The Custom of the Country

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I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Heeny, in comparison, had a reassuring look of solidity and reality. The planting of her firm black bulk in its chair, and the grasp of her broad red hands on the gilt arms, bespoke an organized and self-reliant activity, accounted for by the fact that Mrs. Heeny was a

"society" manicure and masseuse. Toward Mrs. Spragg and her daughter she filled the double role of manipulator and friend; and it was in the latter capacity that, her day's task ended, she had dropped in for a moment to "cheer up" the lonely ladies of the Stentorian.

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Heeny's small blue eyes shot out sparks of curiosity.
"Marvell—what Marvell is that?"

The girl explained languidly: "A little fellow—I think Mr. Popple said his name was Ralph"; while her mother continued: "Undine met them both last night at that party downstairs. And from something Mr. Popple said to her about going to one of the new plays, she thought—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why, Undine Spragg, I've told you all about them time and again! His mother was a Dagonet. They live with old Urban Dagonet down in Washington Square."

To Mrs. Spragg this conveyed even less than to her daughter, "'way down there? Why do they live with somebody else? Haven't they got the means to have a home of their own?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mercy, no! Married ladies."

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

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

"Do you know Mrs. Fairford too?" Undine asked eagerly; while Mrs. Spragg, impressed, but anxious for facts, pursued: "Does she reside on Fifth Avenue?"

"No, she has a little house in Thirty-eighth Street, down beyond Park Avenue."

The ladies' faces drooped again, and the masseuse went on promptly: "But they're glad enough to have her in the big houses!—Why, yes, I know her," she said, addressing herself to Undine. "I mass'd her for a sprained ankle a couple of years ago. She's got a lovely manner, but NO conversation. Some of my patients converse exquisitely," Mrs. Heeny added with discrimination.

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

"No—you are," said Mrs. Heeny bluntly. "Don't you know it's the thing in the best society to pretend that girls can't do anything without their mothers' permission? You just remember that. Undine. You mustn't

accept invitations from gentlemen without you say you've got to ask your mother first."

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Heeny looked at her hostess with friendly compassion. She was well aware that she was the only bright spot on Mrs. Spragg's horizon. Since the Spraggs, some two years previously, had moved from Apex City to New York, they had made little progress in establishing relations with their new environment; and when, about four months earlier, Mrs. Spragg's doctor had called in Mrs. Heeny to minister professionally to his patient, he had done more for her spirit than for her body. Mrs. Heeny had had such "cases" before: she knew the rich helpless family, stranded in lonely splendour in a sumptuous West Side hotel, with a father compelled to seek a semblance of social life at the hotel bar, and a mother deprived of even this contact with her kind, and reduced to illness by boredom and inactivity. Poor Mrs. Spragg had done her own washing in her youth, but since her rising fortunes had made this occupation unsuitable she had sunk into the relative inertia which the ladies of Apex City regarded as one of the prerogatives of affluence. At Apex, however, she had belonged to a social club, and, until they moved to the Mealey House, had been kept busy by the incessant struggle with domestic cares; whereas New York seemed to offer no field for any form of lady-like activity. She therefore took her exercise vicariously, with Mrs. Heeny's help; and Mrs. Heeny knew how to manipulate her imagination as well as her muscles. It was Mrs. Heeny who peopled the solitude of the long ghostly days with lively anecdotes of the Van Degens, the Driscolls, the Chauncey Ellings and the other social potentates whose least doings Mrs. Spragg and Undine had followed from afar in the Apex papers, and who had come to seem so much more

remote since only the width of the Central Park divided mother and daughter from their Olympian portals.

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

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

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

She seemed as yet—poor child!—too small for New York: actually imperceptible to its heedless multitudes; and her mother trembled for the day when her invisibility should be borne in on her. Mrs. Spragg did not mind the long delay for herself—she had stores of lymphatic patience. But she had noticed lately that Undine was beginning to be nervous, and there was nothing that Undine's parents dreaded so much as her being nervous. Mrs. Spragg's maternal apprehensions unconsciously escaped in her next words.

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

"Who's that? Undine?"

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

"Oh, he'll come round. Things don't happen as quick as that in New York," said Mrs. Heeny, driving her nail-polisher cheeringly.

Mrs. Spragg sighed again. "They don't appear to. They say New Yorkers are always in a hurry; but I can't say as they've hurried much to make our acquaintance."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Spragg came in silently, setting his high hat down on the centre-table, and laying his overcoat across one of the gilt chairs. He was tallish, grey-bearded and somewhat stooping, with the slack figure of the sedentary man who would be stout if he were not dyspeptic; and his cautious grey eyes with pouch-like underlids had straight black brows like his daughter's. His thin hair was worn a little too long over his coat collar, and a Masonic emblem dangled from the heavy gold chain which crossed his crumpled black waistcoat.

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

Mrs. Spragg remained seated, but her eyes dwelt on him affectionately.

"Undine's been asked out to a dinner-party; and Mrs. Heeny says it's to

one of the first families. It's the sister of one of the gentlemen that Mabel Lipscomb introduced her to last night."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I guess she's in her room, going over her dresses with that French maid. I don't know as she's got anything fit to wear to that dinner," Mrs. Spragg added in a tentative murmur.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He slipped his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets. "No—I guess Elmer and
I are pretty well talked out."

Mrs. Spragg took up her moan. "Don't you tell her you saw him, Abner."

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

"Oh, I guess not—not in this new set she's going with! Don't tell her ANYHOW."

He turned away, feeling for one of the cigars which he always carried loose in his pocket; and his wife, rising, stole after him, and laid her hand on his arm.

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

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

II

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

She went to the window, and drawing back its many layers of lace gazed eastward down the long brownstone perspective. Beyond the Park lay Fifth Avenue—and Fifth Avenue was where she wanted to be!

She turned back into the room, and going to her writing-table laid Mrs. Fairford's note before her, and began to study it minutely. She had read in the "Boudoir Chat" of one of the Sunday papers that the smartest women were using the new pigeon-blood notepaper with white

ink; and rather against her mother's advice she had ordered a large supply, with her monogram in silver. It was a disappointment, therefore, to find that Mrs. Fairford wrote on the old-fashioned white sheet, without even a monogram—simply her address and telephone number. It gave Undine rather a poor opinion of Mrs. Fairford's social standing, and for a moment she thought with considerable satisfaction of answering the note on her pigeon-blood paper. Then she remembered Mrs. Heeny's emphatic commendation of Mrs. Fairford, and her pen wavered. What if white paper were really newer than pigeon blood? It might be more stylish, anyhow. Well, she didn't care if Mrs. Fairford didn't like red paper—SHE did! And she wasn't going to truckle to any woman who lived in a small house down beyond Park Avenue...

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

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

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

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

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

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

Undine, as a child, had taken but a lukewarm interest in the diversions of her playmates. Even in the early days when she had lived with her parents in a ragged outskirt of Apex, and hung on the fence with Indiana Frusk, the freckled daughter of the plumber "across the way," she had

cared little for dolls or skipping-ropes, and still less for the riotous games in which the loud Indiana played Atalanta to all the boyhood of the quarter. Already Undine's chief delight was to "dress up" in her mother's Sunday skirt and "play lady" before the wardrobe mirror. The taste had outlasted childhood, and she still practised the same secret pantomime, gliding in, settling her skirts, swaying her fan, moving her lips in soundless talk and laughter; but lately she had shrunk from everything that reminded her of her baffled social yearnings. Now, however, she could yield without afterthought to the joy of dramatizing her beauty. Within a few days she would be enacting the scene she was now mimicking; and it amused her to see in advance just what impression she would produce on Mrs. Fairford's guests.

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

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

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

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

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

"Who? The Fairfords and Marvells? If they ain't swell enough for you. Undine Spragg, you'd better go right over to the court of England!"

Undine straightened herself. "I want the best. Are they as swell as the Driscolls and Van Degens?"

Mrs. Heeny sounded a scornful laugh. "Look at here, now, you unbelieving girl! As sure as I'm standing here before you, I've seen Mrs. Harmon B. Driscoll of Fifth Avenue laying in her pink velvet bed with Honiton lace sheets on it, and crying her eyes out because she couldn't get asked to one of Mrs. Paul Marvell's musicals. She'd never 'a dreamt of being asked to a dinner there! Not all of her money couldn't 'a bought her that—and she knows it!"

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

GO STEADY, UNDINE! Yes, that was the advice she needed. Sometimes, in her dark moods, she blamed her parents for not having given it to her. She was so young... and they had told her so little! As she looked back she shuddered at some of her escapes. Even since they had come to New York she had been on the verge of one or two perilous adventures, and there had been a moment during their first winter when she had actually engaged herself to the handsome Austrian riding-master who accompanied her in the Park. He had carelessly shown her a card-case with a coronet, and had confided in her that he had been forced to resign from a crack cavalry regiment for fighting a duel about a Countess; and as a result of these confidences she had pledged herself to him, and bestowed on him her pink pearl ring in exchange for one of

twisted silver, which he said the Countess had given him on her deathbed with the request that he should never take it off till he met a woman more beautiful than herself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was all very novel and interesting, and at first Undine envied Mabel Lipscomb for having made herself a place in such circles; but in time she began to despise her for being content to remain there. For it did not take Undine long to learn that introduction to Mabel's "set" had brought her no nearer to Fifth Avenue. Even in Apex, Undine's tender imagination had been nurtured on the feats and gestures of Fifth Avenue. She knew all of New York's golden aristocracy by name, and the lineaments of its most distinguished scions had been made familiar by passionate poring over the daily press. In Mabel's world she sought in vain for the originals, and only now and then caught a tantalizing glimpse of one of their familiars: as when Claud Walsingham Popple, engaged on the portrait of a lady whom the Lipscombs described as "the wife of a Steel Magnet," felt it his duty to attend one of his client's teas, where it became Mabel's privilege to make his acquaintance and to name to him her friend Miss Spragg.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Spragg surveyed her with humorous fondness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

III

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

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

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

progressed she began to suspect that it wasn't a real "dinner party," and that they had just asked her in to share what they had when they were alone.

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

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

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

Mrs. Fairford talked so well that the girl wondered why Mrs. Heeny had found her lacking in conversation. But though Undine thought silent people awkward she was not easily impressed by verbal fluency.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bernhard in a play she called "Leg-long," and another which she pronounced "Fade"; but even this did not carry them far, as she had forgotten what both plays were about and had found the actress a good deal older than she expected.

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

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

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

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

"—TO DINE WITH ME TOO?" That must be what she was going to say, and
Undine's heart gave a bound.

"—to see me some afternoon," Mrs. Van Degen ended, going down the steps to her motor, at the door of which a much-furred footman waited with more furs on his arm.

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

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

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

IV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No—no one."

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

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

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

"Do you know what a box costs?"

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

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

"Mabel could buy seats for herself."

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Spragg cast a frightened glance at her husband. These struggles between two resolute wills always brought on her palpitations, and she

wished she had her phial of digitalis with her.

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

"I only want it once."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Undine went for a ride, not because she felt particularly disposed for the exercise, but because she wished to discipline her mother. She was almost sure she would get her opera box, but she did not see why she should have to struggle for her rights, and she was especially annoyed with Mrs. Spragg for seconding her so half-heartedly. If she and her

mother did not hold together in such crises she would have twice the work to do.

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

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

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

"No, he hasn't yet."

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

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

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

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

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

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

She sprang up, tugging at the waistband of her habit, while Mrs. Spragg, relapsing from temerity to meekness, hovered about her with obstructive zeal. "If you'd only just let go of my skirt, mother—I can unhook it twice as quick myself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Presently her attention was drawn to a lady in black who was examining the pictures through a tortoise-shell eye-glass adorned with diamonds and hanging from a long pearl chain. Undine was instantly struck by the opportunities which this toy presented for graceful wrist

movements and supercilious turns of the head. It seemed suddenly plebeian and promiscuous to look at the world with a naked eye, and all her floating desires were merged in the wish for a jewelled eye-glass and chain. So violent was this wish that, drawn on in the wake of the owner of the eye-glass, she found herself inadvertently bumping against a stout tight-coated young man whose impact knocked her catalogue from her hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was no message from her father, and a reaction of disgust set in. Of what good were such encounters if they were to have no sequel? She would probably never meet Peter Van Degen again—or, if she DID run across him in the same accidental way, she knew they could not continue their conversation without being "introduced." What was the