

The Custom Of The Country

by
Edith Wharton

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**First
Published**

1913

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Italian countryside that so alienated Undine had enchanted Wharton. Wharton had spent years traveling through Italy by cart, train, automobile, and bicycle, especially enjoying, as Ralph does, "the delicious villas near Siena" (qtd. in Lee 91). The country was the subject of her first novel, *The Valley of Decision*, as well as [two travel books](#), and for Wharton it was a place of artistic vision with a "spectacular, theatrical, illusory quality" (Lee 105).

All of Italy's qualities are lost on Undine, however. She prefers the "midsummer crowds" of St. Moritz and the shallow society of Paris, with the appropriately named Shallums, to the real European society and culture that Ralph tries to show her. The only art Undine cares for is the kind that glorifies her image, and once back in New York, she abandons the staid parties of Ralph's Old New York set for the fashionable studio of Claud Walsingham Popple, a character based on the real-life figure of John Singer Sargent. Caught up in the party to celebrate Popple's portrait of her, Undine forgets the birthday party of her son, an act that confirms her unchanging preference for herself and her image above all else.

In Europe and in New York after their marriage, Ralph and Undine see each other plainly for the first time. Despite Ralph's attempts to get Undine to value "the real thing" in European and Old New York culture, with their reverence for the past, Undine aligns herself with the future: she wants to travel on the new-money tycoon Peter Van Degen's yacht, to get the family heirloom jewels reset, and to ally herself with questionable company like the Baroness Adelschein. For Ralph, during their argument about sailing on Van Degen's yacht, "Undine was no longer beautiful--she seemed to have the face of her thoughts"--thoughts that, in admiring her beauty, he had only imagined up until this point. And Undine, in a rare moment of self-reflection that does not involve a mirror, realizes an even more important truth: "She had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous." In other words, she has committed herself to "the real thing" when "the sham thing" would have suited her much better.



This month's contributor is **Donna Campbell**. Campbell is associate professor of English at Washington State University and a past president of the Edith Wharton Society. Her extensive work on Edith Wharton has focused on Wharton's relationships to her American contemporaries and to American naturalism. Recent work includes "Edith Wharton and Naturalism," in *Edith Wharton in Context* (Cambridge U P, 2012), "Edith Wharton Meets Aquaman: *The Glimpses of the Moon* and Imperiled Male Culture in *Entourage*" (*Journal of Popular Culture*, Dec. 2012), and "The Next 150 Years: Wharton Goes Digital" in the *Edith Wharton Review*, a version of the keynote address she gave at the Edith Wharton in Florence conference in June 2012.

Special thanks to the Modernist Journals Project of Brown University and The University of Tulsa for use of all historic Scribner's Magazine images.

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XI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He laughed.

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

She withdrew her hand with a slight grimace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes. That's why I chose the summer: so that we could have it all to ourselves." She tried to put a note of reasonableness into her voice. "If you'd told me we were going everywhere at the wrong time, of course I could have arranged about my clothes." "You poor darling! Let us, by all means, go to the place where the clothes will be right: they're too beautiful to be left out of our scheme of life."

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

Whereas Ralph imagines subsisting his inspired adjectives, Wharton engaged in the **"wholesale slaughter of adjectives"** in her own writing.

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

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

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

"One can be cool short of the Engadine. Why not go south again—say to Capri?"

"Capri? Is that the island we saw from Naples, where the artists go?" She drew her brows together. "It would be simply awful getting there in this heat."

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

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

He sat motionless, staring ahead at the red-brown walls and towers on the steep above them. After all there was nothing sudden in his discovery. For weeks it had hung on the edge of consciousness, but he had turned from it with the heart's instinctive clinging to the unrealities by which it lives. Even now a hundred qualifying reasons rushed to his aid. They told him it was not of himself that Undine had wearied, but only of their present way of life. He had said a moment before, without conscious exaggeration, that her presence made any place the one place; yet how willingly would he have consented to share in such a life as she was leading before their marriage? And he had to acknowledge their months of desultory wandering from one remote Italian hill-top to another must have seemed as purposeless to her as balls and dinners would have been to him. An imagination like his, peopled with such varied images and associations, fed by so many currents from the long stream of human experience, could hardly picture

the bareness of the small half-lit place in which his wife's spirit fluttered. Her mind was as destitute of beauty and mystery as the prairie school-house in which she had been educated; and her ideals seemed to Ralph as pathetic as the ornaments made of corks and cigar-bands with which her infant hands had been taught to adorn it. He was beginning to understand this, and learning to adapt himself to the narrow compass of her experience. The task of opening new windows in her mind was inspiring enough to give him infinite patience; and he would not yet own to himself that her pliancy and variety were imitative rather than spontaneous.

Meanwhile he had no desire to sacrifice her wishes to his, and it distressed him that he dared not confess his real reason for avoiding the Engadine. The truth was that their funds were shrinking faster than he had expected. Mr. Spragg, after bluntly opposing their hastened marriage on the ground that he was not prepared, at such short notice, to make the necessary provision for his daughter, had shortly afterward (probably, as Undine observed to Ralph, in consequence of a lucky "turn" in the Street) met their wishes with all possible liberality, bestowing on them a wedding in conformity with Mrs. Spragg's ideals and up to the highest standard of Mrs. Heeny's clippings, and pledging himself to provide Undine with an income adequate to so brilliant a beginning. It was understood that Ralph, on their return, should renounce the law for some more paying business; but this seemed the smallest of sacrifices to make for the privilege of calling Undine his wife; and besides, he still secretly hoped that, in the interval, his real vocation might declare itself in some work which would justify his adopting the life of letters.

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

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

She had met Ralph's first note of warning with the assurance that she "didn't mean to worry"; and her tone implied that it was his business to do so for her. He certainly wanted to guard her from this as from all other cares; he wanted also, and still more

Avid travelers both, Edith and Teddy Wharton frequently toured the continent together during the early years of their marriage. In an 1891 letter, Wharton writes of the pleasures of Florence, Siena ("**one of the most interesting towns in Italy**"), Torcello, and Venice.

passionately after the topic had once or twice recurred between them, to guard himself from the risk of judging where he still adored. These restraints to frankness kept him silent during the remainder of the drive, and when, after dinner, Undine again complained of her headache, he let her go up to her room and wandered out into the dimly lit streets to renewed communion with his problems.

They hung on him insistently as darkness fell, and Siena grew vocal with that shrill diversity of sounds that breaks, on summer nights, from every cleft of the masonry in old Italian towns. Then the moon rose, unfolding depth by depth the lines of the antique land; and Ralph, leaning against an old brick parapet, and watching each silver-blue remoteness disclose itself between the dark masses of the middle distance, felt his spirit enlarged and pacified. For the first time, as his senses thrilled to the deep touch of beauty, he asked himself if out of these floating and fugitive vibrations he might not build something concrete and stable, if even such dull common cares as now oppressed him might not become the motive power of creation. If he could only, on the spot, do something with all the accumulated spoils of the last months—something that should both put money into his pocket and harmony into the rich confusion of his spirit! "I'll write—I'll write: that must be what the whole thing means," he said to himself, with a vague clutch at some solution which should keep him a little longer hanging half-way down the steep of disenchantment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ralph laughed. "I don't mean a dead spirit but a living one! I saw the vision of a book I mean to do. It came to me suddenly, magnificently, swooped down on me as that big white moon swooped down on the black landscape, tore at me like a great white eagle-like the bird of Jove! After all, imagination *was* the eagle that devoured Prometheus!" She drew away abruptly, and the bright moonlight showed him the apprehension in her face. "You're not going to write a book *here*?"

He stood up and wandered away a step or two; then he turned and came back. "Of course not here. Wherever you want. The main point is that it's come to me—no, that it's come *back* to me! For it's all these months together, it's all our happiness—it's the meaning of life that I've found, and it's you, dearest, you who've given it to me!" He dropped down beside her again; but she disengaged herself and he heard a little sob in her throat.

"Undine—what's the matter?"

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

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

"I don't know...I don't like Europe...it's not what I expected, and I think it's all too

dreadfully dreary!" The words broke from her in a long wail of rebellion.

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

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

"Not New York in July?"

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

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

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

"We'll go up to Switzerland." He had a fleeting glimpse of the quiet place with the green water-fall, where he might have made tryst with his vision; then he turned his mind from it and said: "We'll go just where you want. How soon can you be ready to start?" "Oh, to-morrow—the first thing to-morrow! I'll make Celeste get out of bed now and pack. Can we go right through to St. Moritz? I'd rather sleep in the train than in another of these awful places."

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

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

XII

In the quiet place with the green water-fall Ralph's vision might have kept faith with him; but how could he hope to surprise it in the midsummer crowds of St. Moritz? Undine, at any rate, had found there what she wanted; and when he was at her side, and her radiant smile included him, every other question was in abeyance. But there were hours of solitary striding over bare grassy slopes, face to face with the ironic

interrogation of sky and mountains, when his anxieties came back, more persistent and importunate. Sometimes they took the form of merely material difficulties. How, for instance, was he to meet the cost of their ruinous suite at the Engadine Palace while he awaited Mr. Spragg's next remittance? And once the hotel bills were paid, what would be left for the journey back to Paris, the looming expenses there, the price of the passage to America? These questions would fling him back on the thought of his projected book, which was, after all, to be what the masterpieces of literature had mostly been—a pot-boiler. Well! Why not? Did not the worshipper always heap the rarest essences on the altar of his divinity? Ralph still rejoiced in the thought of giving back to Undine something of the beauty of their first months together. But even on his solitary walks the vision eluded him; and he could spare so few hours to its pursuit!

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

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

Mrs. Shallum, though in command of but a few verbs, all of which, on her lips, became irregular, managed to express a polyglot personality as vivid as her husband's was effaced. Her only idea of intercourse with her kind was to organize it into bands and subject it to frequent displacements; and society smiled at her for these exertions like an infant vigorously rocked. She saw at once Undine's value as a factor in her scheme, and the two formed an alliance on which Ralph refrained from shedding the cold light of depreciation. It was a point of honour with him not to seem to disdain any of Undine's amusements: the noisy interminable picnics, the hot promiscuous balls, the concerts, bridge-parties and theatricals which helped to disguise the difference between the high Alps and Paris or New York. He told himself that there is always a Narcissus-element in youth, and that what Undine really enjoyed was the image of her own charm mirrored in the general admiration. With her quick perceptions and adaptabilities she would soon

learn to care more about the quality of the reflecting surface; and meanwhile no criticism of his should mar her pleasure.

The appearance at their hotel of the cavalry-officer from Siena was a not wholly agreeable surprise; but even after the handsome Marquis had been introduced to Undine, and had whirled her through an evening's dances, Ralph was not seriously disturbed. Husband and wife had grown closer to each other since they had come to St. Moritz, and in the brief moments she could give him Undine was now always gay and approachable. Her fitful humours had vanished, and she showed qualities of comradeship that seemed the promise of a deeper understanding. But this very hope made him more subject to her moods, more fearful of disturbing the harmony between them. Least of all could he broach the subject of money: he had too keen a memory of the way her lips could narrow, and her eyes turn from him as if he were a stranger. It was a different matter that one day brought the look he feared to her face. She had announced her intention of going on an excursion with Mrs. Shallum and three or four of the young men who formed the nucleus of their shifting circle, and for the first time she did not ask Ralph if he were coming; but he felt no resentment at being left out. He was tired of these noisy assaults on the high solitudes, and the prospect of a quiet afternoon turned his thoughts to his book. Now if ever there seemed a chance of recapturing the moonlight vision...

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

When the excursionists had started he turned back to his writing-table and tried to take up his work; but he could not fix his thoughts: they were far away, in pursuit of Undine. He had been but five months married, and it seemed, after all, rather soon for him to be dropped out of such excursions as unquestioningly as poor Harvey Shallum. He smiled away this first twinge of jealousy, but the irritation it left found a pretext in his displeasure at Undine's choice of companions. Mrs. Shallum grated on his taste, but she was as open to inspection as a shop-window, and he was sure that time would teach his wife the cheapness of what she had to show. Roviano and the Englishmen were well

enough too: frankly bent on amusement, but pleasant and well-bred. But they would naturally take their tone from the women they were with; and Madame Adelschein's tone was notorious. He knew also that Undine's faculty of self-defense was weakened by the instinct of adapting herself to whatever company she was in, of copying "the others" in speech and gesture as closely as she reflected them in dress; and he was disturbed by the thought of what her ignorance might expose her to.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Your poor father! It's a hard knock for him. I'm sorry," he said as he handed it back. For a moment she did not seem to hear; then she said between her teeth:

"It's hard for *us*. I suppose now we'll have to go straight home."

He looked at her with wonder. "If that were all! In any case I should have to be back in a few weeks."

"But we needn't have left here in August! It's the first place in Europe that I've liked,

and it's just my luck to be dragged away from it!"

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

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

"Couldn't your people do something—help us out just this once, I mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Undine's chief surprise seemed to be that Laura's response, though immediate and generous, did not enable them to stay on at St. Moritz. But she apparently read in her

husband's look the uselessness of such a hope, for, with one of the sudden changes of mood that still disarmed him, she accepted the need of departure, and took leave philosophically of the Shallums and their band. After all, Paris was ahead, and in September one would have a chance to see the new models and surprise the secret councils of the dressmakers.

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

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

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

Meanwhile the daily cost of living, and the bills that could not be deferred, were eating deep into Laura's subsidy. Ralph's anxieties returned, and his plight was brought home to him with a shock when, on going one day to engage passages, he learned that the prices were that of the "rush season," and one of the conditions immediate payment. At other times, he was told the rules were easier; but in September and October no exception could be made.

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

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

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

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

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

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

When at last he entered the little salon she called "stuffy" he found her in conference with a blond-bearded gentleman who wore the red ribbon in his lapel, and who, on

Ralph's appearance—and at a sign, as it appeared, from Mrs. Marvell—swept into his note-case some small objects that had lain on the table, and bowed himself out with a "Madame—Monsieur" worthy of the highest traditions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During the five-year period Wharton toiled on *The Custom of the Country*, she increasingly spent her time in Paris. There she experienced her first **love affair** far from her homes in New York and the Berkshires.

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

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

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

XIII

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

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

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

He therefore listened with apparent good-humour to Peter's suggestion of an evening at

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

"What? One of those five-barrelled shows at the Français? Great Scott, Ralph—no wonder your wife's pining for the Folies Bergère!"

"She needn't, my dear fellow. We never interfere with each other's vices."

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

Ah, there's the secret of domestic happiness. Marry somebody who likes all the things you don't, and make love to somebody who likes all the things you do.

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

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

"To-morrow night, then, at Paillard's," Van Degen concluded. "And about the other business—that's a go too? I leave it to you to settle the date."

The nod and laugh they exchanged seemed to hint at depths of collusion from which Ralph was pointedly excluded; and he wondered how large a programme of pleasure they had already had time to sketch out. He disliked the idea of Undine's being too frequently seen with Van Degen, whose Parisian reputation was not fortified by the connections that propped it up in New York; but he did not want to interfere with her pleasure, and he was still wondering what to say when, as the door closed, she turned to him gaily.

"I'm so glad you've come! I've got some news for you." She laid a light touch on his arm.

Touch and tone were enough to disperse his anxieties, and he answered that he was in luck to find her already in when he had supposed her engaged, over a Nouveau Luxe tea-table, in repairing the afternoon's ravages.

"Oh, I didn't shop much—I didn't stay out long." She raised a kindling face to him.

"And what do you think I've been doing? While you were sitting in your stuffy old theatre, worrying about the money I was spending (oh, you needn't fib—I know you were!) I was saving you hundreds and thousands. I've saved you the price of our passage!"

Ralph laughed in pure enjoyment of her beauty. When she shone on him like that what did it matter what nonsense she talked?

"You wonderful woman—how did you do it? By countermanding a tiara?"

"You know I'm not such a fool as you pretend!" She held him at arm's length with a nod of joyous mystery. "You'll simply never guess! I've made Peter Van Degen ask us to go home on the Sorceress. What do you say to that?"

She flashed it out on a laugh of triumph, without appearing to have a doubt of the effect the announcement would produce.

Ralph stared at her. "The Sorceress? You *made* him?"

"Well, I managed it, I worked him round to it! He's crazy about the idea now—but I don't think he'd thought of it before he came."

"I should say not!" Ralph ejaculated. "He never would have had the cheek to think of it."

"Well, I've made him, anyhow! Did you ever know such luck?"

"Such luck?" He groaned at her obstinate innocence. "Do you suppose I'll let you cross the ocean on the Sorceress?"

She shrugged impatiently. "You say that because your cousin doesn't go on her."

"If she doesn't, it's because it's no place for decent women."

"It's Clare's fault if it isn't. Everybody knows she's crazy about you, and she makes him feel it. That's why he takes up with other women."

Her anger reddened her cheeks and dropped her brows like a black bar above her glowing eyes. Even in his recoil from what she said Ralph felt the tempestuous heat of her beauty. But for the first time his latent resentments rose in him, and he gave her back wrath for wrath.

"Is that the precious stuff he tells you?"

"Do you suppose I had to wait for him to tell me? Everybody knows it—everybody in New York knew she was wild when you married. That's why she's always been so nasty to me. If you won't go on the Sorceress they'll all say it's because she was jealous of me and wouldn't let you."

Ralph's indignation had already flickered down to disgust. Undine was no longer beautiful—she seemed to have the face of her thoughts. He stood up with an impatient laugh.

"Is that another of his arguments? I don't wonder they're convincing—" But as quickly as it had come the sneer dropped, yielding to a wave of pity, the vague impulse to silence and protect her. How could he have given way to the provocation of her weakness, when his business was to defend her from it and lift her above it? He recalled his old dreams of saving her from Van Degenism—it was not thus that he had imagined the rescue.

"Don't let's pay Peter the compliment of squabbling over him," he said, turning away to pour himself a cup of tea.

When he had filled his cup he sat down beside Undine, with a smile. "No doubt he was joking—and thought you were; but if you really made him believe we might go with him you'd better drop him a line."

Undine's brow still gloomed. "You refuse, then?"

"Refuse? I don't need to! Do you want to succeed to half the chorus-world of New York?"

"They won't be on board with us, I suppose!"

"The echoes of their conversation will. It's the only language Peter knows."

"He told me he longed for the influence of a good woman—" She checked herself, reddening at Ralph's laugh.

"Well, tell him to apply again when he's been under it a month or two. Meanwhile we'll stick to the liners."

Ralph was beginning to learn that the only road to her reason lay through her vanity,

and he fancied that if she could be made to see Van Degen as an object of ridicule she might give up the idea of the Sorceress of her own accord. But her will hardened slowly under his joking opposition, and she became no less formidable as she grew more calm. He was used to women who, in such cases, yielded as a matter of course to masculine judgments: if one pronounced a man "not decent" the question was closed. But it was Undine's habit to ascribe all interference with her plans to personal motives, and he could see that she attributed his opposition to the furtive machinations of poor Clare. It was odious to him to prolong the discussion, for the accent of recrimination was the one he most dreaded on her lips. But the moment came when he had to take the brunt of it, averting his thoughts as best he might from the glimpse it gave of a world of mean familiarities, of reprisals drawn from the vulgarest of vocabularies. Certain retorts sped through the air like the flight of household utensils, certain charges rang out like accusations of tampering with the groceries. He stiffened himself against such comparisons, but they stuck in his imagination and left him thankful when Undine's anger yielded to a burst of tears. He had held his own and gained his point. The trip on the Sorceress was given up, and a note of withdrawal despatched to Van Degen; but at the same time Ralph cabled his sister to ask if she could increase her loan. For he had conquered only at the cost of a concession: Undine was to stay in Paris till October, and they were to sail on a fast steamer, in a deck-suite, like the Harvey Shallums.

Undine's ill-humour was soon dispelled by any new distraction, and she gave herself to the untroubled enjoyment of Paris. The Shallums were the centre of a like-minded group, and in the hours the ladies could spare from their dress-makers the restaurants shook with their hilarity and the suburbs with the shriek of their motors. Van Degen, who had postponed his sailing, was a frequent sharer in these amusements; but Ralph counted on New York influences to detach him from Undine's train. He was learning to influence her through her social instincts where he had once tried to appeal to other sensibilities.

His worst moment came when he went to see Clare Van Degen, who, on the eve of departure, had begged him to come to her hotel. He found her less restless and rattling than usual, with a look in her eyes that reminded him of the days when she had haunted his thoughts. The visit passed off without vain returns to the past; but as he was leaving she surprised him by saying: "Don't let Peter make a goose of your wife."

Ralph reddened, but laughed.

"Oh, Undine's wonderfully able to defend herself, even against such seductions as Peter's."

Mrs. Van Degen looked down with a smile at the bracelets on her thin brown wrist. "His personal seductions—yes. But as an inventor of amusements he's inexhaustible;

and Undine likes to be amused."

Ralph made no reply but showed no annoyance. He simply took her hand and kissed it as he said good-bye; and she turned from him without audible farewell.

As the day of departure approached. Undine's absorption in her dresses almost precluded the thought of amusement. Early and late she was closeted with fitters and packers—even the competent Celeste not being trusted to handle the treasures now pouring in—and Ralph cursed his weakness in not restraining her, and then fled for solace to museums and galleries.

He could not rouse in her any scruple about incurring fresh debts, yet he knew she was no longer unaware of the value of money. She had learned to bargain, pare down prices, evade fees, brow-beat the small tradespeople and wheedle concessions from the great—not, as Ralph perceived, from any effort to restrain her expenses, but only to prolong and intensify the pleasure of spending. Pained by the trait, he tried to laugh her out of it. He told her once that she had a miserly hand—showing her, in proof, that, for all their softness, the fingers would not bend back, or the pink palm open. But she retorted a little sharply that it was no wonder, since she'd heard nothing talked of since their marriage but economy; and this left him without any answer. So the purveyors continued to mount to their apartment, and Ralph, in the course of his frequent nights from it, found himself always dodging the corners of black glazed boxes and swaying pyramids of pasteboard; always lifting his hat to sidling milliners' girls, or effacing himself before slender vendeuses floating by in a mist of opopanax. He felt incompetent to pronounce on the needs to which these visitors ministered; but the reappearance among them of the blond-bearded jeweller gave him ground for fresh fears. Undine had assured him that she had given up the idea of having her ornaments reset, and there had been ample time for their return; but on his questioning her she explained that there had been delays and "bothers" and put him in the wrong by asking ironically if he supposed she was buying things "for pleasure" when she knew as well as he that there wasn't any money to pay for them.

But his thoughts were not all dark. Undine's moods still infected him, and when she was happy he felt an answering lightness. Even when her amusements were too primitive to be shared he could enjoy their reflection in her face. Only, as he looked back, he was struck by the evanescence, the lack of substance, in their moments of sympathy, and by the permanent marks left by each breach between them. Yet he still fancied that some day the balance might be reversed, and that as she acquired a finer sense of values the depths in her would find a voice.

Something of this was in his mind when, the afternoon before their departure, he came home to help her with their last arrangements. She had begged him, for the day, to leave

her alone in their cramped salon, into which belated bundles were still pouring; and it was nearly dark when he returned. The evening before she had seemed pale and nervous, and at the last moment had excused herself from dining with the Shallums at a suburban restaurant. It was so unlike her to miss any opportunity of the kind that Ralph had felt a little anxious. But with the arrival of the packers she was afoot and in command again, and he withdrew submissively, as Mr. Spragg, in the early Apex days, might have fled from the spring storm of "house-cleaning."

When he entered the sitting-room, he found it still in disorder. Every chair was hidden under scattered dresses, tissue-paper surged from the yawning trunks and, prone among her heaped-up finery. Undine lay with closed eyes on the sofa.

She raised her head as he entered, and then turned listlessly away.

"My poor girl, what's the matter? Haven't they finished yet?"

Instead of answering she pressed her face into the cushion and began to sob. The violence of her weeping shook her hair down on her shoulders, and her hands, clenching the arm of the sofa, pressed it away from her as if any contact were insufferable.

Ralph bent over her in alarm. "Why, what's wrong, dear? What's happened?"

Her fatigue of the previous evening came back to him—a puzzled hunted look in her eyes; and with the memory a vague wonder revived. He had fancied himself fairly disencumbered of the stock formulas about the hallowing effects of motherhood, and there were many reasons for not welcoming the news he suspected she had to give; but the woman a man loves is always a special case, and everything was different that befell Undine. If this was what had befallen her it was wonderful and divine: for the moment that was all he felt.

"Dear, tell me what's the matter," he pleaded.

She sobbed on unheedingly and he waited for her agitation to subside. He shrank from the phrases considered appropriate to the situation, but he wanted to hold her close and give her the depth of his heart in long kiss.

Suddenly she sat upright and turned a desperate face on him. "Why on earth are you staring at me like that? Anybody can see what's the matter!"

He winced at her tone, but managed to get one of her hands in his; and they stayed thus in silence, eye to eye.

As Undine's true character slowly revealed itself to Ralph in each issue, Scribner's readers anxiously awaited the next chapter in Undine's controversial story, prompting Wharton to boast: "**Undine is making the press ring.**"

"Are you as sorry as all that?" he began at length conscious of the flatness of his voice.

"Sorry—sorry? I'm—I'm—" She snatched her hand away, and went on weeping.

"But, Undine—dearest—bye and bye you'll feel differently—I know you will!"

"Differently? Differently? When? In a year? It *takes* a year—a whole year out of life! What do I care how I shall feel in a year?"

The chill of her tone struck in. This was more than a revolt of the nerves: it was a settled, a reasoned resentment. Ralph found himself groping for extenuations, evasions—anything to put a little warmth into her! "Who knows? Perhaps, after all, it's a mistake."

There was no answering light in her face. She turned her head from him wearily.

"Don't you think, dear, you may be mistaken?"

"Mistaken? How on earth can I be mistaken?"

Even in that moment of confusion he was struck by the cold competence of her tone, and wondered how she could be so sure.

"You mean you've asked—you've consulted—?" The irony of it took him by the throat. They were the very words he might have spoken in some miserable secret colloquy—the words he was speaking to his wife!

She repeated dully: "I know I'm not mistaken."

There was another long silence. Undine lay still, her eyes shut, drumming on the arm of the sofa with a restless hand. The other lay cold in Ralph's clasp, and through it there gradually stole to him the benumbing influence of the thoughts she was thinking: the sense of the approach of illness, anxiety, and expense, and of the general unnecessary disorganization of their lives.

"That's all you feel, then?" he asked at length a little bitterly, as if to disguise from himself the hateful fact that he felt it too. He stood up and moved away. "That's all?" he repeated.

"Why, what else do you expect me to feel? I feel horribly ill, if that's what you want." He saw the sobs trembling up through her again.

"Poor dear—poor girl...I'm so sorry—so dreadfully sorry!"

The senseless reiteration seemed to exasperate her. He knew it by the quiver that ran through her like the premonitory ripple on smooth water before the coming of the wind. She turned about on him and jumped to her feet.

"Sorry—you're sorry? *You're* sorry? Why, what earthly difference will it make to *you*?" She drew back a few steps and lifted her slender arms from her sides. "Look at me—see how I look—how I'm going to look! *You* won't hate yourself more and more every morning when you get up and see yourself in the glass! *Your* life's going on just as usual! But what's mine going to be for months and months? And just as I'd been to all this bother—fagging myself to death about all these things—" her tragic gesture swept the disordered room—"just as I thought I was going home to enjoy myself, and look nice, and see people again, and have a little pleasure after all our worries—" She dropped back on the sofa with another burst of tears. "For all the good this rubbish will do me now! I loathe the very sight of it!" she sobbed with her face in her hands.

XIV

It was one of the distinctions of Mr. Claud Walsingham Popple that his studio was never too much encumbered with the attributes of his art to permit the installing, in one of its cushioned corners, of an elaborately furnished tea-table flanked by the most varied seductions in sandwiches and pastry.

Mr. Popple, like all great men, had at first had his ups and downs; but his reputation had been permanently established by the verdict of a wealthy patron who, returning from an excursion into other fields of portraiture, had given it as the final fruit of his experience that Popple was the only man who could "do pearls." To sitters for whom this was of the first consequence it was another of the artist's merits that he always subordinated art to elegance, in life as well as in his portraits. The "messy" element of production was no more visible in his expensively screened and tapestried studio than its results were perceptible in his painting; and it was often said, in praise of his work, that he was the only artist who kept his studio tidy enough for a lady to sit to him in a new dress.

Mr. Popple, in fact, held that the personality of the artist should at all times be dissembled behind that of the man. It was his opinion that the essence of good-breeding lay in tossing off a picture as easily as you lit a cigarette. Ralph Marvell had once said of him that when he began a portrait he always turned back his cuffs and said: "Ladies and gentlemen, you can see there's absolutely nothing here," and Mrs. Fairford supplemented the description by defining his painting as "chafing-dish" art. On a certain late afternoon of December, some four years after Mr. Popple's first meeting with Miss

Undine Spragg of Apex, even the symbolic chafing-dish was nowhere visible in his studio; the only evidence of its recent activity being the full-length portrait of Mrs. Ralph Marvell, who, from her lofty easel and her heavily garlanded frame, faced the doorway with the air of having been invited to "receive" for Mr. Poppo.

The artist himself, becomingly clad in mouse-coloured velveteen, had just turned away from the picture to hover above the tea-cups; but his place had been taken by the considerably broader bulk of Mr. Peter Van Degen, who, tightly moulded into a coat of the latest cut, stood before the portrait in the attitude of a first arrival.

"Yes, it's good—it's damn good, Poppo; you've hit the hair off ripplingly; but the pearls ain't big enough," he pronounced.

A slight laugh sounded from the raised dais behind the easel.

"Of course they're not! But it's not *his* fault, poor man; *he* didn't give them to me!" As she spoke Mrs. Ralph Marvell rose from a monumental gilt arm-chair of pseudo-Venetian design and swept her long draperies to Van Degen's side.

"He might, then—for the privilege of painting you!" the latter rejoined, transferring his bulging stare from the counterfeit to the original. His eyes rested on Mrs. Marvell's in what seemed a quick exchange of understanding; then they passed on to a critical inspection of her person. She was dressed for the sitting in something faint and shining, above which the long curves of her neck looked dead white in the cold light of the studio; and her hair, all a shadowless rosy gold, was starred with a hard glitter of diamonds.

"The privilege of painting me? Mercy, *I* have to pay for being painted! He'll tell you he's giving me the picture—but what do you suppose this cost?" She laid a finger-tip on her shimmering dress.

Van Degen's eye rested on her with cold enjoyment. "Does the price come higher than the dress?"

She ignored the allusion. "Of course what they charge for is the cut—"

"What they cut away? That's what they ought to charge for, ain't it, Poppo?"

Undine took this with cool disdain, but Mr. Poppo's sensibilities were offended.

"My dear Peter—really—the artist, you understand, sees all this as a pure question of colour, of pattern; and it's a point of honour with the *man* to steel himself against the

personal seduction."

Mr. Van Degen received this protest with a sound of almost vulgar derision, but Undine thrilled agreeably under the glance which her portrayer cast on her. She was flattered by Van Degen's notice, and thought his impertinence witty; but she glowed inwardly at Mr. Popple's eloquence. After more than three years of social experience she still thought he "spoke beautifully," like the hero of a novel, and she ascribed to jealousy the lack of seriousness with which her husband's friends regarded him. His conversation struck her as intellectual, and his eagerness to have her share his thoughts was in flattering contrast to Ralph's growing tendency to keep his to himself. Popple's homage seemed the, subtlest proof of what Ralph could have made of her if he had "really understood" her. It was but another step to ascribe all her past mistakes to the lack of such understanding; and the satisfaction derived from this thought had once impelled her to tell the artist that he alone knew how to rouse her 'higher self.' He had assured her that the memory of her words would thereafter hallow his life; and as he hinted that it had been stained by the darkest errors she was moved at the thought of the purifying influence she exerted.

Thus it was that a man should talk to a true woman—but how few whom she had known possessed the secret! Ralph, in the first months of their marriage, had been eloquent too, had even gone the length of quoting poetry; but he disconcerted her by his baffling twists and strange allusions (she always scented ridicule in the unknown), and the poets he quoted were esoteric and abstruse. Mr. Popple's rhetoric was drawn from more familiar sources, and abounded in favourite phrases and in moving reminiscences of the Fifth Reader. He was moreover as literary as he was artistic; possessing an unequalled acquaintance with contemporary fiction, and dipping even into the lighter type of memoirs, in which the old acquaintances of history are served up in the disguise of "A Royal Sorceress" or "Passion in a Palace." The mastery with which Mr. Popple discussed the novel of the day, especially in relation to the sensibilities of its hero and heroine, gave Undine a sense of intellectual activity which contrasted strikingly with Marvell's flippant estimate of such works. "Passion," the artist implied, would have been the dominant note of his life, had it not been held in check by a sentiment of exalted chivalry, and by the sense that a nature of such emotional intensity as his must always be "ridden on the curb."

Van Degen was helping himself from the tray of iced cocktails which stood near the tea-table, and Popple, turning to Undine, took up the thread of his discourse. But why, he asked, why allude before others to feelings so few could understand? The average man—lucky devil!—(with a compassionate glance at Van Degen's back) the average man knew nothing of the fierce conflict between the lower and higher natures; and even the woman whose eyes had kindled it—how much did *She* guess of its violence? Did she know—Popple recklessly asked—how often the artist was forgotten in the man—how

She had found out that she had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous.

make distinctions unknown to her girlish categories. She had found out that she had given herself to the exclusive and the dowdy when the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous; that she was in the case of those who have cast in their lot with a fallen cause, or—to use an analogy more within her range—who have hired an opera box on the wrong night. It was all confusing and exasperating. Apex ideals had been based on the myth of "old families" ruling New York from a throne of Revolutionary tradition, with the new millionaires paying them feudal allegiance. But experience had long since proved the delusiveness of the simile. Mrs. Marvell's classification of the world into the visited and the unvisited was as obsolete as a mediaeval cosmogony. Some of those whom Washington Square left unvisited were the centre of social systems far outside its ken, and as indifferent to its opinions as the constellations to the reckonings of the astronomers; and all these systems joyously revolved about their central sun of gold.

There were moments after Undine's return to New York when she was tempted to class her marriage with the hateful early mistakes from the memories of which she had hoped it would free her. Since it was never her habit to accuse herself of such mistakes it was inevitable that she should gradually come to lay the blame on Ralph. She found a poignant pleasure, at this stage of her career, in the question: "What does a young girl know of life?" And the poignancy was deepened by the fact that each of the friends to whom she put the question seemed convinced that—had the privilege been his—he would have known how to spare her the disenchantment it implied.

The conviction of having blundered was never more present to her than when, on this particular afternoon, the guests invited by Mr. Poppel to view her portrait began to assemble before it.

Some of the principal figures of Undine's group had rallied for the occasion, and almost all were in exasperating enjoyment of the privileges for which she pined. There was young Jim Driscoll, heir-apparent of the house, with his short stout mistrustful wife, who hated society, but went everywhere lest it might be thought she had been left out; the "beautiful Mrs. Beringer," a lovely aimless being, who kept (as Laura Fairford said) a home for stray opinions, and could never quite tell them apart; little Dicky Bowles, whom every one invited because he was understood to "say things" if one didn't; the Harvey Shallums, fresh from Paris, and dragging in their wake a bewildered nobleman vaguely designated as "the Count," who offered cautious conversational openings, like an explorer trying beads on savages; and, behind these more salient types, the usual filling in of those who are seen everywhere because they have learned to catch the social eye.

Such a company was one to flatter the artist as much his sitter, so completely did it

represent that unanimity of opinion which constitutes social strength. Not one the number was troubled by any personal theory of art: all they asked of a portrait was that the costume should be sufficiently "life-like," and the face not too much so; and a long experience in idealizing flesh and realizing dress-fabrics had enabled Mr. Pople to meet both demands.

"Hang it," Peter Van Degen pronounced, standing before the easel in an attitude of inspired interpretation, "the great thing in a man's portrait is to catch the likeness—we all know that; but with a woman's it's different—a woman's picture has got to be pleasing. Who wants it about if it isn't? Those big chaps who blow about what they call realism—how do *their* portraits look in a drawing-room? Do you suppose they ever ask themselves that? *They* don't care—they're not going to live with the things! And what do they know of drawing-rooms, anyhow? Lots of them haven't even got a dress-suit. There's where old Popp has the pull over 'em—*he* knows how we live and what we want."

This was received by the artist with a deprecating murmur, and by his public with warm expressions of approval.

"Happily in this case," Pople began ("as in that of so many of my sitters," he hastily put in), "there has been no need to idealize—nature herself has outdone the artist's dream." Undine, radiantly challenging comparison with her portrait, glanced up at it with a smile of conscious merit, which deepened as young Jim Driscoll declared:

"By Jove, Mamie, you must be done exactly like that for the new music-room."

His wife turned a cautious eye upon the picture.

"How big is it? For our house it would have to be a good deal bigger," she objected; and Pople, fired by the thought of such a dimensional opportunity, rejoined that it would be the chance of all others to "work in" a marble portico and a court-train: he had just done Mrs. Lycurgus Ambler in a court-train and feathers, and as *that* was for Buffalo of course the pictures needn't clash.

"Well, it would have to be a good deal bigger than Mrs. Ambler's," Mrs. Driscoll insisted; and on Pople's suggestion that in that case he might "work in" Driscoll, in court-dress also—"You've been presented? Well, you *will* be,—you'll *have* to, if I do the picture—which will make a lovely memento"—Van Degen turned aside to murmur to Undine: "Pure bluff, you know—Jim couldn't pay for a photograph. Old Driscoll's high and dry since the Ararat investigation."

She threw him a puzzled glance, having no time, in her crowded existence, to follow the

perturbations of Wall Street save as they affected the hospitality of Fifth Avenue. "You mean they've lost their money? Won't they give their fancy ball, then?"

Van Degen shrugged. "Nobody knows how it's coming out. That queer chap Elmer Moffatt threatens to give old Driscoll a fancy ball—says he's going to dress him in stripes! It seems he knows too much about the Apex street-railways."

Undine paled a little. Though she had already tried on her costume for the Driscoll ball her disappointment at Van Degen's announcement was effaced by the mention of Moffatt's name. She had not had the curiosity to follow the reports of the "Ararat Trust Investigation," but once or twice lately, in the snatches of smoking-room talk, she had been surprised by a vague allusion to Elmer Moffatt, as to an erratic financial influence, half ridiculed, yet already half redoubtable. Was it possible that the redoubtable element had prevailed? That the time had come when Elmer Moffatt—the Elmer Moffatt of Apex!—could, even for a moment, cause consternation in the Driscoll camp? He had always said he "saw things big"; but no one had ever believed he was destined to carry them out on the same scale. Yet apparently in those idle Apex days, while he seemed to be "loafing and fooling," as her father called it, he had really been sharpening his weapons of aggression; there had been something, after all, in the effect of loose-drifting power she had always felt in him. Her heart beat faster, and she longed to question Van Degen; but she was afraid of betraying herself, and turned back to the group about the picture. Mrs. Driscoll was still presenting objections in a tone of small mild obstinacy. "Oh, it's a *likeness*, of course—I can see that; but there's one thing I must say, Mr. Popple. It looks like a last year's dress."

The attention of the ladies instantly rallied to the picture, and the artist paled at the challenge.

"It doesn't look like a last year's face, anyhow—that's what makes them all wild," Van Degen murmured. Undine gave him back a quick smile. She had already forgotten about Moffatt. Any triumph in which she shared left a glow in her veins, and the success of the picture obscured all other impressions. She saw herself throning in a central panel at the spring exhibition, with the crowd pushing about the picture, repeating her name; and she decided to stop on the way home and telephone her press-agent to do a paragraph about Popple's tea.

But in the hall, as she drew on her cloak, her thoughts reverted to the Driscoll fancy ball. What a blow if it were given up after she had taken so much trouble about her dress! She was to go as the Empress Josephine, after the Prudhon portrait in the Louvre. The dress was already fitted and partly embroidered, and she foresaw the difficulty of persuading the dress-maker to take it back.

"Why so pale and sad, fair cousin? What's up?" Van Degen asked, as they emerged from the lift in which they had descended alone from the studio.

"I don't know—I'm tired of posing. And it was so frightfully hot."

"Yes. Popple always keeps his place at low-neck temperature, as if the portraits might catch cold." Van Degen glanced at his watch. "Where are you off to?"

"West End Avenue, of course—if I can find a cab to take me there."

It was not the least of Undine's grievances that she was still living in the house which represented Mr. Spragg's first real-estate venture in New York. It had been understood, at the time of her marriage, that the young couple were to be established within the sacred precincts of fashion; but on their return from the honeymoon the still untenanted house in West End Avenue had been placed at their disposal, and in view of Mr. Spragg's financial embarrassment even Undine had seen the folly of refusing it. That first winter, more-over, she had not regretted her exile: while she awaited her boy's birth she was glad to be out of sight of Fifth Avenue, and to take her hateful compulsory exercise where no familiar eye could fall on her. And the next year of course her father would give them a better house.

But the next year rents had risen in the Fifth Avenue quarter, and meanwhile little Paul Marvell, from his beautiful pink cradle, was already interfering with his mother's plans. Ralph, alarmed by the fresh rush of expenses, sided with his father-in-law in urging Undine to resign herself to West End Avenue; and thus after three years she was still submitting to the incessant pin-pricks inflicted by the incongruity between her social and geographical situation—the need of having to give a west side address to her tradesmen, and the deeper irritation of hearing her friends say: "Do let me give you a lift home, dear—Oh, I'd forgotten! I'm afraid I haven't the time to go so far—"

It was bad enough to have no motor of her own, to be avowedly dependent on "lifts," openly and unconcealably in quest of them, and perpetually plotting to provoke their offer (she did so hate to be seen in a cab!) but to miss them, as often as not, because of the remoteness of her destination, emphasized the hateful sense of being "out of things."

Van Degen looked out at the long snow-piled streets, down which the lamps were beginning to put their dreary yellow splashes.

"Of course you won't get a cab on a night like this. If you don't mind the open car, you'd better jump in with me. I'll run you out to the High Bridge and give you a breath of air before dinner."

The offer was tempting, for Undine's triumph in the studio had left her tired and nervous—she was beginning to learn that success may be as fatiguing as failure. Moreover, she was going to a big dinner that evening, and the fresh air would give her the eyes and complexion she needed; but in the back of her mind there lingered the vague sense of a forgotten engagement. As she tried to recall it she felt Van Degen raising the fur collar about her chin.

"Got anything you can put over your head? Will that lace thing do? Come along, then." He pushed her through the swinging doors, and added with a laugh, as they reached the street: "You're not afraid of being seen with me, are you? It's all right at this hour—Ralph's still swinging on a strap in the elevated."

The winter twilight was deliriously cold, and as they swept through Central Park, and gathered impetus for their northward flight along the darkening Boulevard, Undine felt the rush of physical joy that drowns scruples and silences memory. Her scruples, indeed, were not serious; but Ralph disliked her being too much with Van Degen, and it was her way to get what she wanted with as little "fuss" as possible. Moreover, she knew it was a mistake to make herself too accessible to a man of Peter's sort: her impatience to enjoy was curbed by an instinct for holding off and biding her time that resembled the patient skill with which her father had conducted the sale of his "bad" real estate in the Pure Water Move days. But now and then youth had its way—she could not always resist the present pleasure. And it was amusing, too, to be "talked about" with Peter Van Degen, who was noted for not caring for "nice women." She enjoyed the thought of triumphing over meretricious charms: it ennobled her in her own eyes to influence such a man for good.

Nevertheless, as the motor flew on through the icy twilight, her present cares flew with it. She could not shake off the thought of the useless fancy dress which symbolized the other crowding expenses she had not dared confess to Ralph. Van Degen heard her sigh, and bent down, lowering the speed of the motor.

"What's the matter? Isn't everything all right?"

His tone made her suddenly feel that she could confide in him, and though she began by murmuring that it was nothing she did so with the conscious purpose of being persuaded to confess. And his extraordinary "niceness" seemed to justify her and to prove that she had been right in trusting her instinct rather than in following the counsels of prudence. Heretofore, in their talks, she had never gone beyond the vaguest hint of material "bothers"—as to which dissimulation seemed vain while one lived in West End Avenue! But now that the avowal of a definite worry had been wrung from her she felt the injustice of the view generally taken of poor Peter. For he had been

to part"); he had just laughed away, in bluff brotherly fashion, the gnawing thought of the fancy dress, had assured her he'd give a ball himself rather than miss seeing her wear it, and had added: "Oh, hang waiting for the bill—won't a couple of thou make it all right?" in a tone that showed what a small matter money was to any one who took the larger view of life.

The whole incident passed off so quickly and easily that within a few minutes she had settled down—with a nod for his "Everything jolly again now?"—to untroubled enjoyment of the hour. Peace of mind, she said to herself, was all she needed to make her happy—and that was just what Ralph had never given her! At the thought his face seemed to rise before her, with the sharp lines of care between the eyes: it was almost like a part of his "nagging" that he should thrust himself in at such a moment! She tried to shut her eyes to the face; but a moment later it was replaced by another, a small odd likeness of itself; and with a cry of compunction she started up from her furs.

"Mercy! It's the boy's birthday—I was to take him to his grandmother's. She was to have a cake for him and Ralph was to come up town. I *knew* there was something I'd forgotten!"

Staff Spotlight

From **Rebecka McDougall, Communications Director**:

Scandals, social climbing, embezzlement, and suicide—reading Wharton's story of Undine Spragg, I couldn't help but think of the successful "Housewives" franchise on Bravo. The same elements that make for popular reality TV are found in the pages of *The Custom of the Country*. The main difference between the two is that Wharton's Undine Spragg is a fictional caricature, combining all the unattractive traits of many and attributing them to one individual, whereas the celebrities of reality TV are living and breathing exaggerations of ourselves.

I wonder what Wharton would make of our current reality culture, where marriages and friendships are easily thrown aside if they get in the way of 15-minutes of fame. Was Wharton prescient, knowing that a society that values status, wealth, and looks above all else would eventually produce real-life Undines who destroy lives while we watch from the comfort of our living rooms?