family had ever taken so long a wedding-journey. One bride had gone to England (even that was considered extreme), and another the artistic daughter had spent a week in Venice; which certainly showed that they were not behind the times, and had no old-fashioned prejudices. Since wedding-journeys were the fashion, they had taken them; but who had ever heard of travelling afterward?

What could be the possible object of leaving one's family, one's habits, one's friends? It was natural that the Americans, who had no homes, who were born and died in hotels, should have contracted nomadic habits: but the new Marquise de Chelles was no longer an American, and she had Saint Desert and the Hotel de Chelles to live in, as generations of ladies of her name had done before her. Thus Undine beheld her future laid out for her, not directly and in blunt words, but obliquely and affably, in the allusions, the assumptions, the insinuations of the amiable women among whom her days were spent. Their interminable conversations were carried on to the click of knitting-needles and the rise and fall of industrious fingers above embroidery-frames; and as Undine sat staring at the lustrous nails of her idle hands she felt that her inability to occupy them was regarded as one of the chief causes of her restlessness. The innumerable rooms of Saint Desert were furnished with the embroidered hangings and tapestry chairs produced by generations of diligent chatelaines, and the untiring needles of the old Marquise, her daughters and dependents were still steadily increasing the provision.

It struck Undine as curious that they should be willing to go on making chair-coverings and bed-curtains for a house that didn't really belong to them, and that she had a right to pull about and rearrange as she chose; but then that was only a part of their whole incomprehensible way of regarding themselves (in spite of their acute personal and

parochial absorptions) as minor members of a powerful and indivisible whole, the huge voracious fetish they called The Family.

Notwithstanding their very definite theories as to what Americans were and were not, they were evidently bewildered at finding no corresponding sense of solidarity in Undine; and little Paul's rootlessness, his lack of all local and linear ties, made them (for all the charm he exercised) regard him with something of the shyness of pious Christians toward an elfin child. But though mother and child gave them a sense of insuperable strangeness, it plainly never occurred to them that both would not be gradually subdued to the customs of Saint Desert. Dynasties had fallen, institutions changed, manners and morals, alas, deplorably declined; but as far back as memory went, the ladies of the line of Chelles had always sat at their needle-work on the terrace of Saint Desert, while the men of the house lamented the corruption of the government and the cure ascribed the unhappy state of the country to the decline of religious feeling and the rise in the cost of living. It was inevitable that, in the course of time, the new Marquise should come to understand the fundamental necessity of these things being as they were; and meanwhile the forbearance of her husband's family exercised itself, with the smiling discretion of their race, through the long succession of uneventful days.

Once, in September, this routine was broken in upon by the unannounced descent of a flock of motors bearing the Princess Estradina and a chosen band from one watering-place to another. Raymond was away at the time, but family loyalty constrained the old Marquise to welcome her kinswoman and the latter's friends; and Undine once more found herself immersed in the world from which her marriage had removed her.

The Princess, at first, seemed totally to have forgotten their former intimacy, and Undine was made to feel that in a life so variously agitated the episode could hardly have left a trace. But the night before her departure the incalculable Lili, with one of her sudden changes of humour, drew her former friend into her bedroom and plunged into an exchange of confidences. She naturally unfolded her own history first, and it was so packed with incident that the courtyard clock had struck two before she turned her attention to Undine.

"My dear, you're handsomer than ever; only perhaps a shade too stout. Domestic bliss, I suppose? Take care! You need an emotion, a drama... You Americans are really extraordinary. You appear to live on change and excitement; and then suddenly a man comes along and claps a ring on your finger, and you never look through it to see what's going on outside. Aren't you ever the least bit bored? Why do I never see anything of you any more? I suppose it's the fault of my venerable aunt she's never forgiven me for having a better time than her daughters. How can I help it if I don't look like the cure's umbrella? I daresay she owes you the same grudge. But why do you let her coop you up

here? It's a thousand pities you haven't had a child. They'd all treat you differently if you had."

It was the same perpetually reiterated condolence; and Undine flushed with anger as she listened. Why indeed had she let herself be cooped up? She could not have answered the Princess's question: she merely felt the impossibility of breaking through the mysterious web of traditions, conventions, prohibitions that enclosed her in their impenetrable net-work. But her vanity suggested the obvious pretext, and she murmured with a laugh: "I didn't know Raymond was going to be so jealous "

The Princess stared. "Is it Raymond who keeps you shut up here? And what about his trips to Dijon? And what do you suppose he does with himself when he runs up to Paris? Politics?" She shrugged ironically. "Politics don't occupy a man after midnight. Raymond jealous of you? Ah, merci! My dear, it's what I always say when people talk to me about fast Americans: you're the only innocent women left in the world..."

XL

After the Princess Estradina's departure, the days at Saint Desert succeeded each other indistinguishably; and more and more, as they passed, Undine felt herself drawn into the slow strong current already fed by so many tributary lives. Some spell she could not have named seemed to emanate from the old house which had so long been the custodian of an unbroken tradition: things had happened there in the same way for so many generations that to try to alter them seemed as vain as to contend with the elements.

Winter came and went, and once more the calendar marked the first days of spring; but though the horse-chestnuts of the Champs Elysees were budding snow still lingered in the grass drives of Saint Desert and along the ridges of the hills beyond the park. Sometimes, as Undine looked out of the windows of the Boucher gallery, she felt as if her eyes had never rested on any other scene. Even her occasional brief trips to Paris left no lasting trace: the life of the vivid streets faded to a shadow as soon as the black and white horizon of Saint Desert closed in on her again.

Though the afternoons were still cold she had lately taken to sitting in the gallery. The smiling scenes on its walls and the tall screens which broke its length made it more habitable than the drawing-rooms beyond; but her chief reason for preferring it was the satisfaction she found in having fires lit in both the monumental chimneys that faced each other down its long perspective. This satisfaction had its source in the old Marquise's disapproval. Never before in the history of Saint Desert had the consumption of firewood exceeded a certain carefully-calculated measure; but since Undine had been in authority this allowance had been doubled. If any one had told her, a year earlier, that one of the chief distractions of her new life would be to invent ways of annoying her mother-in-law, she would have laughed at the idea of wasting her time on such trifles. But she found herself with a great deal of time to waste, and with a fierce desire to spend it in upsetting the immemorial customs of Saint Desert. Her husband had mastered her in essentials, but she had discovered innumerable small ways of irritating and hurting him, and one and not the least effectual was to do anything that went counter to his mother's prejudices. It was not that he always shared her views, or was a particularly subservient son; but it seemed to be one of his fundamental principles that a man should respect his mother's wishes, and see to it that his household respected them. All Frenchmen of his class appeared to share this view, and to regard it as beyond discussion: it was based on something so much more Immutable than personal feeling that one might even hate one's mother and yet insist that her ideas as to the consumption of fire-wood should be regarded.

The old Marquise, during the cold weather, always sat in her bedroom; and there, between the tapestried four-poster and the fireplace, the family grouped itself around the ground-glass of her single carcel lamp. In the evening, if there were visitors, a fire was lit in the library; otherwise the family again sat about the Marquise's lamp till the footman came in at ten with tisane and biscuits de Reims; after which every one bade the dowager good night and scattered down the corridors to chill distances marked by tapers floating in cups of oil.

Since Undine's coming the library fire had never been allowed to go out; and of late, after experimenting with the two drawing-rooms and the so-called "study" where Raymond kept his guns and saw the bailiff, she had selected the gallery as the most suitable place for the new and unfamiliar ceremony of afternoon tea. Afternoon refreshments had never before been served at Saint Desert except when company was expected; when they had invariably consisted in a decanter of sweet port and a plate of small dry cakes the kind that kept. That the complicated rites of the tea-urn, with its offering-up of perishable delicacies, should be enacted for the sole enjoyment of the family, was a thing so unheard of that for a while Undine found sufficient amusement in elaborating the ceremonial, and in making the ancestral plate groan under more varied viands; and when this palled she devised the plan of performing the office in the gallery and lighting sacrificial fires in both chimneys.

She had said to Raymond, at first: "It's ridiculous that your mother should sit in her bedroom all day. She says she does it to save fires; but if we have a fire downstairs why can't she let hers go out, and come down? I don't see why I should spend my life in your mother's bedroom."

Raymond made no answer, and the Marquise did, in fact, let her fire go out. But she did not come down she simply continued to sit upstairs without a fire.

At first this also amused Undine; then the tacit criticism implied began to irritate her. She hoped Raymond would speak of his mother's attitude: she had her answer ready if he did! But he made no comment, he took no notice; her impulses of retaliation spent themselves against the blank surface of his indifference. He was as amiable, as considerate as ever; as ready, within reason, to accede to her wishes and gratify her whims. Once or twice, when she suggested running up to Paris to take Paul to the dentist, or to look for a servant, he agreed to the necessity and went up with her. But instead of going to an hotel they went to their apartment, where carpets were up and curtains down, and a care-taker prepared primitive food at uncertain hours; and Undine's first glimpse of Hubert's illuminated windows deepened her rancour and her sense of helplessness.

As Madame de Trezac had predicted, Raymond's vigilance gradually relaxed, and during their excursions to the capital Undine came and went as she pleased. But her visits were too short to permit of her falling in with the social pace, and when she showed herself among her friends she felt countrified and out-of-place, as if even her clothes had come from Saint Desert. Nevertheless her dresses were more than ever her chief preoccupation: in Paris she spent hours at the dressmaker's, and in the country the arrival of a box of new gowns was the chief event of the vacant days. But there was more bitterness than joy in the unpacking, and the dresses hung in her wardrobe like so many unfulfilled promises of pleasure, reminding her of the days at the Stentorian when she had reviewed other finery with the same cheated eyes. In spite of this, she multiplied her orders, writing up to the dress-makers for patterns, and to the milliners for boxes of hats which she tried on, and kept for days, without being able to make a choice. Now and then she even sent her maid up to Paris to bring back great assortments of veils, gloves, flowers and laces; and after periods of painful indecision she ended by keeping the greater number, lest those she sent back should turn out to be the ones that were worn in Paris. She knew she was spending too much money, and she had lost her youthful faith in providential solutions; but she had always had the habit of going out to buy something when she was bored, and never had she been in greater need of such solace.

The dulness of her life seemed to have passed into her blood: her complexion was less animated, her hair less shining. The change in her looks alarmed her, and she scanned the fashion-papers for new scents and powders, and experimented in facial bandaging, electric massage and other processes of renovation. Odd atavisms woke in her, and she began to pore over patent medicine advertisements, to send stamped envelopes to beauty doctors and professors of physical development, and to brood on the advantage of consulting faith-healers, mind-readers and their kindred adepts. She even wrote to her mother for the receipts of some of her grandfather's forgotten nostrums, and modified her daily life, and her hours of sleeping, eating and exercise, in accordance with each new experiment.

Her constitutional restlessness lapsed into an apathy like Mrs. Spragg's, and the least demand on her activity irritated her. But she was beset by endless annoyances: bickerings with discontented maids, the difficulty of finding a tutor for Paul, and the problem of keeping him amused and occupied without having him too much on her hands. A great liking had sprung up between Raymond and the little boy, and during the summer Paul was perpetually at his step-father's side in the stables and the park. But with the coming of winter Raymond was oftener away, and Paul developed a persistent cold that kept him frequently indoors. The confinement made him fretful and exacting, and the old Marquise ascribed the change in his behaviour to the deplorable influence of his tutor, a "laic" recommended by one of Raymond's old professors. Raymond himself would have preferred an abbé: it was in the tradition of the house, and though Paul was

not of the house it seemed fitting that he should conform to its ways. Moreover, when the married sisters came to stay they objected to having their children exposed to the tutor's influence, and even implied that Paul's society might be contaminating. But Undine, though she had so readily embraced her husband's faith, stubbornly resisted the suggestion that she should hand over her son to the Church. The tutor therefore remained; but the friction caused by his presence was so irritating to Undine that she began to consider the alternative of sending Paul to school. He was still small and tender for the experiment; but she persuaded herself that what he needed was "hardening," and having heard of a school where fashionable infancy was subjected to this process, she entered into correspondence with the master. His first letter convinced her that his establishment was just the place for Paul; but the second contained the price-list, and after comparing it with the tutor's keep and salary she wrote to say that she feared her little boy was too young to be sent away from home.

Her husband, for some time past, had ceased to make any comment on her expenditure. She knew he thought her too extravagant, and felt sure he was minutely aware of what she spent; for Saint Desert projected on economic details a light as different as might be from the haze that veiled them in West End Avenue. She therefore concluded that Raymond's silence was intentional, and ascribed it to his having shortcomings of his own to conceal. The Princess Estradina's pleasantry had reached its mark. Undine did not believe that her husband was seriously in love with another woman she could not conceive that any one could tire of her of whom she had not first tired but she was humiliated by his indifference, and it was easier to ascribe it to the arts of a rival than to any deficiency in herself. It exasperated her to think that he might have consolations for the outward monotony of his life, and she resolved that when they returned to Paris he should see that she was not without similar opportunities.

March, meanwhile, was verging on April, and still he did not speak of leaving. Undine had learned that he expected to have such decisions left to him, and she hid her impatience lest her showing it should incline him to delay. But one day, as she sat at tea in the gallery, he came in in his riding-clothes and said: "I've been over to the other side of the mountain. The February rains have weakened the dam of the Alette, and the vineyards will be in danger if we don't rebuild at once."

She suppressed a yawn, thinking, as she did so, how dull he always looked when he talked of agriculture. It made him seem years older, and she reflected with a shiver that listening to him probably gave her the same look.

He went on, as she handed him his tea: "I'm sorry it should happen just now. I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to give up your spring in Paris." "Oh, no no!" she broke out. A

throng of half-subdued grievances choked in her: she wanted to burst into sobs like a child.

"I know it's a disappointment. But our expenses have been unusually heavy this year."

"It seems to me they always are. I don't see why we should give up Paris because you've got to make repairs to a dam. Isn't Hubert ever going to pay back that money?"

He looked at her with a mild surprise. "But surely you understood at the time that it won't be possible till his wife inherits?"

"Till General Arlington dies, you mean? He doesn't look much older than you!"

"You may remember that I showed you Hubert's note. He has paid the interest quite regularly."

"That's kind of him!" She stood up, flaming with rebellion. "You can do as you please; but I mean to go to Paris."

"My mother is not going. I didn't intend to open our apartment."

"I understand. But I shall open it that's all!"

He had risen too, and she saw his face whiten. "I prefer that you shouldn't go without me."

"Then I shall go and stay at the Nouveau Luxe with my American friends."

"That never!"

"Why not?"

"I consider it unsuitable."

"Your considering it so doesn't prove it."

They stood facing each other, quivering with an equal anger; then he controlled himself and said in a more conciliatory tone: "You never seem to see that there are necessities "

"Oh, neither do you that's the trouble. You can't keep me shut up here all my life, and interfere with everything I want to do, just by saying it's unsuitable."

"I've never interfered with your spending your money as you please."

It was her turn to stare, sincerely wondering. "Mercy, I should hope not, when you've always grudged me every penny of yours!"

"You know it's not because I grudge it. I would gladly take you to Paris if I had the money."

"You can always find the money to spend on this place. Why don't you sell it if it's so fearfully expensive?"

"Sell it? Sell Saint Desert?"

The suggestion seemed to strike him as something monstrously, almost fiendishly significant: as if her random word had at last thrust into his hand the clue to their whole unhappy difference. Without understanding this, she guessed it from the change in his face: it was as if a deadly solvent had suddenly decomposed its familiar lines.

"Well, why not?" His horror spurred her on. "You might sell some of the things in it anyhow. In America we're not ashamed to sell what we can't afford to keep." Her eyes fell on the storied hangings at his back. "Why, there's a fortune in this one room: you could get anything you chose for those tapestries. And you stand here and tell me you're a pauper!"

His glance followed hers to the tapestries, and then returned to her face. "Ah, you don't understand," he said.

"I understand that you care for all this old stuff more than you do for me, and that you'd rather see me unhappy and miserable than touch one of your great-grandfather's arm-chairs."

The colour came slowly back to his face, but it hardened into lines she had never seen. He looked at her as though the place where she stood were empty. "You don't understand," he said again.

XLI

The incident left Undine with the baffled feeling of not being able to count on any of her old weapons of aggression. In all her struggles for authority her sense of the rightfulness of her cause had been measured by her power of making people do as she pleased. Raymond's firmness shook her faith in her own claims, and a blind desire to wound and destroy replaced her usual business-like intentness on gaining her end. But her ironies were as ineffectual as her arguments, and his imperviousness was the more exasperating because she divined that some of the things she said would have hurt him if any one else had said them: it was the fact of their coming from her that made them innocuous. Even when, at the close of their talk, she had burst out: "If you grudge me everything I care about we'd better separate," he had merely answered with a shrug: "It's one of the things we don't do " and the answer had been like the slamming of an iron door in her face.

An interval of silent brooding had resulted in a reaction of rebellion. She dared not carry out her threat of joining her compatriots at the Nouveau Luxe: she had too clear a memory of the results of her former revolt. But neither could she submit to her present fate without attempting to make Raymond understand his selfish folly. She had failed to prove it by argument, but she had an inherited faith in the value of practical demonstration. If he could be made to see how easily he could give her what she wanted perhaps he might come round to her view.

With this idea in mind, she had gone up to Paris for twenty-four hours, on the pretext of finding a new nurse for Paul; and the steps then taken had enabled her, on the first occasion, to set her plan in motion. The occasion was furnished by Raymond's next trip to Beaune. He went off early one morning, leaving word that he should not be back till night; and on the afternoon of the same day she stood at her usual post in the gallery, scanning the long perspective of the poplar avenue.

She had not stood there long before a black speck at the end of the avenue expanded into a motor that was presently throbbing at the entrance. Undine, at its approach, turned from the window, and as she moved down the gallery her glance rested on the great tapestries, with their ineffable minglings of blue and rose, as complacently as though they had been mirrors reflecting her own image.

She was still looking at them when the door opened and a servant ushered in a small swarthy man who, in spite of his conspicuously London-made clothes, had an odd exotic air, as if he had worn rings in his ears or left a bale of spices at the door.

He bowed to Undine, cast a rapid eye up and down the room, and then, with his back to the windows, stood intensely contemplating the wall that faced them.

Undine's heart was beating excitedly. She knew the old Marquise was taking her afternoon nap in her room, yet each sound in the silent house seemed to be that of her heels on the stairs.

"Ah " said the visitor.

He had begun to pace slowly down the gallery, keeping his face to the tapestries, like an actor playing to the footlights.

"AH " he said again.

To ease the tension of her nerves Undine began: "They were given by
Louis the Fifteenth to the Marquis de Chelles who "
"Their history has been published," the visitor briefly interposed; and she coloured at her blunder.

The swarthy stranger, fitting a pair of eye-glasses to a nose that was like an instrument of precision, had begun a closer and more detailed inspection of the tapestries. He seemed totally unmindful of her presence, and his air of lofty indifference was beginning to make her wish she had not sent for him. His manner in Paris had been so different!

Suddenly he turned and took off the glasses, which sprang back into a fold of his clothing like retracted feelers.

"Yes." He stood and looked at her without seeing her. "Very well. I have brought down a gentleman."

"A gentleman ?"

"The greatest American collector he buys only the best. He will not be long in Paris, and it was his only chance of coming down."

Undine drew herself up. "I don't understand I never said the tapestries were for sale."

"Precisely. But this gentleman buys only this that are not for sale."

It sounded dazzling and she wavered. "I don't know you were only to put a price on them
"

"Let me see him look at them first; then I'll put a price on them," he chuckled; and without waiting for her answer he went to the door and opened it. The gesture revealed the fur-coated back of a gentleman who stood at the opposite end of the hall examining the bust of a seventeenth century field-marshal.

The dealer addressed the back respectfully. "Mr. Moffatt!"

Moffatt, who appeared to be interested in the bust, glanced over his shoulder without moving. "See here "

His glance took in Undine, widened to astonishment and passed into apostrophe. "Well, if this ain't the damnedest !" He came forward and took her by both hands. "Why, what on earth are you doing down here?"

She laughed and blushed, in a tremor at the odd turn of the adventure.
"I live here. Didn't you know?"
"Not a word never thought of asking the party's name." He turned jovially to the bowing dealer. "Say I told you those tapestries'd have to be out and outers to make up for the trip; but now I see I was mistaken."

Undine looked at him curiously. His physical appearance was unchanged: he was as compact and ruddy as ever, with the same astute eyes under the same guileless brow; but his self-confidence had become less aggressive, and she had never seen him so gallantly at ease.

"I didn't know you'd become a great collector."

"The greatest! Didn't he tell you so? I thought that was why I was allowed to come."

She hesitated. "Of course, you know, the tapestries are not for sale "

"That so? I thought that was only his dodge to get me down. Well, I'm glad they ain't: it'll give us more time to talk."

Watch in hand, the dealer intervened. "If, nevertheless, you would first take a glance. Our train "

"It ain't mine!" Moffatt interrupted; "at least not if there's a later one."

Undine's presence of mind had returned. "Of course there is," she said gaily. She led the way back into the gallery, half hoping the dealer would allege a pressing reason for

departure. She was excited and amused at Moffatt's unexpected appearance, but humiliated that he should suspect her of being in financial straits. She never wanted to see Moffatt except when she was happy and triumphant.

The dealer had followed the other two into the gallery, and there was a moment's pause while they all stood silently before the tapestries. "By George!" Moffatt finally brought out.

"They're historical, you know: the King gave them to Raymond's great-great-grandfather. The other day when I was in Paris," Undine hurried on, "I asked Mr. Fleischhauer to come down some time and tell us what they're worth ... and he seems to have misunderstood ... to have thought we meant to sell them." She addressed herself more pointedly to the dealer. "I'm sorry you've had the trip for nothing."

Mr. Fleischhauer inclined himself eloquently. "It is not nothing to have seen such beauty."

Moffatt gave him a humorous look. "I'd hate to see Mr. Fleischhauer miss his train "

"I shall not miss it: I miss nothing," said Mr. Fleischhauer. He bowed to Undine and backed toward the door.

"See here," Moffatt called to him as he reached the threshold, "you let the motor take you to the station, and charge up this trip to me."

When the door closed he turned to Undine with a laugh. "Well, this beats the band. I thought of course you were living up in Paris."

Again she felt a twinge of embarrassment. "Oh, French people I mean my husband's kind always spend a part of the year on their estates."

"But not this part, do they? Why, everything's humming up there now.
I was dining at the Nouveau Luxe last night with the Driscolls and
Shallums and Mrs. Rolliver, and all your old crowd were there whooping
things up."
The Driscolls and Shallums and Mrs. Rolliver! How carelessly he reeled off their names! One could see from his tone that he was one of them and wanted her to know it. And nothing could have given her a completer sense of his achievement of the number of millions he must be worth. It must have come about very recently, yet he was already at ease in his new honours he had the metropolitan tone. While she examined him with these thoughts in her mind she was aware of his giving her as close a scrutiny. "But I

suppose you've got your own crowd now," he continued; "you always WERE a lap ahead of me." He sent his glance down the lordly length of the room. "It's sorter funny to see you in this kind of place; but you look it you always DO look it!"

She laughed. "So do you I was just thinking it!" Their eyes met. "I suppose you must be awfully rich."

He laughed too, holding her eyes. "Oh, out of sight! The Consolidation set me on my feet. I own pretty near the whole of Apex. I came down to buy these tapestries for my private car."

The familiar accent of hyperbole exhilarated her. "I don't suppose I could stop you if you really wanted them!"

"Nobody can stop me now if I want anything."

They were looking at each other with challenge and complicity in their eyes. His voice, his look, all the loud confident vigorous things he embodied and expressed, set her blood beating with curiosity. "I didn't know you and Rolliver were friends," she said.

"Oh JIM " his accent verged on the protective. "Old Jim's all right. He's in Congress now. I've got to have somebody up in Washington." He had thrust his hands in his pockets, and with his head thrown back and his lips shaped to the familiar noiseless whistle, was looking slowly and discerningly about him.

Presently his eyes reverted to her face. "So this is what I helped you to get," he said. "I've always meant to run over some day and take a look. What is it they call you a Marquise?"

She paled a little, and then flushed again. "What made you do it?" she broke out abruptly. "I've often wondered."

He laughed. "What lend you a hand? Why, my business instinct, I suppose. I saw you were in a tight place that time I ran across you in Paris and I hadn't any grudge against you. Fact is, I've never had the time to nurse old scores, and if you neglect 'em they die off like gold-fish." He was still composedly regarding her. "It's funny to think of your having settled down to this kind of life; I hope you've got what you wanted. This is a great place you live in."

"Yes; but I see a little too much of it. We live here most of the year." She had meant to give him the illusion of success, but some underlying community of instinct drew the confession from her lips.

"That so? Why on earth don't you cut it and come up to Paris?"

"Oh, Raymond's absorbed in the estates and we haven't got the money.
This place eats it all up."
"Well, that sounds aristocratic; but ain't it rather out of date? When the swells are hard-up nowadays they generally chip off an heirloom." He wheeled round again to the tapestries. "There are a good many Paris seasons hanging right here on this wall."

"Yes I know." She tried to check herself, to summon up a glittering equivocation; but his face, his voice, the very words he used, were like so many hammer-strokes demolishing the unrealities that imprisoned her. Here was some one who spoke her language, who knew her meanings, who understood instinctively all the deep-seated wants for which her acquired vocabulary had no terms; and as she talked she once more seemed to herself intelligent, eloquent and interesting.

"Of course it's frightfully lonely down here," she began; and through the opening made by the admission the whole flood of her grievances poured forth. She tried to let him see that she had not sacrificed herself for nothing; she touched on the superiorities of her situation, she gilded the circumstances of which she called herself the victim, and let titles, offices and attributes shed their utmost lustre on her tale; but what she had to boast of seemed small and tinkling compared with the evidences of his power.

"Well, it's a downright shame you don't go round more," he kept saying; and she felt ashamed of her tame acceptance of her fate.

When she had told her story she asked for his; and for the first time she listened to it with interest. He had what he wanted at last. The Apex Consolidation scheme, after a long interval of suspense, had obtained its charter and shot out huge ramifications. Rolliver had "stood in" with him at the critical moment, and between them they had "chucked out" old Harmon B. Driscoll bag and baggage, and got the whole town in their control. Absorbed in his theme, and forgetting her inability to follow him, Moffatt launched out on an epic recital of plot and counterplot, and she hung, a new Desdemona, on his conflict with the new anthropophagi. It was of no consequence that the details and the technicalities escaped her: she knew their meaningless syllables stood for success, and what that meant was as clear as day to her. Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue, and while he talked of building up railways she was building up palaces, and picturing all the multiple lives he would lead in them. To have things had always seemed to her the first essential of existence, and as she listened to him the vision of the things he could have unrolled itself before her like the long triumph of an Asiatic conqueror.

"And what are you going to do next?" she asked, almost breathlessly, when he had ended.

"Oh, there's always a lot to do next. Business never goes to sleep."

"Yes; but I mean besides business."

"Why everything I can, I guess." He leaned back in his chair with an air of placid power, as if he were so sure of getting what he wanted that there was no longer any use in hurrying, huge as his vistas had become.

She continued to question him, and he began to talk of his growing passion for pictures and furniture, and of his desire to form a collection which should be a great representative assemblage of unmatched specimens. As he spoke she saw his expression change, and his eyes grow younger, almost boyish, with a concentrated look in them that reminded her of long-forgotten things.

"I mean to have the best, you know; not just to get ahead of the other fellows, but because I know it when I see it. I guess that's the only good reason," he concluded; and he added, looking at her with a smile: "It was what you were always after, wasn't it?"

XLII

Undine had gained her point, and the entresol of the Hotel de Chelles reopened its doors for the season.

Hubert and his wife, in expectation of the birth of an heir, had withdrawn to the sumptuous chateau which General Arlington had hired for them near Compiegne, and Undine was at least spared the sight of their bright windows and animated stairway. But she had to take her share of the felicitations which the whole far-reaching circle of friends and relations distributed to every member of Hubert's family on the approach of the happy event. Nor was this the hardest of her trials. Raymond had done what she asked he had stood out against his mother's protests, set aside considerations of prudence, and consented to go up to Paris for two months; but he had done so on the understanding that during their stay they should exercise the most unremitting economy. As dinner-giving put the heaviest strain on their budget, all hospitality was suspended; and when Undine attempted to invite a few friends informally she was warned that she could not do so without causing the gravest offense to the many others genealogically entitled to the same attention.

Raymond's insistence on this rule was simply part of an elaborate and inveterate system of "relations" (the whole of French social life seemed to depend on the exact interpretation of that word), and Undine felt the uselessness of struggling against such mysterious inhibitions. He reminded her, however, that their inability to receive would give them all the more opportunity for going out, and he showed himself more socially disposed than in the past. But his concession did not result as she had hoped. They were asked out as much as ever, but they were asked to big dinners, to impersonal crushes, to the kind of entertainment it is a slight to be omitted from but no compliment to be included in. Nothing could have been more galling to Undine, and she frankly bewailed the fact to Madame de Trezac.

"Of course it's what was sure to come of being mewed up for months and months in the country. We're out of everything, and the people who are having a good time are simply too busy to remember us. We're only asked to the things that are made up from visiting-lists."

Madame de Trezac listened sympathetically, but did not suppress a candid answer.

"It's not altogether that, my dear; Raymond's not a man his friends forget. It's rather more, if you'll excuse my saying so, the fact of your being you personally in the wrong set."

"The wrong set? Why, I'm in HIS set the one that thinks itself too good for all the others. That's what you've always told me when I've said it bored me."

"Well, that's what I mean " Madame de Trezac took the plunge. "It's not a question of your being bored."

Undine coloured; but she could take the hardest thrusts where her personal interest was involved. "You mean that I'M the bore, then?"

"Well, you don't work hard enough you don't keep up. It's not that they don't admire you your looks, I mean; they think you beautiful; they're delighted to bring you out at their big dinners, with the Sevres and the plate. But a woman has got to be something more than good-looking to have a chance to be intimate with them: she's got to know what's being said about things. I watched you the other night at the Duchess's, and half the time you hadn't an idea what they were talking about. I haven't always, either; but then I have to put up with the big dinners."

Undine winced under the criticism; but she had never lacked insight into the cause of her own failures, and she had already had premonitions of what Madame de Trezac so bluntly phrased. When Raymond ceased to be interested in her conversation she had concluded it was the way of husbands; but since then it had been slowly dawning on her that she produced the same effect on others. Her entrances were always triumphs; but they had no sequel. As soon as people began to talk they ceased to see her. Any sense of insufficiency exasperated her, and she had vague thoughts of cultivating herself, and went so far as to spend a morning in the Louvre and go to one or two lectures by a fashionable philosopher. But though she returned from these expeditions charged with opinions, their expression did not excite the interest she had hoped. Her views, if abundant, were confused, and the more she said the more nebulous they seemed to grow. She was disconcerted, moreover, by finding that everybody appeared to know about the things she thought she had discovered, and her comments clearly produced more bewilderment than interest.

Remembering the attention she had attracted on her first appearance in Raymond's world she concluded that she had "gone off" or grown dowdy, and instead of wasting more time in museums and lecture-halls she prolonged her hours at the dress-maker's and gave up the rest of the day to the scientific cultivation of her beauty.

"I suppose I've turned into a perfect frump down there in that wilderness," she lamented to Madame de Trezac, who replied inexorably: "Oh, no, you're as handsome as ever; but people here don't go on looking at each other forever as they do in London."

Meanwhile financial cares became more pressing. A dunning letter from one of her tradesmen fell into Raymond's hands, and the talk it led to ended in his making it clear to her that she must settle her personal debts without his aid. All the "scenes" about money which had disturbed her past had ended in some mysterious solution of her difficulty. Disagreeable as they were, she had always, vulgarly speaking, found they paid; but now it was she who was expected to pay. Raymond took his stand without ill-temper or apology: he simply argued from inveterate precedent. But it was impossible for Undine to understand a social organization which did not regard the indulging of woman as its first purpose, or to believe that any one taking another view was not moved by avarice or malice; and the discussion ended in mutual acrimony.

The morning afterward, Raymond came into her room with a letter in his hand.

"Is this your doing?" he asked. His look and voice expressed something she had never known before: the disciplined anger of a man trained to keep his emotions in fixed channels, but knowing how to fill them to the brim.

The letter was from Mr. Fleischhauer, who begged to transmit to the Marquis de Chelles an offer for his Boucher tapestries from a client prepared to pay the large sum named on condition that it was accepted before his approaching departure for America.

"What does it mean?" Raymond continued, as she did not speak.

"How should I know? It's a lot of money," she stammered, shaken out of her self-possession. She had not expected so prompt a sequel to the dealer's visit, and she was vexed with him for writing to Raymond without consulting her. But she recognized Moffatt's high-handed way, and her fears faded in the great blaze of the sum he offered.

Her husband was still looking at her. "It was Fleischhauer who brought a man down to see the tapestries one day when I was away at Beaune?"

He had known, then everything was known at Saint Desert!

She wavered a moment and then gave him back his look.

"Yes it was Fleischhauer; and I sent for him."

"You sent for him?"

He spoke in a voice so veiled and repressed that he seemed to be consciously saving it for some premeditated outbreak. Undine felt its menace, but the thought of Moffatt sent a flame through her, and the words he would have spoken seemed to fly to her lips.

"Why shouldn't I? Something had to be done. We can't go on as we are. I've tried my best to economize I've scraped and scrimped, and gone without heaps of things I've always had. I've moped for months and months at Saint Desert, and given up sending Paul to school because it was too expensive, and asking my friends to dine because we couldn't afford it. And you expect me to go on living like this for the rest of my life, when all you've got to do is to hold out your hand and have two million francs drop into it!"

Her husband stood looking at her coldly and curiously, as though she were some alien apparition his eyes had never before beheld.

"Ah, that's your answer that's all you feel when you lay hands on things that are sacred to us!" He stopped a moment, and then let his voice break out with the volume she had felt it to be gathering. "And you're all alike," he exclaimed, "every one of you. You come among us from a country we don't know, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honourable for us!"

He stopped again, his white face and drawn nostrils giving him so much the look of an extremely distinguished actor in a fine part that, in spite of the vehemence of his emotion, his silence might have been the deliberate pause for a replique. Undine kept him waiting long enough to give the effect of having lost her cue then she brought out, with a little soft stare of incredulity: "Do you mean to say you're going to refuse such an offer?"

"Ah !" He turned back from the door, and picking up the letter that lay on the table between them, tore it in pieces and tossed the pieces on the floor. "That's how I refuse it!"

The violence of his tone and gesture made her feel as though the fluttering strips were so many lashes laid across her face, and a rage that was half fear possessed her.

"How dare you speak to me like that? Nobody's ever dared to before. Is talking to a woman in that way one of the things you call decent and honourable? Now that I know what you feel about me I don't want to stay in your house another day. And I don't mean to I mean to walk out of it this very hour!"

For a moment they stood face to face, the depths of their mutual incomprehension at last bared to each other's angry eyes; then Raymond, his glance travelling past her, pointed to the fragments of paper on the floor.

"If you're capable of that you're capable of anything!" he said as he went out of the room.

XLIII

She watched him go in a kind of stupour, knowing that when they next met he would be as courteous and self-possessed as if nothing had happened, but that everything would nevertheless go on in the same way in HIS way and that there was no more hope of shaking his resolve or altering his point of view than there would have been of transporting the deep-rooted masonry of Saint Desert by means of the wheeled supports on which Apex architecture performed its easy transits.

One of her childish rages possessed her, sweeping away every feeling save the primitive impulse to hurt and destroy; but search as she would she could not find a crack in the strong armour of her husband's habits and prejudices. For a long time she continued to sit where he had left her, staring at the portraits on the walls as though they had joined hands to imprison her. Hitherto she had almost always felt herself a match for circumstances, but now the very dead were leagued to defeat her: people she had never seen and whose names she couldn't even remember seemed to be plotting and contriving against her under the escutcheoned grave-stones of Saint Desert.

Her eyes turned to the old warm-toned furniture beneath the pictures, and to her own idle image in the mirror above the mantelpiece. Even in that one small room there were enough things of price to buy a release from her most pressing cares; and the great house, in which the room was a mere cell, and the other greater house in Burgundy, held treasures to deplete even such a purse as Moffatt's. She liked to see such things about her without any real sense of their meaning she felt them to be the appropriate setting of a pretty woman, to embody something of the rareness and distinction she had always considered she possessed; and she reflected that if she had still been Moffatt's wife he would have given her just such a setting, and the power to live in it as became her.

The thought sent her memory flying back to things she had turned it from for years. For the first time since their far-off weeks together she let herself relive the brief adventure. She had been drawn to Elmer Moffatt from the first from the day when Ben Frusk, Indiana's brother, had brought him to a church picnic at Mulvey's Grove, and he had taken instant possession of Undine, sitting in the big "stage" beside her on the "ride" to the grove, supplanting Millard Binch (to whom she was still, though intermittently and incompletely, engaged), swinging her between the trees, rowing her on the lake, catching and kissing her in "forfeits," awarding her the first prize in the Beauty Show he hilariously organized and gallantly carried out, and finally (no one knew how) contriving to borrow a buggy and a fast colt from old Mulvey, and driving off with her at a two-forty gait while Millard and the others took their dust in the crawling stage.

No one in Apex knew where young Moffatt had come from, and he offered no information on the subject. He simply appeared one day behind the counter in Luckaback's Dollar Shoe-store, drifted thence to the office of Semple and Binch, the coal-merchants, reappeared as the stenographer of the Police Court, and finally edged his way into the power-house of the Apex Water-Works. He boarded with old Mrs. Flynn, down in North Fifth Street, on the edge of the red-light slum, he never went to church or attended lectures, or showed any desire to improve or refine himself; but he managed to get himself invited to all the picnics and lodge sociables, and at a supper of the Phi Upsilon Society, to which he had contrived to affiliate himself, he made the best speech that had been heard there since young Jim Rolliver's first flights. The brothers of Undine's friends all pronounced him "great," though he had fits of uncouthness that made the young women slower in admitting him to favour. But at the Mulvey's Grove picnic he suddenly seemed to dominate them all, and Undine, as she drove away with him, tasted the public triumph which was necessary to her personal enjoyment.

After that he became a leading figure in the youthful world of Apex, and no one was surprised when the Sons of Jonadab, (the local Temperance Society) invited him to deliver their Fourth of July oration. The ceremony took place, as usual, in the Baptist church, and Undine, all in white, with a red rose in her breast, sat just beneath the platform, with Indiana jealously glaring at her from a less privileged seat, and poor Millard's long neck craning over the row of prominent citizens behind the orator.

Elmer Moffatt had been magnificent, rolling out his alternating effects of humour and pathos, stirring his audience by moving references to the Blue and the Gray, convulsing them by a new version of Washington and the Cherry Tree (in which the infant patriot was depicted as having cut down the tree to check the deleterious spread of cherry bounce), dazzling them by his erudite allusions and apt quotations (he confessed to Undine that he had sat up half the night over Bartlett), and winding up with a peroration that drew tears from the Grand Army pensioners in the front row and caused the minister's wife to say that many a sermon from that platform had been less uplifting.

An ice-cream supper always followed the "exercises," and as repairs were being made in the church basement, which was the usual scene of the festivity, the minister had offered the use of his house. The long table ran through the doorway between parlour and study, and another was set in the passage outside, with one end under the stairs. The stair-rail was wreathed in fire-weed and early golden-rod, and Temperance texts in smilax decked the walls. When the first course had been despatched the young ladies, gallantly seconded by the younger of the "Sons," helped to ladle out and carry in the ice-cream, which stood in great pails on the larder floor, and to replenish the jugs of lemonade and coffee. Elmer Moffatt was indefatigable in performing these services, and when the minister's wife pressed him to sit down and take a mouthful himself he modestly

declined the place reserved for him among the dignitaries of the evening, and withdrew with a few chosen spirits to the dim table-end beneath the stairs. Explosions of hilarity came from this corner with increasing frequency, and now and then tumultuous rappings and howls of "Song! Song!" followed by adjurations to "Cough it up" and "Let her go," drowned the conversational efforts at the other table.

At length the noise subsided, and the group was ceasing to attract attention when, toward the end of the evening, the upper table, drooping under the lengthy elucubrations of the minister and the President of the Temperance Society, called on the orator of the day for a few remarks. There was an interval of scuffling and laughter beneath the stairs, and then the minister's lifted hand enjoined silence and Elmer Moffatt got to his feet.

"Step out where the ladies can hear you better, Mr. Moffatt!" the minister called. Moffatt did so, steadying himself against the table and twisting his head about as if his collar had grown too tight. But if his bearing was vacillating his smile was unabashed, and there was no lack of confidence in the glance he threw at Undine Spragg as he began: "Ladies and Gentlemen, if there's one thing I like better than another about getting drunk and I like most everything about it except the next morning it's the opportunity you've given me of doing it right here, in the presence of this Society, which, as I gather from its literature, knows more about the subject than anybody else. Ladies and Gentlemen" he straightened himself, and the table-cloth slid toward him "ever since you honoured me with an invitation to address you from the temperance platform I've been assiduously studying that literature; and I've gathered from your own evidence what I'd strongly suspected before that all your converted drunkards had a hell of a good time before you got at 'em, and that... and that a good many of 'em have gone on having it since..."

At this point he broke off, swept the audience with his confident smile, and then, collapsing, tried to sit down on a chair that didn't happen to be there, and disappeared among his agitated supporters.

There was a night-mare moment during which Undine, through the doorway, saw Ben Frusk and the others close about the fallen orator to the crash of crockery and tumbling chairs; then some one jumped up and shut the parlour door, and a long-necked Sunday school teacher, who had been nervously waiting his chance, and had almost given it up, rose from his feet and recited High Tide at Gettysburg amid hysterical applause.

The scandal was considerable, but Moffatt, though he vanished from the social horizon, managed to keep his place in the power-house till he went off for a week and turned up again without being able to give a satisfactory reason for his absence. After that he

drifted from one job to another, now extolled for his "smartness" and business capacity, now dismissed in disgrace as an irresponsible loafer. His head was always full of immense nebulous schemes for the enlargement and development of any business he happened to be employed in. Sometimes his suggestions interested his employers, but proved unpractical and inapplicable; sometimes he wore out their patience or was thought to be a dangerous dreamer. Whenever he found there was no hope of his ideas being adopted he lost interest in his work, came late and left early, or disappeared for two or three days at a time without troubling himself to account for his absences. At last even those who had been cynical enough to smile over his disgrace at the temperance supper began to speak of him as a hopeless failure, and he lost the support of the feminine community when one Sunday morning, just as the Baptist and Methodist churches were releasing their congregations, he walked up Eubaw Avenue with a young woman less known to those sacred edifices than to the saloons of North Fifth Street.

Undine's estimate of people had always been based on their apparent power of getting what they wanted provided it came under the category of things she understood wanting. Success was beauty and romance to her; yet it was at the moment when Elmer Moffatt's failure was most complete and flagrant that she suddenly felt the extent of his power. After the Eubaw Avenue scandal he had been asked not to return to the surveyor's office to which Ben Frusk had managed to get him admitted; and on the day of his dismissal he met Undine in Main Street, at the shopping hour, and, sauntering up cheerfully, invited her to take a walk with him. She was about to refuse when she saw Millard Binch's mother looking at her disapprovingly from the opposite street-corner.

"Oh, well, I will " she said; and they walked the length of Main Street and out to the immature park in which it ended. She was in a mood of aimless discontent and unrest, tired of her engagement to Millard Binch, disappointed with Moffatt, half-ashamed of being seen with him, and yet not sorry to have it known that she was independent enough to choose her companions without regard to the Apex verdict.

"Well, I suppose you know I'm down and out," he began; and she responded virtuously: "You must have wanted to be, or you wouldn't have behaved the way you did last Sunday."

"Oh, shucks!" he sneered. "What do I care, in a one-horse place like this? If it hadn't been for you I'd have got a move on long ago."

She did not remember afterward what else he said: she recalled only the expression of a great sweeping scorn of Apex, into which her own disdain of it was absorbed like a drop in the sea, and the affirmation of a soaring self-confidence that seemed to lift her on wings. All her own attempts to get what she wanted had come to nothing; but she had

always attributed her lack of success to the fact that she had had no one to second her. It was strange that Elmer Moffatt, a shiftless out-cast from even the small world she despised, should give her, in the very moment of his downfall, the sense of being able to succeed where she had failed. It was a feeling she never had in his absence, but that his nearness always instantly revived; and he seemed nearer to her now than he had ever been. They wandered on to the edge of the vague park, and sat down on a bench behind the empty band-stand.

"I went with that girl on purpose, and you know it," he broke out abruptly. "It makes me too damned sick to see Millard Binch going round looking as if he'd patented you."

"You've got no right " she interrupted; and suddenly she was in his arms, and feeling that no one had ever kissed her before....

The week that followed was a big bright blur the wildest vividest moment of her life. And it was only eight days later that they were in the train together, Apex and all her plans and promises behind them, and a bigger and brighter blur ahead, into which they were plunging as the "Limited" plunged into the sunset....

Undine stood up, looking about her with vague eyes, as if she had come back from a long distance. Elmer Moffatt was still in Paris he was in reach, within telephone-call. She stood hesitating a moment; then she went into her dressing-room, and turning over the pages of the telephone book, looked out the number of the Nouveau Luxe....

XLIV

Undine had been right in supposing that her husband would expect their life to go on as before. There was no appreciable change in the situation save that he was more often absent-finding abundant reasons, agricultural and political, for frequent trips to Saint Desert and that, when in Paris, he no longer showed any curiosity concerning her occupations and engagements. They lived as much apart is if their cramped domicile had been a palace; and when Undine as she now frequently did joined the Shallums or Rollivers for a dinner at the Nouveau Luxe, or a party at a petit theatre, she was not put to the trouble of prevaricating.

Her first impulse, after her scene with Raymond, had been to ring up Indiana Rolliver and invite herself to dine. It chanced that Indiana (who was now in full social progress, and had "run over" for a few weeks to get her dresses for Newport) had organized for the same evening a showy cosmopolitan banquet in which she was enchanted to include the Marquise de Chelles; and Undine, as she had hoped, found Elmer Moffatt of the party. When she drove up to the Nouveau Luxe she had not fixed on any plan of action; but once she had crossed its magic threshold her energies revived like plants in water. At last she was in her native air again, among associations she shared and conventions she understood; and all her self-confidence returned as the familiar accents uttered the accustomed things.

Save for an occasional perfunctory call, she had hitherto made no effort to see her compatriots, and she noticed that Mrs. Jim Driscoll and Bertha Shallum received her with a touch of constraint; but it vanished when they remarked the cordiality of Moffatt's greeting. Her seat was at his side, and her old sense of triumph returned as she perceived the importance his notice conferred, not only in the eyes of her own party but of the other diners. Moffatt was evidently a notable figure in all the worlds represented about the crowded tables, and Undine saw that many people who seemed personally unacquainted with him were recognizing and pointing him out. She was conscious of receiving a large share of the attention he attracted, and, bathed again in the bright air of publicity, she remembered the evening when Raymond de Chelles' first admiring glance had given her the same sense of triumph.

This inopportune memory did not trouble her: she was almost grateful to Raymond for giving her the touch of superiority her compatriots clearly felt in her. It was not merely her title and her "situation," but the experiences she had gained through them, that gave her this advantage over the loud vague company. She had learned things they did not guess: shades of conduct, turns of speech, tricks of attitude and easy and free and enviable as she thought them, she would not for the world have been back among them at the cost of knowing no more than they.

Moffatt made no allusion to his visit to Saint Desert; but when the party had re-grouped itself about coffee and liqueurs on the terrace, he bent over to ask confidentially: "What about my tapestries?"

She replied in the same tone: "You oughtn't to have let Fleischhauer write that letter. My husband's furious."

He seemed honestly surprised. "Why? Didn't I offer him enough?"

"He's furious that any one should offer anything. I thought when he found out what they were worth he might be tempted; but he'd rather see me starve than part with one of his grand-father's snuff-boxes."

"Well, he knows now what the tapestries are worth. I offered more than Fleischhauer advised."
"Yes; but you were in too much of a hurry."

"I've got to be; I'm going back next week."

She felt her eyes cloud with disappointment. "Oh, why do you? I hoped you might stay on."

They looked at each other uncertainly a moment; then he dropped his voice to say: "Even if I did, I probably shouldn't see anything of you."

"Why not? Why won't you come and see me? I've always wanted to be friends."

He came the next day and found in her drawing-room two ladies whom she introduced as her sisters-in-law. The ladies lingered on for a long time, sipping their tea stiffly and exchanging low-voiced remarks while Undine talked with Moffatt; and when they left, with small sidelong bows in his direction.

Undine exclaimed: "Now you see how they all watch me!"

She began to go into the details of her married life, drawing on the experiences of the first months for instances that scarcely applied to her present liberated state. She could thus, without great exaggeration, picture herself as entrapped into a bondage hardly conceivable to Moffatt, and she saw him redden with excitement as he listened. "I call it darned low darned low " he broke in at intervals.

"Of course I go round more now," she concluded. "I mean to see my friends I don't care what he says."

"What CAN he say?"

"Oh, he despises Americans they all do."

"Well, I guess we can still sit up and take nourishment."

They laughed and slipped back to talking of earlier things. She urged him to put off his sailing there were so many things they might do together: sight-seeing and excursions and she could perhaps show him some of the private collections he hadn't seen, the ones it was hard to get admitted to. This instantly roused his attention, and after naming one or two collections he had already seen she hit on one he had found inaccessible and was particularly anxious to visit. "There's an Ingres there that's one of the things I came over to have a look at; but I was told there was no use trying."

"Oh, I can easily manage it: the Duke's Raymond's uncle." It gave her a peculiar satisfaction to say it: she felt as though she were taking a surreptitious revenge on her husband. "But he's down in the country this week," she continued, "and no one not even the family is allowed to see the pictures when he's away. Of course his Ingres are the finest in France."

She ran it off glibly, though a year ago she had never heard of the painter, and did not, even now, remember whether he was an Old Master or one of the very new ones whose names one hadn't had time to learn.

Moffatt put off sailing, saw the Duke's Ingres under her guidance, and accompanied her to various other private galleries inaccessible to strangers. She had lived in almost total ignorance of such opportunities, but now that she could use them to advantage she showed a surprising quickness in picking up "tips," ferreting out rare things and getting a sight of hidden treasures. She even acquired as much of the jargon as a pretty woman needs to produce the impression of being well-informed; and Moffatt's sailing was more than once postponed.

They saw each other almost daily, for she continued to come and go as she pleased, and Raymond showed neither surprise nor disapproval. When they were asked to family dinners she usually excused herself at the last moment on the plea of a headache and, calling up Indiana or Bertha Shallum, improvised a little party at the Nouveau Luxe; and on other occasions she accepted such invitations as she chose, without mentioning to her husband where she was going.

In this world of lavish pleasures she lost what little prudence the discipline of Saint Desert had inculcated. She could never be with people who had all the things she envied without being hypnotized into the belief that she had only to put her hand out to obtain them, and all the unassuaged rancours and hungers of her early days in West End Avenue came back with increased acuity. She knew her wants so much better now, and was so much more worthy of the things she wanted!

She had given up hoping that her father might make another hit in Wall Street. Mrs. Spragg's letters gave the impression that the days of big strokes were over for her husband, that he had gone down in the conflict with forces beyond his measure. If he had remained in Apex the tide of its new prosperity might have carried him to wealth; but New York's huge waves of success had submerged instead of floating him, and Rolliver's enmity was a hand perpetually stretched out to strike him lower. At most, Mr. Spragg's tenacity would keep him at the level he now held, and though he and his wife had still further simplified their way of living Undine understood that their self-denial would not increase her opportunities. She felt no compunction in continuing to accept an undiminished allowance: it was the hereditary habit of the parent animal to despoil himself for his progeny. But this conviction did not seem incompatible with a sentimental pity for her parents. Aside from all interested motives, she wished for their own sakes that they were better off. Their personal requirements were pathetically limited, but renewed prosperity would at least have procured them the happiness of giving her what she wanted.

Moffatt lingered on; but he began to speak more definitely of sailing, and Undine foresaw the day when, strong as her attraction was, stronger influences would snap it like a thread. She knew she interested and amused him, and that it flattered his vanity to be seen with her, and to hear that rumour coupled their names; but he gave her, more than any one she had ever known, the sense of being detached from his life, in control of it, and able, without weakness or uncertainty, to choose which of its calls he should obey. If the call were that of business of any of the great perilous affairs he handled like a snake-charmer spinning the deadly reptiles about his head she knew she would drop from his life like a loosened leaf.

These anxieties sharpened the intensity of her enjoyment, and made the contrast keener between her crowded sparkling hours and the vacant months at Saint Desert. Little as she understood of the qualities that made Moffatt what he was, the results were of the kind most palpable to her. He used life exactly as she would have used it in his place. Some of his enjoyments were beyond her range, but even these appealed to her because of the money that was required to gratify them. When she took him to see some inaccessible picture, or went with him to inspect the treasures of a famous dealer, she

saw that the things he looked at moved him in a way she could not understand, and that the actual touching of rare textures bronze or marble, or velvets flushed with the bloom of age gave him sensations like those her own beauty had once roused in him. But the next moment he was laughing over some commonplace joke, or absorbed in a long cipher cable handed to him as they re-entered the Nouveau Luxe for tea, and his aesthetic emotions had been thrust back into their own compartment of the great steel strong-box of his mind.

Her new life went on without comment or interference from her husband, and she saw that he had accepted their altered relation, and intended merely to keep up an external semblance of harmony. To that semblance she knew he attached intense importance: it was an article of his complicated social creed that a man of his class should appear to live on good terms with his wife. For different reasons it was scarcely less important to Undine: she had no wish to affront again the social reprobation that had so nearly wrecked her. But she could not keep up the life she was leading without more money, a great deal more money; and the thought of contracting her expenditure was no longer tolerable.

One afternoon, several weeks later, she came in to find a tradesman's representative waiting with a bill. There was a noisy scene in the anteroom before the man threateningly withdrew a scene witnessed by the servants, and overheard by her mother-in-law, whom she found seated in the drawing-room when she entered. The old Marquise's visits to her daughter-in-law were made at long intervals but with ritual regularity; she called every other Friday at five, and Undine had forgotten that she was due that day. This did not make for greater cordiality between them, and the altercation in the anteroom had been too loud for concealment. The Marquise was on her feet when her daughter-in-law came in, and instantly said with lowered eyes: "It would perhaps be best for me to go."

"Oh, I don't care. You're welcome to tell Raymond you've heard me insulted because I'm too poor to pay my bills he knows it well enough already!" The words broke from Undine unguardedly, but once spoken they nourished her defiance.

"I'm sure my son has frequently recommended greater prudence " the
Marquise murmured.
"Yes! It's a pity he didn't recommend it to your other son instead! All the money I was entitled to has gone to pay Hubert's debts."

"Raymond has told me that there are certain things you fail to understand I have no wish whatever to discuss them." The Marquise had gone toward the door; with her hand on it she paused to add: "I shall say nothing whatever of what has happened."

Her icy magnanimity added the last touch to Undine's wrath. They knew her extremity, one and all, and it did not move them. At most, they would join in concealing it like a blot on their honour. And the menace grew and mounted, and not a hand was stretched to help her....

Hardly a half-hour earlier Moffatt, with whom she had been visiting a "private view," had sent her home in his motor with the excuse that he must hurry back to the Nouveau Luxe to meet his stenographer and sign a batch of letters for the New York mail. It was therefore probable that he was still at home that she should find him if she hastened there at once. An overwhelming desire to cry out her wrath and wretchedness brought her to her feet and sent her down to hail a passing cab. As it whirled her through the bright streets powdered with amber sunlight her brain throbbed with confused intentions. She did not think of Moffatt as a power she could use, but simply as some one who knew her and understood her grievance. It was essential to her at that moment to be told that she was right and that every one opposed to her was wrong.

At the hotel she asked his number and was carried up in the lift. On the landing she paused a moment, disconcerted it had occurred to her that he might not be alone. But she walked on quickly, found the number and knocked.... Moffatt opened the door, and she glanced beyond him and saw that the big bright sitting-room was empty.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, surprised; and as he stood aside to let her enter she saw him draw out his watch and glance at it surreptitiously. He was expecting someone, or he had an engagement elsewhere something claimed him from which she was excluded. The thought flushed her with sudden resolution. She knew now what she had come for to keep him from every one else, to keep him for herself alone.

"Don't send me away!" she said, and laid her hand on his beseechingly.

XLV

She advanced into the room and slowly looked about her. The big vulgar writing-table wreathed in bronze was heaped with letters and papers. Among them stood a lapis bowl in a Renaissance mounting of enamel and a vase of Phenician glass that was like a bit of rainbow caught in cobwebs. On a table against the window a little Greek marble lifted its pure lines. On every side some rare and sensitive object seemed to be shrinking back from the false colours and crude contours of the hotel furniture. There were no books in the room, but the florid console under the mirror was stacked with old numbers of Town Talk and the New York Radiator. Undine recalled the dingy hall-room that Moffatt had lodged in at Mrs. Flynn's, over Hober's livery stable, and her heart beat at the signs of his altered state. When her eyes came back to him their lids were moist.

"Don't send me away," she repeated. He looked at her and smiled. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"I don't know but I had to come. To-day, when you spoke again of sailing, I felt as if I couldn't stand it." She lifted her eyes and looked in his profoundly.

He reddened a little under her gaze, but she could detect no softening or confusion in the shrewd steady glance he gave her back.

"Things going wrong again is that the trouble?" he merely asked with a comforting inflexion.

"They always are wrong; it's all been an awful mistake. But I shouldn't care if you were here and I could see you sometimes. You're so STRONG: that's what I feel about you, Elmer. I was the only one to feel it that time they all turned against you out at Apex.... Do you remember the afternoon I met you down on Main Street, and we walked out together to the Park? I knew then that you were stronger than any of them...."

She had never spoken more sincerely. For the moment all thought of self-interest was in abeyance, and she felt again, as she had felt that day, the instinctive yearning of her nature to be one with his. Something in her voice must have attested it, for she saw a change in his face.

"You're not the beauty you were," he said irrelevantly; "but you're a lot more fetching."

The oddly qualified praise made her laugh with mingled pleasure and annoyance.

"I suppose I must be dreadfully changed "

"You're all right! But I've got to go back home," he broke off abruptly. "I've put it off too long."

She paled and looked away, helpless in her sudden disappointment. "I knew you'd say that.... And I shall just be left here...." She sat down on the sofa near which they had been standing, and two tears formed on her lashes and fell.

Moffatt sat down beside her, and both were silent. She had never seen him at a loss before. She made no attempt to draw nearer, or to use any of the arts of cajolery; but presently she said, without rising: "I saw you look at your watch when I came in. I suppose somebody else is waiting for you."

"It don't matter."

"Some other woman?"

"It don't matter."

"I've wondered so often but of course I've got no right to ask." She stood up slowly, understanding that he meant to let her go.

"Just tell me one thing did you never miss me?"

"Oh, damnably!" he brought out with sudden bitterness.

She came nearer, sinking her voice to a low whisper. "It's the only time
I ever really cared all through!"
He had risen too, and they stood intensely gazing at each other. Moffatt's face was fixed and grave, as she had seen it in hours she now found herself rapidly reliving.

"I believe you DID," he said.

"Oh, Elmer if I'd known if I'd only known!"

He made no answer, and she turned away, touching with an unconscious hand the edge of the lapis bowl among his papers.

"Elmer, if you're going away it can't do any harm to tell me is there any one else?"

He gave a laugh that seemed to shake him free. "In that kind of way?

Lord, no! Too busy!"
She came close again and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Then why not why shouldn't we ?" She leaned her head back so that her gaze slanted up through her wet lashes. "I can do as I please my husband does. They think so differently about marriage over here: it's just a business contract. As long as a woman doesn't make a show of herself no one cares." She put her other hand up, so that she held him facing her. "I've always felt, all through everything, that I belonged to you."

Moffatt left her hands on his shoulders, but did not lift his own to clasp them. For a moment she thought she had mistaken him, and a leaden sense of shame descended on her. Then he asked: "You say your husband goes with other women?"

Lili Estradina's taunt flashed through her and she seized on it. "People have told me so his own relations have. I've never stooped to spy on him...."

"And the women in your set I suppose it's taken for granted they all do the same?"

She laughed.

"Everything fixed up for them, same as it is for the husbands, eh?
Nobody meddles or makes trouble if you know the ropes?"
"No, nobody ... it's all quite easy...." She stopped, her faint smile checked, as his backward movement made her hands drop from his shoulders.

"And that's what you're proposing to me? That you and I should do like the rest of 'em?" His face had lost its comic roundness and grown harsh and dark, as it had when her father had taken her away from him at Opake. He turned on his heel, walked the length of the room and halted with his back to her in the embrasure of the window. There he paused a full minute, his hands in his pockets, staring out at the perpetual interweaving of motors in the luminous setting of the square. Then he turned and spoke from where he stood.

"Look here. Undine, if I'm to have you again I don't want to have you that way. That time out in Apex, when everybody in the place was against me, and I was down and out, you stood up to them and stuck by me. Remember that walk down Main Street? Don't I! and the way the people glared and hurried by; and how you kept on alongside of me, talking and laughing, and looking your Sunday best. When Abner Spragg came out to Opake after us and pulled you back I was pretty sore at your deserting; but I came to see it was natural enough. You were only a spoilt girl, used to having everything you wanted; and I couldn't give you a thing then, and the folks you'd been taught to believe in all told you I never would. Well, I did look like a back number, and no blame to you for thinking

so. I used to say it to myself over and over again, laying awake nights and totting up my mistakes ... and then there were days when the wind set another way, and I knew I'd pull it off yet, and I thought you might have held on...." He stopped, his head a little lowered, his concentrated gaze on her flushed face. "Well, anyhow," he broke out, "you were my wife once, and you were my wife first and if you want to come back you've got to come that way: not slink through the back way when there's no one watching, but walk in by the front door, with your head up, and your Main Street look."

Since the days when he had poured out to her his great fortune-building projects she had never heard him make so long a speech; and her heart, as she listened, beat with a new joy and terror. It seemed to her that the great moment of her life had come at last the moment all her minor failures and successes had been building up with blind indefatigable hands.

"Elmer Elmer " she sobbed out.

She expected to find herself in his arms, shut in and shielded from all her troubles; but he stood his ground across the room, immovable.

"Is it yes?"

She faltered the word after him: "Yes ?"

"Are you going to marry me?"

She stared, bewildered. "Why, Elmer marry you? You forget!"

"Forget what? That you don't want to give up what you've got?"

"How can I? Such things are not done out here. Why, I'm a Catholic; and the Catholic Church " She broke off, reading the end in his face. "But later, perhaps ... things might change. Oh, Elmer, if only you'd stay over here and let me see you sometimes!"

"Yes the way your friends see each other. We're differently made out in Apex. When I want that sort of thing I go down to North Fifth Street for it."

She paled under the retort, but her heart beat high with it. What he asked was impossible and she gloried in his asking it. Feeling her power, she tried to temporize. "At least if you stayed we could be friends I shouldn't feel so terribly alone."

He laughed impatiently. "Don't talk magazine stuff to me, Undine Spragg. I guess we want each other the same way. Only our ideas are different. You've got all muddled, living out here among a lot of loafers who call it a career to run round after every petticoat. I've got my job out at home, and I belong where my job is."

"Are you going to be tied to business all your life?" Her smile was faintly depreciatory.

"I guess business is tied to ME: Wall Street acts as if it couldn't get along without me." He gave his shoulders a shake and moved a few steps nearer. "See here, Undine you're the one that don't understand. If I was to sell out to-morrow, and spend the rest of my life reading art magazines in a pink villa, I wouldn't do what you're asking me. And I've about as much idea of dropping business as you have of taking to district nursing. There are things a man doesn't do. I understand why your husband won't sell those tapestries till he's got to. His ancestors are HIS business: Wall Street's mine."

He paused, and they silently faced each other. Undine made no attempt to approach him: she understood that if he yielded it would be only to recover his advantage and deepen her feeling of defeat. She put out her hand and took up the sunshade she had dropped on entering. "I suppose it's good-bye then," she said.

"You haven't got the nerve?"

"The nerve for what?"

"To come where you belong: with me."

She laughed a little and then sighed. She wished he would come nearer, or look at her differently: she felt, under his cool eye, no more compelling than a woman of wax in a show-case.

"How could I get a divorce? With my religion "

"Why, you were born a Baptist, weren't you? That's where you used to attend church when I waited round the corner, Sunday mornings, with one of old Hober's buggies." They both laughed, and he went on: "If you'll come along home with me I'll see you get your divorce all right. Who cares what they do over here? You're an American, ain't you? What you want is the home-made article."

She listened, discouraged yet fascinated by his sturdy inaccessibility to all her arguments and objections. He knew what he wanted, saw his road before him, and acknowledged no obstacles. Her defense was drawn from reasons he did not

understand, or based on difficulties that did not exist for him; and gradually she felt herself yielding to the steady pressure of his will. Yet the reasons he brushed away came back with redoubled tenacity whenever he paused long enough for her to picture the consequences of what he exacted.

"You don't know you don't understand " she kept repeating; but she knew that his ignorance was part of his terrible power, and that it was hopeless to try to make him feel the value of what he was asking her to give up.

"See here, Undine," he said slowly, as if he measured her resistance though he couldn't fathom it, "I guess it had better be yes or no right here. It ain't going to do either of us any good to drag this thing out. If you want to come back to me, come if you don't, we'll shake hands on it now. I'm due in Apex for a directors' meeting on the twentieth, and as it is I'll have to cable for a special to get me out there. No, no, don't cry it ain't that kind of a story ... but I'll have a deck suite for you on the Semantic if you'll sail with me the day after to-morrow."

XLVI

In the great high-ceilinged library of a private hotel overlooking one of the new quarters of Paris, Paul Marvell stood listlessly gazing out into the twilight.

The trees were budding symmetrically along the avenue below; and Paul, looking down, saw, between windows and tree-tops, a pair of tall iron gates with gilt ornaments, the marble curb of a semi-circular drive, and bands of spring flowers set in turf. He was now a big boy of nearly nine, who went to a fashionable private school, and he had come home that day for the Easter holidays. He had not been back since Christmas, and it was the first time he had seen the new hotel which his step-father had bought, and in which Mr. and Mrs. Moffatt had hastily established themselves, a few weeks earlier, on their return from a flying trip to America. They were always coming and going; during the two years since their marriage they had been perpetually dashing over to New York and back, or rushing down to Rome or up to the Engadine: Paul never knew where they were except when a telegram announced that they were going somewhere else. He did not even know that there was any method of communication between mothers and sons less laconic than that of the electric wire; and once, when a boy at school asked him if his mother often wrote, he had answered in all sincerity: "Oh yes I got a telegram last week."

He had been almost sure as sure as he ever was of anything that he should find her at home when he arrived; but a message (for she hadn't had time to telegraph) apprised him that she and Mr. Moffatt had run down to Deauville to look at a house they thought of hiring for the summer; they were taking an early train back, and would be at home for dinner were in fact having a lot of people to dine.

It was just what he ought to have expected, and had been used to ever since he could remember; and generally he didn't much mind, especially since his mother had become Mrs. Moffatt, and the father he had been most used to, and liked best, had abruptly disappeared from his life. But the new hotel was big and strange, and his own room, in which there was not a toy or a book, or one of his dear battered relics (none of the new servants they were always new could find his things, or think where they had been put), seemed the loneliest spot in the whole house. He had gone up there after his solitary luncheon, served in the immense marble dining-room by a footman on the same scale, and had tried to occupy himself with pasting post-cards into his album; but the newness and sumptuousness of the room embarrassed him the white fur rugs and brocade chairs seemed maliciously on the watch for smears and ink-spots and after a while he pushed the album aside and began to roam through the house.

He went to all the rooms in turn: his mother's first, the wonderful lacy bedroom, all pale silks and velvets, artful mirrors and veiled lamps, and the boudoir as big as a drawing-

room, with pictures he would have liked to know about, and tables and cabinets holding things he was afraid to touch. Mr. Moffatt's rooms came next. They were soberer and darker, but as big and splendid; and in the bedroom, on the brown wall, hung a single picture the portrait of a boy in grey velvet that interested Paul most of all. The boy's hand rested on the head of a big dog, and he looked infinitely noble and charming, and yet (in spite of the dog) so sad and lonely that he too might have come home that very day to a strange house in which none of his old things could be found.

From these rooms Paul wandered downstairs again. The library attracted him most: there were rows and rows of books, bound in dim browns and golds, and old faded reds as rich as velvet: they all looked as if they might have had stories in them as splendid as their bindings. But the bookcases were closed with gilt trellising, and when Paul reached up to open one, a servant told him that Mr. Moffatt's secretary kept them locked because the books were too valuable to be taken down. This seemed to make the library as strange as the rest of the house, and he passed on to the ballroom at the back. Through its closed doors he heard a sound of hammering, and when he tried the door-handle a servant passing with a tray-full of glasses told him that "they" hadn't finished, and wouldn't let anybody in.

The mysterious pronoun somehow increased Paul's sense of isolation, and he went on to the drawing-rooms, steering his way prudently between the gold arm-chairs and shining tables, and wondering whether the wigged and corseleted heroes on the walls represented Mr. Moffatt's ancestors, and why, if they did, he looked so little like them. The dining-room beyond was more amusing, because busy servants were already laying the long table. It was too early for the florist, and the centre of the table was empty, but down the sides were gold baskets heaped with pulpy summer fruits-figs, strawberries and big blushing nectarines. Between them stood crystal decanters with red and yellow wine, and little dishes full of sweets; and against the walls were sideboards with great pieces of gold and silver, ewers and urns and branching candelabra, which sprinkled the green marble walls with starlike reflections.

After a while he grew tired of watching the coming and going of white-sleeved footmen, and of listening to the butler's vociferated orders, and strayed back into the library. The habit of solitude had given him a passion for the printed page, and if he could have found a book anywhere any kind of a book he would have forgotten the long hours and the empty house. But the tables in the library held only massive unused inkstands and immense immaculate blotters; not a single volume had slipped its golden prison.

His loneliness had grown overwhelming, and he suddenly thought of Mrs. Heeny's clippings. His mother, alarmed by an insidious gain in weight, had brought the masseuse back from New York with her, and Mrs. Heeny, with her old black bag and

waterproof, was established in one of the grand bedrooms lined with mirrors. She had been loud in her joy at seeing her little friend that morning, but four years had passed since their last parting, and her personality had grown remote to him. He saw too many people, and they too often disappeared and were replaced by others: his scattered affections had ended by concentrating themselves on the charming image of the gentleman he called his French father; and since his French father had vanished no one else seemed to matter much to him.

"Oh, well," Mrs. Heeny had said, discerning the reluctance under his civil greeting, "I guess you're as strange here as I am, and we're both pretty strange to each other. You just go and look round, and see what a lovely home your Ma's got to live in; and when you get tired of that, come up here to me and I'll give you a look at my clippings."

The word woke a train of dormant associations, and Paul saw himself seated on a dingy carpet, between two familiar taciturn old presences, while he rummaged in the depths of a bag stuffed with strips of newspaper.

He found Mrs. Heeny sitting in a pink arm-chair, her bonnet perched on a pink-shaded electric lamp and her numerous implements spread out on an immense pink toilet-table. Vague as his recollection of her was, she gave him at once a sense of reassurance that nothing else in the house conveyed, and after he had examined all her scissors and pastes and nail-polishers he turned to the bag, which stood on the carpet at her feet as if she were waiting for a train.

"My, my!" she said, "do you want to get into that again? How you used to hunt in it for taffy, to be sure, when your Pa brought you up to Grandma Spragg's o' Saturdays! Well, I'm afraid there ain't any taffy in it now; but there's piles and piles of lovely new clippings you ain't seen."

"My Papa?" He paused, his hand among the strips of newspaper. "My Papa never saw my Grandma Spragg. He never went to America."

"Never went to America? Your Pa never ? Why, land alive!" Mrs. Heeny gasped, a blush empurpling her large warm face. "Why, Paul Marvell, don't you remember your own father, you that bear his name?" she exclaimed.

The boy blushed also, conscious that it must have been wrong to forget, and yet not seeing how he was to blame.

"That one died a long long time ago, didn't he? I was thinking of my
French father," he explained.

"Oh, mercy," ejaculated Mrs. Heeny; and as if to cut the conversation short she stooped over, creaking like a ship, and thrust her plump strong hand into the bag.

"Here, now, just you look at these clippings I guess you'll find a lot in them about your Ma. Where do they come from? Why, out of the papers, of course," she added, in response to Paul's enquiry. "You'd oughter start a scrap-book yourself you're plenty old enough. You could make a beauty just about your Ma, with her picture pasted in the front and another about Mr. Moffatt and his collections. There's one I cut out the other day that says he's the greatest collector in America."

Paul listened, fascinated. He had the feeling that Mrs. Heeny's clippings, aside from their great intrinsic interest, might furnish him the clue to many things he didn't understand, and that nobody had ever had time to explain to him. His mother's marriages, for instance: he was sure there was a great deal to find out about them. But she always said: "I'll tell you all about it when I come back" and when she came back it was invariably to rush off somewhere else. So he had remained without a key to her transitions, and had had to take for granted numberless things that seemed to have no parallel in the experience of the other boys he knew.

"Here here it is," said Mrs. Heeny, adjusting the big tortoiseshell spectacles she had taken to wearing, and reading out in a slow chant that seemed to Paul to come out of some lost remoteness of his infancy.

"'It is reported in London that the price paid by Mr. Elmer Moffatt for the celebrated Grey Boy is the largest sum ever given for a Vandyck. Since Mr. Moffatt began to buy extensively it is estimated in art circles that values have gone up at least seventy-five per cent.'"

But the price of the Grey Boy did not interest Paul, and he said a little impatiently: "I'd rather hear about my mother."

"To be sure you would! You wait now." Mrs. Heeny made another dive, and again began to spread her clippings on her lap like cards on a big black table.

"Here's one about her last portrait no, here's a better one about her pearl necklace, the one Mr. Moffatt gave her last Christmas. 'The necklace, which was formerly the property of an Austrian Archduchess, is composed of five hundred perfectly matched pearls that took thirty years to collect. It is estimated among dealers in precious stones that since Mr. Moffatt began to buy the price of pearls has gone up over fifty per cent.'"

Even this did not fix Paul's attention. He wanted to hear about his mother and Mr. Moffatt, and not about their things; and he didn't quite know how to frame his question. But Mrs. Heeny looked kindly at him and he tried. "Why is mother married to Mr. Moffatt now?"

"Why, you must know that much, Paul." Mrs. Heeny again looked warm and worried. "She's married to him because she got a divorce that's why." And suddenly she had another inspiration. "Didn't she ever send you over any of those splendid clippings that came out the time they were married? Why, I declare, that's a shame; but I must have some of 'em right here."

She dived again, shuffled, sorted, and pulled out a long discoloured strip. "I've carried this round with me ever since, and so many's wanted to read it, it's all torn." She smoothed out the paper and began:

"'Divorce and remarriage of Mrs. Undine Spragg-de Chelles. American Marquise renounces ancient French title to wed Railroad King. Quick work untying and tying. Boy and girl romance renewed. "'Reno, November 23d. The Marquise de Chelles, of Paris, France, formerly Mrs. Undine Spragg Marvell, of Apex City and New York, got a decree of divorce at a special session of the Court last night, and was remarried fifteen minutes later to Mr. Elmer Moffatt, the billionaire Railroad King, who was the Marquise's first husband.

"'No case has ever been railroaded through the divorce courts of this State at a higher rate of speed: as Mr. Moffatt said last night, before he and his bride jumped onto their east-bound special, every record has been broken. It was just six months ago yesterday that the present Mrs. Moffatt came to Reno to look for her divorce. Owing to a delayed train, her counsel was late yesterday in receiving some necessary papers, and it was feared the decision would have to be held over; but Judge Toomey, who is a personal friend of Mr. Moffatt's, held a night session and rushed it through so that the happy couple could have the knot tied and board their special in time for Mrs. Moffatt to spend Thanksgiving in New York with her aged parents. The hearing began at seven ten p. m. and at eight o'clock the bridal couple were steaming out of the station.

"'At the trial Mrs. Spragg-de Chelles, who wore copper velvet and sables, gave evidence as to the brutality of her French husband, but she had to talk fast as time pressed, and Judge Toomey wrote the entry at top speed, and then jumped into a motor with the happy couple and drove to the Justice of the Peace, where he acted as best man to the bridegroom. The latter is said to be one of the six wealthiest men east of the Rockies. His gifts to the bride are a necklace and tiara of pigeon-blood rubies belonging to Queen Marie Antoinette, a million dollar cheque and a house in New York. The happy pair will

pass the honeymoon in Mrs. Moffatt's new home, 5009 Fifth Avenue, which is an exact copy of the Pitti Palace, Florence. They plan to spend their springs in France.'"

Mrs. Heeny drew a long breath, folded the paper and took off her spectacles. "There," she said, with a benignant smile and a tap on Paul's cheek, "now you see how it all happened...."

Paul was not sure he did; but he made no answer. His mind was too full of troubled thoughts. In the dazzling description of his mother's latest nuptials one fact alone stood out for him that she had said things that weren't true of his French father. Something he had half-guessed in her, and averted his frightened thoughts from, took his little heart in an iron grasp. She said things that weren't true.... That was what he had always feared to find out.... She had got up and said before a lot of people things that were awfully false about his dear French father....

The sound of a motor turning in at the gates made Mrs. Heeny exclaim "Here they are!" and a moment later Paul heard his mother calling to him. He got up reluctantly, and stood wavering till he felt Mrs. Heeny's astonished eye upon him. Then he heard Mr. Moffatt's jovial shout of "Paul Marvell, ahoy there!" and roused himself to run downstairs.

As he reached the landing he saw that the ballroom doors were open and all the lustres lit. His mother and Mr. Moffatt stood in the middle of the shining floor, looking up at the walls; and Paul's heart gave a wondering bound, for there, set in great gilt panels, were the tapestries that had always hung in the gallery at Saint Desert.

"Well, Senator, it feels good to shake your fist again!" his step-father said, taking him in a friendly grasp; and his mother, who looked handsomer and taller and more splendidly dressed than ever, exclaimed: "Mercy! how they've cut his hair!" before she bent to kiss him.

"Oh, mother, mother!" he burst out, feeling, between his mother's face and the others, hardly less familiar, on the walls, that he was really at home again, and not in a strange house.

"Gracious, how you squeeze!" she protested, loosening his arms. "But you look splendidly and how you've grown!" She turned away from him and began to inspect the tapestries critically. "Somehow they look smaller here," she said with a tinge of disappointment.

Mr. Moffatt gave a slight laugh and walked slowly down the room, as if to study its effect. As he turned back his wife said: "I didn't think you'd ever get them." He laughed again, more complacently. "Well, I don't know as I ever should have, if General Arlington hadn't happened to bust up."

They both smiled, and Paul, seeing his mother's softened face, stole his hand in hers and began: "Mother, I took a prize in composition "

"Did you? You must tell me about it to-morrow. No, I really must rush off now and dress I haven't even placed the dinner-cards." She freed her hand, and as she turned to go Paul heard Mr. Moffatt say: "Can't you ever give him a minute's time, Undine?"

She made no answer, but sailed through the door with her head high, as she did when anything annoyed her; and Paul and his step-father stood alone in the illuminated ball-room.

Mr. Moffatt smiled good-naturedly at the little boy and then turned back to the contemplation of the hangings.

"I guess you know where those come from, don't you?" he asked in a tone of satisfaction.

"Oh, yes," Paul answered eagerly, with a hope he dared not utter that, since the tapestries were there, his French father might be coming too.

"You're a smart boy to remember them. I don't suppose you ever thought you'd see them here?"

"I don't know," said Paul, embarrassed.

"Well, I guess you wouldn't have if their owner hadn't been in a pretty tight place. It was like drawing teeth for him to let them go."

Paul flushed up, and again the iron grasp was on his heart. He hadn't, hitherto, actually disliked Mr. Moffatt, who was always in a good humour, and seemed less busy and absent-minded than his mother; but at that instant he felt a rage of hate for him. He turned away and burst into tears.

"Why, hullo, old chap why, what's up?" Mr. Moffatt was on his knees beside the boy, and the arms embracing him were firm and friendly. But Paul, for the life of him, couldn't answer: he could only sob and sob as the great surges of loneliness broke over him.

"Is it because your mother hadn't time for you? Well, she's like that, you know; and you and I have got to lump it," Mr. Moffatt continued, getting to his feet. He stood looking down at the boy with a queer smile. "If we two chaps stick together it won't be so bad we can keep each other warm, don't you see? I like you first rate, you know; when you're big enough I mean to put you in my business. And it looks as if one of these days you'd be the richest boy in America...."

The lamps were lit, the vases full of flowers, the foot-men assembled on the landing and in the vestibule below, when Undine descended to the drawing-room. As she passed the ballroom door she glanced in approvingly at the tapestries. They really looked better than she had been willing to admit: they made her ballroom the handsomest in Paris. But something had put her out on the way up from Deauville, and the simplest way of easing her nerves had been to affect indifference to the tapestries. Now she had quite recovered her good humour, and as she glanced down the list of guests she was awaiting she said to herself, with a sigh of satisfaction, that she was glad she had put on her rubies.

For the first time since her marriage to Moffatt she was about to receive in her house the people she most wished to see there. The beginnings had been a little difficult; their first attempt in New York was so unpromising that she feared they might not be able to live down the sensational details of their reunion, and had insisted on her husband's taking her back to Paris. But her apprehensions were unfounded. It was only necessary to give people the time to pretend they had forgotten; and already they were all pretending beautifully. The French world had of course held out longest; it had strongholds she might never capture. But already seceders were beginning to show themselves, and her dinner-list that evening was graced with the names of an authentic Duke and a not too-damaged Countess. In addition, of course, she had the Shallums, the Chauncey Ellings, May Beringer, Dicky Bowles, Walsingham Popple, and the rest of the New York frequenters of the Nouveau Luxe; she had even, at the last minute, had the amusement of adding Peter Van Degen to their number. In the evening there were to be Spanish dancing and Russian singing; and Dicky Bowles had promised her a Grand Duke for her next dinner, if she could secure the new tenor who always refused to sing in private houses.

Even now, however, she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them. And there had been moments lately when she had had to confess to herself that Moffatt did not fit into the picture. At first she had been dazzled by his success and subdued by his authority. He had given her all she had ever wished for, and more than she had ever dreamed of having: he had made up to her for all her failures and blunders, and there were hours when she still felt his dominion and exulted in it. But there were others when

she saw his defects and was irritated by them: when his loudness and redness, his misplaced joviality, his familiarity with the servants, his alternating swagger and ceremony with her friends, jarred on perceptions that had developed in her unawares. Now and then she caught herself thinking that his two predecessors who were gradually becoming merged in her memory would have said this or that differently, behaved otherwise in such and such a case. And the comparison was almost always to Moffatt's disadvantage.

This evening, however, she thought of him indulgently. She was pleased with his clever stroke in capturing the Saint Desert tapestries, which General Arlington's sudden bankruptcy, and a fresh gambling scandal of Hubert's, had compelled their owner to part with. She knew that Raymond de Chelles had told the dealers he would sell his tapestries to anyone but Mr. Elmer Moffatt, or a buyer acting for him; and it amused her to think that, thanks to Elmer's astuteness, they were under her roof after all, and that Raymond and all his clan were by this time aware of it. These facts disposed her favourably toward her husband, and deepened the sense of well-being with which according to her invariable habit she walked up to the mirror above the mantelpiece and studied the image it reflected.

She was still lost in this pleasing contemplation when her husband entered, looking stouter and redder than ever, in evening clothes that were a little too tight. His shirt front was as glossy as his baldness, and in his buttonhole he wore the red ribbon bestowed on him for waiving his claim to a Velasquez that was wanted for the Louvre. He carried a newspaper in his hand, and stood looking about the room with a complacent eye.

"Well, I guess this is all right," he said, and she answered briefly: "Don't forget you're to take down Madame de Follerive; and for goodness' sake don't call her 'Countess.'"

"Why, she is one, ain't she?" he returned good-humouredly.

"I wish you'd put that newspaper away," she continued; his habit of leaving old newspapers about the drawing-room annoyed her.

"Oh, that reminds me " instead of obeying her he unfolded the paper.
"I brought it in to show you something. Jim Driscoll's been appointed
Ambassador to England."
"Jim Driscoll !" She caught up the paper and stared at the paragraph he pointed to. Jim Driscoll that pitiful nonentity, with his stout mistrustful commonplace wife! It seemed extraordinary that the government should have hunted up such insignificant people.

And immediately she had a great vague vision of the splendours they were going to all the banquets and ceremonies and precedences....

"I shouldn't say she'd want to, with so few jewels " She dropped the paper and turned to her husband. "If you had a spark of ambition, that's the kind of thing you'd try for. You could have got it just as easily as not!"

He laughed and thrust his thumbs in his waistcoat armholes with the gesture she disliked. "As it happens, it's about the one thing I couldn't."

"You couldn't? Why not?"

"Because you're divorced. They won't have divorced Ambassadresses."

"They won't? Why not, I'd like to know?"

"Well, I guess the court ladies are afraid there'd be too many pretty women in the Embassies," he answered jocularly.

She burst into an angry laugh, and the blood flamed up into her face. "I never heard of anything so insulting!" she cried, as if the rule had been invented to humiliate her.

There was a noise of motors backing and advancing in the court, and she heard the first voices on the stairs. She turned to give herself a last look in the glass, saw the blaze of her rubies, the glitter of her hair, and remembered the brilliant names on her list.

But under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remained. She had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for.

THE END