

The Custom of the Country



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDITH WHARTON

Born Edith Newbold Jones, Edith Wharton was born into a wealthy real-estate family in New York City. She spent much of her youth traveling around Europe and became fluent in several languages. Wharton started writing at a young age, and with help from her family, got a few poems published, many anonymously. Her parents, however, initially placed more emphasis on her social status than her writing. After her society debut in 1879, she didn't write much for several years, and instead participated in New York social life and married her husband Edward Robbins Wharton in 1885. During the early years of her marriage, Wharton traveled extensively. Although she didn't publish a novel until she was over 40 (*The Valley of Decision* in 1902), she became extremely prolific, writing over 15 novels, as well as many shorter works, poems, and nonfiction works. She is perhaps best known today for her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and for the novella *Ethan Frome* (1911). She died in 1937 at her country home in France.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wharton published *The Custom of the Country* during the Progressive Era, just before the start of World War I. The Progressive Era was a time of social change (including a greater acceptance for divorce in many parts of the United States), but it was also a time of widespread corruption, where even new "trustbusting" laws were not enough to stop big corporate monopolies. As Undine Spragg's situation in the novel shows, many women had more social and economic freedoms than they did in previous eras, but they still lacked the right to vote, and men still dominated positions of authority.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Due to her affluent background, Edith Wharton had a strong education in canonically classic writers such as Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*), John Milton (*Paradise Lost*), Victor Hugo (*Les Misérables*), and Washington Irving ("The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"). The character name "Ralph Marvell" may have been inspired by the poet Andrew Marvell ("To His Coy Mistress"). Wharton's precise style also draws influence from scientific writers of the time, such as Charles Darwin (*On the Origin of Species*) and Herbert Spencer (*Principles of Biology*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Custom of the Country

- **When Written:** Early 20th century
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** 1913
- **Literary Period:** The Progressive Era, Modernism
- **Genre:** Novel, Comedy of Manners, Tragicomedy
- **Setting:** New York City and France
- **Climax:** Undine realizes she wants to marry Elmer Moffatt again.
- **Antagonist:** Undine's own selfishness and materialism
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Life Imitates Art. The phrase "keeping up with the Joneses" (i.e., trying to compete with your neighbors to own the best things) may have originally referred to Edith Wharton's father's family (whose last name was Jones). Fittingly, many of Wharton's novels are about characters who metaphorically try to "keep up with the Joneses."

Based on True Events. *The Custom of the Country*, a novel about a woman who gets divorced four times, was published in the same year that Edith Wharton divorced her own husband.



PLOT SUMMARY

Undine Spragg lives with her parents, Mr. Spragg and Mrs. Spragg, at a hotel in New York City called the **Stentorian**. It has a view of **Fifth Avenue**, but it isn't quite part of that fashionable area. Her family is originally from **Apex**, a city in the Midwest where Mr. Spragg recently made his fortune. In her first two years in the city, Undine has not been successful in meeting members of New York's high society, but one day she gets an invitation to a dinner party hosted by Laura Fairford, the sister of Ralph Marvell. Along with the Dagonets, the Marvells are one of the most fashionable families in New York, and Undine tries to make connections.

Eventually, Ralph takes a liking to Undine and proposes to her. Before they can get married, however, Elmer Moffatt shows up in New York. Elmer is originally from Apex, and he was Undine's first husband. If news got out that Undine was already divorced, it would be a major scandal that could end her engagement with Ralph. Elmer agrees to stay silent, as long as Undine introduces him to any useful business partners she happens to meet through her marriage. So at last, Ralph and Undine get married.

During their honeymoon in Europe, Ralph realizes that he'll

have a hard time finding enough money to pay for all of Undine's extravagant desires. Even in the most scenic parts of Europe, Undine gets bored whenever there isn't a crowd of people around her. Eventually, the couple has to return home when Undine realizes that she is pregnant with a son, Paul Marvell.

Back in New York, Ralph and Undine's marriage dissolves over the course of several years. Undine begins spending time with Peter Van Degen (the husband of Ralph's cousin Clare Van Degen), who in spite of being married, has a reputation as a notorious playboy. One turning point is when Undine forgets to pick up Paul to bring him to his own birthday party. Undine gets the idea that she would be happier in Europe, so using the excuse that it's for her own health, she leaves Ralph and Paul to go to France.

In France, Undine makes plans to divorce Ralph and marry Peter, who is richer and so who would better be able to pay for Undine's lifestyle. Although Peter initially seems willing to leave his wife, when the two of them go back to the United States to finalize their divorces and meet up again, Peter dumps Undine.

Without a husband, Undine goes back to Paris, where she attracts the attention of the French marquis Raymond de Chelles. Raymond comes from a wealthy, traditional family of French Catholics, which means that they don't believe in divorce, at least without an official annulment. Running low on money as she tries to figure out how to procure an annulment, Undine happens to run into Elmer Moffatt again, and he gives her an unusual suggestion: to use her custody over Paul to get money from Ralph.

Ralph and his family have been raising Paul in Undine's absence, but in order to avoid a scandal, he carelessly signed all the divorce papers without looking at what they said. After speaking with his cousin Clare, Ralph realizes that Undine is only enforcing her custody over Paul as a way to raise money, and so he borrows a lot of money from his family and takes it to Elmer Moffatt for a legally dubious business deal that will take place in Apex. The deal doesn't go through in time to meet Undine's lawyers' deadline, and in the process, Ralph learns about Undine's first marriage to Elmer. Ralph commits suicide, which allows Undine to marry Raymond. The funds that Ralph invested make a profit three months later.

Undine marries Raymond and takes Paul to France with her. Though she is happy for a short time, she comes to resent Raymond, who makes her spend long months in an isolated chateau at Saint Desert rather than Paris, where she'd prefer to be. For a while, even the willful Undine feels trapped by the force of Raymond's old traditions. But one day, she happens to run into her ex-husband Elmer Moffatt, who has become extremely wealthy and who just so happens to be looking at tapestries owned by Raymond's family.

Elmer and Undine begin spending more time together, and

eventually, Elmer suggests that if she divorces Raymond, he'd be willing to marry her. After some persuading, Undine agrees. A couple years later, Undine has everything she ever wanted at the beginning of the novel—Elmer is the first husband who can afford even her most expensive wishes. Paul, however, is left alone to wander through a big, empty hotel while his parents are off traveling the world. Just as Undine is about to host a triumphant dinner party, she begins to imagine what it would be like to be the wife of an ambassador—something that will never happen because of Undine's many divorces.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Undine Spragg – Undine Spragg is the daughter of Mr. Spragg and Mrs. Spragg, and while she originally comes from **Apex** in the Midwest, her dream is to eventually become a member of the **Fifth Avenue** society in New York City. Over the course of the story, she marries and divorces several men, including Elmer Moffatt, Ralph Marvell, Raymond de Chelles, and then Elmer Moffatt again, having her son Paul Marvell with Ralph. Undine's defining characteristic is her desire to climb up the social ranks. She constantly measures herself against the people around her and almost always reaches the conclusion that she could be doing more. At the beginning of the novel, she feels shame about her party dresses that sit in her wardrobe unused, and throughout the rest of the novel, she does whatever she can to make sure that she is always surrounded by people—ideally people who will notice and admire her. As a result of this, many of Undine's friendships are based on competition, such as her rivalry with Indiana Frusk, who always seemed to live in Undine's shadow in Apex but who surprises Undine later in the novel with her social conquests, including a marriage to Representative James J. Rolliver. Because of her endless ambition, Undine feels little satisfaction in achieving her goals and often finds herself haunted by her failures, such as her inability to make Peter Van Degen propose to her. By the end of the novel, Undine has obtained everything she ever wanted—including a marriage to Elmer Moffatt, who has become so wealthy that Undine will never have to worry about money again—but she remains unsatisfied. She imagines what it would be like to be the wife of an ambassador (which she can likely never become because of her history of divorces). While elements of Undine's character are sympathetic, she ultimately represents the dangers of greed and of unchecked ambition, showing how materialism can make it impossible to ever be satisfied.

Ralph Marvell – Ralph Marvell is Undine Spragg's second husband and the father of her only child, Paul Marvell. The Marvell family is related to the Dagonet family, and these families both have long, illustrious histories in New York City but also don't have as much money as their reputations might

suggest. Despite his family's dwindling funds, Ralph still grows up in privilege, primarily living off an allowance from his grandfather, Mr. Dagonet, while making very small amounts of money off his poetry. While Ralph imagines that he likes to live a simple life, his marriage to the extravagant Undine Spragg forces him to learn the value of money, even taking up an office job in real estate. Ralph is not ambitious or a social climber, making him a bad fit for Undine; ultimately, she abandons both him and Paul, and then divorces him. Ralph's trusting attitude causes him to be careless during the divorce, and this gives Undine the opportunity to use her custody over Paul to try to get more money out of Ralph. In order to pay Undine off and keep Paul, Ralph goes to Elmer Moffatt and takes a risky business deal. At a low moment, when it seems like he'll lose Paul and the deal will fail, Ralph commits suicide, only for the deal to go through three months later. Ralph illustrates how the naïve and the unambitious can flounder in a cut-throat society. His death is tragicomic, since three months might have made all the difference, illustrating the dangers of short-term thinking and the need for instant gratification.

Elmer Moffatt – Elmer Moffatt is Undine Spragg's first husband; many years after the divorce, he marries her again to become her fourth husband. Like Mr. Spragg and Mrs. Spragg, as well as like Undine herself, Elmer Moffatt is shaped by his background in the Midwestern town of **Apex**. Apex is small enough that when Elmer elopes with Undine, it causes a scandal and seriously damages Elmer's reputation. New York offers a new start for Elmer. Compared to the upper-class members of New York society like Ralph Marvell, Elmer is more mercenary and willing to do whatever it takes to get ahead. This trait serves him well, and despite several setbacks and reversals, Elmer ultimately establishes himself as a successful player on Wall Street. In many ways, Elmer is the male counterpart to Undine, showing how sometimes it's possible to climb the social ladder through sheer, undisguised ambition. Unlike Undine, however, there's nothing particularly tragic or cautionary about Elmer's story, and so Elmer represents how New York high society rewards ambition and having flexible morals.

Raymond de Chelles – Raymond de Chelles is a French marquis and of Undine Spragg's third husband. Although his significant wealth and European background seem to differentiate him from Undine's previous husbands, he ultimately disappoints her just as her previous husbands did. Partly, this is because Undine is the type of person who's never satisfied, but it's also because Raymond fails to live up to her romantic notions of European nobility. Even compared to the old-money families of New York, Raymond is traditional, since European history goes back even further. Raymond's Catholic faith (which forbids divorce) has ancient roots and contrasts with the more recent Protestant faith of most of the American characters from New York. Raymond also has an old-fashioned

devotion to preserving his family's rural chateau, which contrasts with the more contemporary urban style of the wealthy American characters. All of this bores Undine, who prefers the bustle of urban life, yet the strength of Raymond's belief in tradition leaves her feeling powerless to oppose him. Raymond demonstrates how there are different kinds of wealth outside of New York high society and how in spite of old money's glamor, it often comes with traditions that trap new generations in their ancestors' shadows.

Peter Van Degen – Peter Van Degen is Clare Van Degen's husband. He has a reputation for womanizing and later becomes Undine Spragg's admirer, though Undine is at that point already married to Ralph Marvell. Although in the end Peter and Undine barely even kiss, Undine believes that Peter is on the verge of divorcing his wife to marry her. As Ralph notes at one point, what Peter really offers for Undine isn't sex but admiration (as well as money). Unlike the Dagonets, who are respectable but no longer truly wealthy, Peter is the sort of man who never has to worry about money. As far as Undine is concerned, this makes him ideal, as she constantly feels inadequate and tries to compensate by spending money. Ultimately, however, Peter rejects Undine. His character represents how fickle the wealthy can be, as he cycles between his wife and various mistresses as it pleases him.

Clare Van Degen – Clare Van Degen is one of the most important members of New York high society, being part of the Dagonet family by birth and the Van Degen family through her marriage to Peter Van Degen. Although Clare was once in love with her cousin Ralph Marvell and still holds some feelings for him, she rarely acts on them, and he doesn't either. Clare is too devoted to tradition to consider divorcing Peter, even as Peter earns himself a reputation as a playboy. Clare and Peter's marriage reflects how many members of upper-class New York society lived with open secrets, showing how these secrets could drive spouses apart. Clare shows how tradition and custom can trap people in ways that no amount of wealth or privilege can overcome.

Mr. Abner E. Spragg – Mr. Abner E. Spragg Undine Spragg's father; he's married to Mrs. Leota B. Spragg. He is wealthy by **Apex** standards, but he is not quite so wealthy by New York standards. But although Mr. Spragg frequently complains of bills and his own bad financial situation, he almost never turns down his daughter when she asks for something. Mr. Spragg's new money contrasts with established New York families like the Dagonets—Mr. Spragg lived humbly until he became part of a legally dubious scheme involving Representative James J. Rolliver and water purification in Apex. Mr. Spragg's defining trait is his gently ironic sense of humor. As an outsider in wealthy society, he remains amused by the new world he inhabits, and his attitude seems to be that it's easier to go along with things rather than trying to change them.

Paul Marvell – Paul Marvell is Ralph Marvell and Undine

Spragg's son. Although Paul is charming and generally impresses all of the adults who meet him, he struggles to win his mother's affection. Although Undine occasionally feels sympathy toward Paul, she generally puts her own needs and wants above his. In fact, she even weaponizes her custody of Paul as an attempt to get money out of Ralph, which ultimately leads to Ralph's suicide. In the story, Paul plays the role of the innocent victim, showing the dark side and the dire consequences of Undine's selfishness.

Claud Walsingham Popple – Claud Popple is a portrait painter who is a member of New York high society, albeit not one of the most respected members. Undine Spragg takes an early interest in him but loses interest when Mrs. Heeny advises her that Ralph Marvell is even better. While Ralph has idealistic ideas about art (but doesn't actually produce much of it), Claud represents the exact opposite, taking a utilitarian approach to his art that at times even borders on sloppy. Claud gives people what they expect from portraits, nothing less, nothing more. While some characters look down on Claud, he shows how it's possible to hold onto a position in high society by doing the bare minimum to flatter people's expectations.

Mrs. Heeny – Mrs. Heeny is a masseuse who in many ways acts as a surrogate parental figure to Undine Spragg in New York City, since Undine's mother, Mrs. Spragg, doesn't understand the nuances of **Fifth Avenue** high society. While Mrs. Heeny is herself more of an observer than a member of high society, her obsession with saving newspaper clippings (especially from the society pages) gives her a solid understanding of how the New York social world moves. She kickstarts Undine's social ambitions, encouraging her to try to improve her status. Mrs. Heeny lives out her own fantasies of social climbing vicariously through Undine.

Representative James J. Rolliver – Representative James J. Rolliver is a major figure in a minor subplot about corrupt business dealings in the Midwestern town **Apex**. These shady dealings help both Mr. Spragg and Elmer Moffatt become wealthy, as well as enriching the reputation of Representative Rolliver himself. James J. Rolliver's presence in the novel helps highlight how many wealthy people built their fortunes on shaky moral ground and how rather than fighting corruption, many politicians used it to their advantage.

Princess Lili Estradina – Princess Lili Estradina is Raymond de Chelles's cousin and one of Undine Spragg's friends. Like Raymond, the Princess represents the glamor of European aristocracy, but she also highlights how European nobles often fail to live up to their lofty titles. She is older than she looks, and her unglamorous outfits frequently clash with her title, suggesting that a title alone is not enough to transform a person and that the old aristocratic traditions are becoming obsolete in the modern world.

Indiana Frusk – Indiana Frusk is Undine Spragg's old friend and

rival from back when they both lived in **Apex**. Although Indiana lived in Undine's shadow during their younger days, even marrying a man that Undine had already cast off, Indiana leapfrogs to a higher social position when she marries Representative James J. Rolliver. Indiana highlights the volatile nature of social status and how success or failure in one part of life doesn't necessarily guarantee the same results later.

Mr. Dagonet – Mr. Dagonet is the patriarch of the venerable New York Dagonet family; he's also Ralph Marvell and Laura Fairford's grandfather. Despite her reverence for the members of New York high society, Undine Spragg finds Mr. Dagonet unimpressive, and indeed, his family isn't nearly as wealthy as it once was. Mr. Dagonet even has to ask Mr. Spragg for help supporting Ralph when Ralph is set to marry Undine. Although Mr. Dagonet embodies the influence of tradition, he also shows how tradition alone isn't enough and how even the most venerable families face losing their reputation once the money starts to run out.

Laura Fairford – Laura Fairford is Ralph Marvell's sister. She sets into motion all the events of the novel by inviting Undine Spragg to a dinner party on Ralph's behalf. Laura always tries to be the perfect hostess, always doing whatever she can to include everyone in conversation and to smooth over any potential unpleasantness. While Laura's wealth and manners make her the epitome of New York high society, Undine still finds her unimpressive, suggesting that for all Laura's accomplishments, she lives in an insular world that doesn't always make sense to outsiders.

Mabel Lipscomb – Mabel Lipscomb is originally from New York, but she met Undine Spragg at a boarding school in the Midwest. Undine constantly measures herself against the people around her and tries to outdo them, and her ambitions in New York are motivated in part by a desire to prove that she can do better than Mabel.

Celeste – Celeste is Undine Spragg's French maid. She hints at how upper-class New York life is only possible due to the largely unseen work performed by servants, and her foreign background also represents how globalized the world was becoming—at least for the wealthy who could afford easy trips between the U.S. and Europe.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Leota B. Spragg – Mrs. Leota B. Spragg is Undine Spragg's mother and Mr. Abner E. Spragg's wife. She supports her daughter's social climbing ambitions, even though she herself doesn't understand high society or look particularly glamorous.

Harmon B. Driscoll – Harmon B. Driscoll owns the firm in New York where Elmer Moffatt works. Elmer alternately supports and betrays Harmon, depending on which side will pay more, and so ultimately, the once respectable Harmon B. Driscoll becomes little more than a pawn.

The Duchess – The Duchess is Princess Lili Estradina’s mother and Raymond de Chelles’s aunt. Unlike her daughter, the Duchess matches with Undine Spragg’s idea of how a noble should look, but she also shows heavy signs of age.

Hubert de Chelles – Hubert de Chelles is Raymond de Chelles’s brother. He causes problems for his family racking up debts even after he marries an American heiress, exhibiting a compulsion for spending money that mirrors Undine Spragg’s.

The Marquise de Chelles – The Marquise de Chelles is Raymond de Chelles and Hubert de Chelles’s mother. Like the Duchess, she is one of the last survivors of a prior era of nobility, and any remaining glamor she has is directly related to this sense of ruin.

Harry Lipscomb – Harry Lipscomb is Mabel Lipscomb’s husband. He’s a stockbroker who is most notable for exposing one of Undine Spragg’s old fiancés as a fraud.

Charles Bowen – Charles Bowen is an older man who hangs around with Laura Fairford. He shows how high society is populated with hangers-on who attach themselves to others.

Henley Fairford – Henley Fairford is a member of New York high society who marries Laura Fairford, Ralph Marvell’s sister.

husband’s (Ralph Marvell) family. But even with Undine’s freedom to get out of marriages quickly with divorce, she still finds herself catering to the whims of male characters. For instance, she spends months trying to get a proposal out of Peter Van Degen, only for him to abruptly drop and forget her. Undine’s move to Europe introduces her to yet another set of attitudes and customs surrounding marriage and divorce; there, she’s forced to follow the more traditional, Catholic beliefs of her second husband, Raymond de Chelles, whose old-fashioned ways can make even Undine defer to him. The many marriages and divorces of *The Custom of the Country* explore how despite the conventional idea that marriage is based on love, it often functions more as a business transaction, a means of social climbing, or a way to control people.



MATERIALISM AND AMBITION

On the surface, Undine Spragg, the main character of Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country*, seems unrelentingly selfish. She has an endless appetite for buying new things, and she quickly burns through the money of any other character foolish enough to give it to her. But behind Undine’s selfishness is the insecurity that she’s never doing enough to keep up with the people around her. While Undine’s father (Mr. Spragg) is well off, he’s not extremely wealthy by New York City standards. So, in order to keep up her lavish lifestyle, Undine’s only option if she wants to move from **the Stentorian to Fifth Avenue** is to improve her social status by meeting people richer than her (and perhaps marrying one of them). In this way, Undine’s materialism and her ambition to improve her social status go hand in hand, with her heavy spending helping her keep up social appearances with the Fifth Avenue crowd and her social connections helping to fund her heavy spending. By the end of the novel, the ambitious Undine Spragg has everything she wanted at the beginning of the novel. She is securely married to Elmer Moffatt, the man she wanted to marry in the first place, and he is wealthy enough to support her lavish lifestyle. But Undine’s ending isn’t triumphant: despite her many successes, Undine is dissatisfied to learn that she’ll never be an ambassador’s wife (because of her previous divorces). Even after achieving all her goals, she finds new ones to chase. The character of Undine Spragg is tragic because her potentially admirable ambition gets twisted by the materialistic world she lives in, where selfishness is expected and even rewarded. Undine demonstrates how social climbing isn’t about achieving a specific goal but rather about always striving for more and how getting caught up in this endless cycle of greed and ambition ultimately leads to misery.



GENDER ROLES

The characters in Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* live in a society that adheres to a



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* is a novel full of marriages and divorces. Over the course of the book, the main character, Undine Spragg, gets divorced three times and married four times, and along the way, she considers even more marriage options. While Undine is perhaps an extreme example when it comes to quick marriages and divorces (her first marriage lasted just two weeks), her character illustrates how the conventions of marriage transformed rapidly in the early-20th century, even while other marriage traditions remained relevant.

Undine, along with her friends like Indiana Rusk and Mabel Lipscomb, is a modern woman who puts more emphasis on her own happiness than on meekly submitting to her husband. But while the novel shows how divorce offers new freedoms, particularly to women, it also comes with consequences, restrictions, and exceptions. For example, the novel shows the potential consequences of a messy divorce when Undine manipulates marriage law for selfish reasons, using her custody over her son (Paul Marvell) to try to extort money from her ex-

gender binary where men and women fulfill different roles and face different expectations. While Undine Spragg is willful and impulsive, she still lives in a patriarchal world where men hold most of the positions of authority in business, political, and religious matters. Because of this, men play a similarly authoritative role in her own life. Particularly in the upper-class circles that Undine wants to infiltrate, women rarely work, and so in order to fund her lifestyle, Undine needs to find male patrons, whether it's her father (Mr. Spragg) or one of her past, present, or future husbands.

But while the gender binary often tips the scale against Undine, she also finds ways to use it to her advantage and even to manipulate the people around her. Undine's ignorance of business, which other characters accept because she's a woman, allows her to spend money freely while letting other people sort out the consequences. Undine also flips "traditional" ideas of motherhood, largely ignoring her first child, Paul Marvell, and leaving his care to his father, Ralph, and then later, to her other husbands. Despite the novel's feminist themes, Undine herself is no role model. On the other side of the gender binary, Ralph resists the "traditional" male role of providing income for his family. He takes on more of a caregiver role for Paul and only goes to work at an office when he has no other options to pay Undine's high bills. These exceptions to standard gender roles hint at how fragile and perhaps arbitrary the roles can be, but as the title of the novel alludes, social "customs" are difficult to escape, regardless of their origins. *The Custom of the Country* demonstrates how all the characters wrestle with expectations that gender roles impose on them while also illustrating how it's sometimes possible to contradict or transcend these expectations. In so doing, it depicts both the enduring power of tradition and the possibility for change.



CORRUPTION

In addition to being a time of significant social change, the early 20th century (when *The Custom of the Country* was published and takes place) was also a time of widespread political and business corruption, and this corruption is a constant backdrop throughout the novel. Many of the wealthy characters in the novel, particularly "new money" characters like Mr. Spragg and Elmer Moffatt (who originally come from humbler backgrounds), appear respectable on the surface by going to operas and hosting banquets, but they obtained their wealth through legally dubious means. Although throughout the novel characters obsess over their social reputations, many of them seem to have surprisingly lenient attitudes toward corruption and financial scandal. For example, the many insider deals of **Apex** politician Representative James J. Rolliver are an open secret, but if anything, the money and power that he obtains through his shady dealings only earn him more respect, improving his reputation and furthering his political career. Similarly, despite

his well-known shady dealings, which make the local newspapers, Elmer Moffatt manages to reinvent himself as an upright member of society, becoming a successful Wall Street businessman and a world-traveling art collector. The novel's protagonist, Undine Spragg, has little interest in backroom dealings, and so many of the conspiracies and rackets in the novel get only brief mentions, reflecting how little Undine herself cares about the specifics of dubious business practices. Undine is willing to overlook just about anything in a person who'll give her money, and her indifference toward corruption perhaps reflects how, on a broader level, many people ignore tricky ethical questions in situations where they stand to personally benefit. Undine and other characters maintain their ignorance so that they can continue to live their own lavish lifestyles without guilt. The corrupt dealings in *The Custom of the Country* reveal the hypocrisy at the heart of high society, showing how behind their refined and polite exteriors, many people are willing to put aside their morals for the sake of money.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE STENTORIAN

The Stentorian is the hotel in New York City where Undine Spragg stays with her family, and it represents the start of Undine's journey to climb the social ladder. The hotel simultaneously represents the glamor of urban life while also representing something less glamorous than the even more desirable **Fifth Avenue**. Living in New York, in such a hotel, shows how far Undine has come from her start in **Apex**, but it also highlights how far she has to go if she ever wants to make it to Fifth Avenue, her ultimate goal.

In various ways, the Stentorian highlights the Spragg family's middling wealth (compared to those who live on Fifth Avenue) and the hustle and bustle of upper-class city life. The word "stentorian" literally means loud (usually referring to a person's voice), and this ties into both the bustle of life in the city as well as to the showy, intense lives of the people who make up New York's upper echelon. Additionally, although the Spraggs stay in the Stentorian for quite a while, hotels suggest temporary living arrangements, and this impermanence clearly differentiates Mr. Spragg's new wealth from the older, more established wealth of men like Mr. Dagonet or Raymond de Chelles (both of whom own property that has been in their families for a long time).



FIFTH AVENUE

Fifth Avenue is a luxurious area of New York City that, for Undine Spragg, acts as a metaphor for the cream of New York society, since it's the physical location where many of the wealthiest and most important New Yorkers live. Notably, Fifth Avenue is famous not just as a place to live but also as a place full of luxury shops, suggesting that Undine's dream of living on Fifth Avenue is directly tied to ideas about materialism. Undine Spragg can see Fifth Avenue out her window at the **Stentorian**, but rather than making her feel closer to Fifth Avenue, this just emphasizes to her that she hasn't reached her goal of making it to the top of New York society yet. Fifth Avenue represents the constant cycle of striving, as well as the place in Undine's imagination where the grass is always greener, and the people are always richer and more sophisticated.



APEX

Apex City (which is usually just called "Apex") is a fictional town in the Midwestern United States that represents how the middle of the country differs from the coasts. As the hometown of Undine Spragg and many other characters in the novel, it ironically doesn't represent the "apex" of their social climbing but in fact is only the first rung of the ladder. Mr. Spragg is one of the richest men in Apex, but after moving to New York City, he finds that his wealth doesn't take him nearly as far as it did in the Midwest. Many characters, such as Undine and Elmer Moffatt, try to shed their connections to Apex, using their move to New York as an opportunity for rebirth, highlighting the Midwest's supposed undesirability.

Undine, however, sometimes finds that New York doesn't live up to its grand reputation and that the **Fifth Avenue** elites of the big city are not as far above their counterparts in Apex as they might like to think. Apex represents a smaller, more insular way of living than the cosmopolitan New York, although the novel constantly returns to the question of whether the upper-class residents of New York are really as worldly and sophisticated as they'd like to believe they are.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Custom of the Country* published in 2006.

Chapter 1 Quotes


“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.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Mrs. Leota B. Spragg (speaker), Ralph Marvell, Mr. Abner E. Spragg, Laura Fairford

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis


This quote is the first few lines of *The Custom of the Country*. The first two words of the novel are the main character's name—Undine Spragg—although it's actually her mother, Mrs. Spragg who says them. This establishes early on that Undine is a central character. It also establishes that the way other characters perceive Undine will play an important role in the novel. Whereas the narrator describes Undine's mother as having wrinkled hands, Undine has quick, youthful fingers. Undine's youth is an important part of her character—she is energetic and ambitious about her plans for the future, but she can also be naïve, particularly since her background in the smaller Midwestern city of Apex has not fully prepared her for the fast-moving social life of New York City.



The novel begins with Undine receiving a letter, and communication remains an important theme throughout the novel. When Undine takes the letter and runs away from her mother, it symbolizes Undine's coming-of-age, with Undine becoming independent from her parents as she runs away and puts physical distance between herself and her mother (although Undine will continue to rely on them for much of the early parts of the book).

Chapter 2 Quotes

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!

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Mr. Abner E. Spragg, Mrs. Leota B. Spragg

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 12



Explanation and Analysis



This quote describes Undine's view as she looks out the window of the Stentorian, which is the luxury hotel near Central Park where she has a room with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Spragg. As its lacy window curtains suggest, the Stentorian is a fancy, lavishly decorated hotel. But although the Stentorian is a nice hotel and Undine seems to live a privileged life, she never knows when to stop dreaming, and Fifth Avenue represents how her life could be even better—or so she thinks. Around the turn of the 20th century, when the novel is set, Fifth Avenue was a residential district in the process of becoming a more commercial district full of luxury stores. And so, Undine's dreams of Fifth Avenue reflect her materialism and greed. Undine wants things that she sees but can't have—in fact, not being able to have something is what makes her want it most of all. This scene of Undine looking out the window establishes early how Undine is always looking ahead to how she could have even more than she already does.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ 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.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell, Laura Fairford

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 20



Explanation and Analysis

After Undine receives a letter in Chapter I inviting her to a dinner party, this quote from Chapter III describes Undine's reaction when she actually arrives at Laura Fairford's party. While Undine longs to become a part of fancy Fifth Avenue society, this quote shows how disappointment often undermines Undine's admiration for this crowd. Because Undine's family is newly wealthy and comes from the unfashionable Midwestern city of Apex, Undine often feels insecure in the presence of old-money elites from New York City. One way that she copes with this insecurity is by focusing on these people's flaws. Here, for instance, she notes that the food Laura serves at her party is not so different from the food she used to eat in Apex. Undine's Apex background makes it difficult for her to understand some aspects of high society, but it also helps her to see through high society's pretense and the hypocrisy, as well.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ It had become clear to Undine that Mabel Lipscomb was ridiculous. That was the reason why Popple did not come to the box. No one would care to be seen talking to her while Mabel was at her side. [...] She had a way of trumpeting out her ignorances that jarred on Undine's subtler methods. It was precisely at this point that there dawned on Undine what was to be one of the guiding principles of her career: "*It's better to watch than to ask questions.*"

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell, Claud Walsingham Popple, Mrs. Heeny, Mabel Lipscomb

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes Undine's friend Mabel Lipscomb, who went to a boarding school in the Midwest with Undine, but who is originally from New York and who came back to New York to marry a stockbroker. Mabel was the one who first suggested that Undine's family should live in the Stentorian, where Mabel herself lives. At first, Undine admires and envies Mabel, but as she gets to know her better, Undine finds ways to look down on her. Undine has internalized Mrs. Heeny's advice about always associating with the right people, and Undine quickly grasps that Mabel is not part of New York's most fashionable crowd. The New Yorkers of


Fifth Avenue, like Ralph Marvell and Claud Popple, prefer subtlety (or at least they think they do), but Mabel's showy and excitable personality—at least as Undine sees it—is more Midwestern. Undine often learns things about herself by observing others, and from Mabel, she learns the value of sitting back and quietly observing.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ But how long would their virgin innocence last? Popple's vulgar hands were on it already—Popple's and the unspeakable Van Degen's! Once they and theirs had begun the process of initiating Undine, there was no knowing—or rather there was too easy knowing—how it would end!

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell, Peter Van Degen, Clare Van Degen, Claud Walsingham Popple

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the end of Chapter VI, which temporarily changes the narration's perspective to focus on Ralph Marvell instead of Undine. In the quote, Ralph imagines Undine as untouched and pure because she lacks any connection to the Fifth-Avenue society of men like Claud Popple and Peter Van Degen. Purity is an important concept for Ralph—he admires Undine for her innocence, not realizing that she has already been married and divorced once before (with a couple broken engagements along the way). Ralph's obsession with purity relates back to the larger Fifth Avenue obsession with discretion and grace. Paradoxically, Ralph believes Undine is a good fit for him in New York's high society because she *hasn't* had time to learn the rules of high society on her own. Later chapters reveal that Ralph has lived a sheltered life, not working for even a single day, but even at this early point, it's clear that Ralph's romantic ideas about Undine don't match up with the reality of her character.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ “Oh, it all depends on *you!* Out in Apex, if a girl marries a man who don't come up to what she expected, people consider it's to her credit to want to change. *You'd* better think twice of that!”

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

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

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell, Mr. Dagonet (speaker), Mabel Lipscomb

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

This passage contains a conversation between Undine, her new fiancé Ralph, and Ralph's grandfather, Mr. Dagonet. It's the first time that Undine goes to meet many of her future in-laws. Despite Undine's attempts earlier in the dinner to be an acceptable future wife to Ralph, she can sense disapproval from many of the family members. As a result, she becomes more outspoken by the end of dinner. When the topic of Mabel Lipscomb comes up, Undine fears that Mr. Dagonet will look down on her, so she defends Mabel (even though Undine herself often looks down on her). Undine boldly brings up the topic of divorce, saying that Mabel is going to divorce her husband to find something better, and that back in Apex, people respected women who made those sorts of choices. Undine's bold language seems to test the limits of what Ralph will let her say in front of his family. Ralph, however, takes everything in stride and acts as if Undine is only joking.

The conversation ends with Ralph asking what Undine expects of him, and Undine replying “*everything!*” While Undine uses humor to deal with the difficult Dagonets, she isn't necessarily exaggerating when she says she wants *everything*. Her character is tragic because no matter how much she gets what she wants, she always finds a new thing to want—in other words, she really *does* want everything.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Mr. Spragg mused. “Wasn't he ever *taught* to work?”

“No; I really couldn't have afforded that.”

Related Characters: Mr. Abner E. Spragg, Mr. Dagonet (speaker), Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 74



Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a conversation between Mr. Spragg and Mr. Dagonet before Ralph Marvell and Undine Spragg's upcoming marriage. Mr. Dagonet acts grand and important when he comes to see Mr. Spragg, but in fact, Mr. Dagonet has come to ask for a slightly embarrassing favor: he wants Mr. Spragg to contribute a significant amount of money to help support Undine and Ralph. Mr. Spragg tries to use humor to get out of this obligation, but Mr. Dagonet remains insistent, refusing to beg or plead with Mr. Spragg, simply acting as if Mr. Spragg has no choice but to comply. Mr. Dagonet explains to Mr. Spragg, seemingly without irony, that it would've been too personally expensive for him to teach Ralph how to be successful at a job. This conversation highlights the vast difference between normal people (who must work to support themselves) and the New York elite (many of whom are like Ralph and so unsuited to work that learning to do so would in actuality cost them money). The passage also foreshadows the difficulties ahead for the new couple and how Ralph in particular isn't ready for the challenges he'll face in marriage.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ 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.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Claud Walsingham Pople, Laura Fairford

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes a tea-time event when the portrait artist Claud Walsingham Pople invites some influential

people over to witness his new portrait of Undine. Previous chapters have established that Undine doesn't know much about art—she always loses focus whenever people like Laura Fairford try to ask her about the topic. As this passage reveals, however, the people around Undine who pretend to know art might not actually be any more sophisticated. This passage humorously illustrates how the people at Claud's exhibition focus on small details, like how realistic the outfit looks or how flattering the face looks, without giving any thought to the portrait's deeper artistic merit. Claud is little better than his audience, painting portraits that will flatter his subjects rather than painting more realistic works. In addition, even though the portrait is hers, Undine struggles to fit in with the crowd. This shows how, once more, Undine's new-money, Midwestern background simultaneously makes it difficult for her to understand the New York crowd—but it also helps her to identify the hypocrisy of the people around her.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☝☝ Her colour rose again, and she looked him quickly and consciously in the eye. It was time to play her last card. "You seem to forget that I am—married," she said.

Van Degen was silent—for a moment she thought he was swaying to her in the flush of surrender. But he remained doggedly seated, meeting her look with an odd clearing of his heated gaze, as if a shrewd businessman had suddenly replaced the pining gentleman at the window.

"Hang it—so am I!" he rejoined; and Undine saw that in the last issue he was still the stronger of the two.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Peter Van Degen (speaker), Ralph Marvell, Clare Van Degen

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the end of Chapter XVI, when Undine has left Ralph to spend time in Europe but hasn't divorced him yet. Peter Van Degen is also in Europe without his wife, Clare Van Degen, and he and Undine seem to be on the verge of having an affair. Despite Peter's reputation as a womanizer and Undine's own disregard for what people think of her, the two of them have not had sex. As her dialogue here reveals, Undine acts cautiously toward Peter. She doesn't just want an affair—she wants someone who will marry her and provide her with long-term security (and


money). Peter seems to be just the right man for the job, and he even seems to like Undine back, but he also remains cautious. Although neither Undine nor Peter cares much for traditional ideas about marriage and faithfulness, they do care about their social standings, and they know that an extramarital affair could hurt both their reputations. This passage shows how marriage conventions continue to influence characters' actions, even when they themselves might be willing to break them.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ Moffatt's social gifts were hardly of a kind to please the two ladies: he would have shone more brightly in Peter Van Degen's set than in his wife's. But neither Clare nor Mrs. Fairford had expected a man of conventional cut, and Moffatt's loud easiness was obviously less disturbing to them than to their hostess. Undine felt only his crudeness, and the tacit criticism passed on it by the mere presence of such men as her husband and Bowen; but Mrs. Fairford seemed to enjoy provoking him to fresh excesses of slang and hyperbole.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Elmer Moffatt, Peter Van Degen, Clare Van Degen, Mr. Abner E. Spragg, Laura Fairford, Charles Bowen

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes a dinner party where Undine introduces her old Apex acquaintance Elmer Moffatt to her New York social circle (in order to fulfill a promise she made earlier to always introduce Elmer to any potentially interesting business contacts she knows). Elmer has been a consistent but mysterious presence in the story so far. At first, Mr. Spragg fears him, and Undine seems uneasy around him too. But as the story goes on, the narrator reveals that in fact, Undine married Elmer back in Apex—and might still have feelings for him.



Elmer is an outsider to New York society who, unlike Undine, doesn't really try to change his ways and adapt his mannerisms to fit in. Nevertheless, Elmer remains flexible in other ways, always willing to take whatever side in a business deal will make him the most money. Ultimately, Elmer becomes extremely wealthy and successful in New York, all without changing his Apex mannerisms, showing

how success involves more than outward signs of success, like proper manners.

Chapter 20 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Raymond de Chelles, Peter Van Degen

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes a triumphant moment in Paris when Undine looks out the window and feels good about the direction her life has gone since the last time she was in Paris. After an initial honeymoon period with her new husband Ralph, Undine began to resent Ralph and how his lack of money forced her to live a more modest life than she would have liked. But as she looks out the window now, she feels that she has gained back the exciting, vibrant life that Paris represents. Although Undine has not yet divorced Ralph, she feels that she will soon be able to marry Peter Van Degen—and that *he* will finally be able to give her the lavish lifestyle she deserves. (And if Peter doesn't work out, there's always Raymond de Chelles as backup.) But Undine is the type of person who never stays satisfied for long, and in fact, her celebration in this chapter turns out to be premature, as Peter Van Degen ultimately loses interest in her, and they never marry. This passage depicts one of several times in the novel when Undine gazes out a window, and each of these occasions helps her take stock of how her life is going at that particular moment.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝☝ “Do you mean to tell me that Undine's divorcing *me*?”

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

“For desertion?” Ralph pursued, still laughing.

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

Related Characters: Ralph Marvell, Mr. Abner E. Spragg (speaker), Undine Spragg

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

This quote depicts the moment when Ralph learns from Mr. Spragg that Undine intends to divorce him. *The Custom of the Country* is a tragicomedy, and this passage encapsulates both what's funny and what's sad about the story. On the one hand, Ralph's surprise is humorous. After Undine's long absence, he should know that his marriage is troubled and on the verge of collapse. Mr. Spragg's delivery of the news is also funny—he remains polite and businesslike, even as he delivers awful news.

The scene is also sad, however, because it marks the end of Ralph's innocence and forces him to confront the reality that his relationship with Undine has failed. After the shock wears off, Ralph maintains his people-pleasing manner, doing whatever he can to placate Undine, even in the middle of their divorce proceedings. This decision ends up having tragic consequences that will play out in some of the later chapters (Ralph ultimately dies by suicide), highlighting the dangers of being too trusting in the cutthroat environment of New York high society.


Chapter 24 Quotes

☝☝ “If you'd only had the sense to come straight to me, Undine Spragg!

There isn't a tip I couldn't have given you—not one!”

Related Characters: Indiana Frusk (speaker), Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell, Raymond de Chelles, Peter Van Degen, Representative James J. Rolliver

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from Indiana Frusk, an old friend of Undine's from Apex who used to live in Undine's shadow—but who suddenly shoots ahead of Undine socially when she marries Representative James J. Rolliver, possibly the most influential man in all of Apex. Indiana seems to enjoy suddenly holding a higher position than Undine, and as this quote reveals, she relishes the opportunity to give Undine advice.

Many characters in the story like to give advice or make grand proclamations about morality, but few characters actually take their own advice. Indiana, for example, tells Undine that she should have gotten a divorce as soon as possible, even though Indiana herself wasn't divorced when she started wooing Representative James J. Rolliver. Giving advice becomes less about being helpful and more about jockeying for position in the social order, since (the thinking goes) a person who can give advice must be an expert of some sort. Indiana's relationship with Undine illustrates just how many friendships in the novel are more like rivalries, where even simple things like advice-giving become competitive rather than helpful.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝☝ Undine, without answering, caught up the pearls and thrust them into

Mrs. Heeny's hands.

“Good land alive!” The masseuse dropped into a chair and let the twist slip through her fat flexible fingers. “Well, you got a fortune right round your neck whenever you wear them, Undine Spragg.”

Undine murmured something indistinguishable. “I want you to take them—” she began.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Mrs. Heeny (speaker), Peter Van Degen

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis


This quote describes a moment when Mrs. Heeny happens to notice some very expensive pearls Undine is wearing, which Peter Van Degen gave to her as a gift. Peter recently rejected Undine, despite his earlier promise to marry her, and yet Undine is still wearing the pearls he gave her. The pearls signify Peter's continuing influence over Undine. But when Mrs. Heeny notices the pearls, Undine finally decides that it's time to get rid of the necklace and asks Mrs. Heeny to sell the pearls.

By selling Peter's gift, Undine chooses to be pragmatic rather than sentimental. Although the novel often presents Undine's materialism in a negative light, some sections portray her more sympathetically, and this passage reveals how Undine manages her heartbreak by focusing on practical matters, like the amount of money she can get from Mrs. Heeny selling the pearls.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☛☛ The Princess and her mother, in their different ways, were different from any one else she had known. The Princess, who might have been of any age between twenty and forty, had a small triangular face with caressing impudent eyes, a smile like a silent whistle and the gait of a baker's boy balancing his basket. She wore either baggy shabby clothes like a man's, or rich draperies that looked as if they had been rained on; and she seemed equally at ease in either style of dress, and carelessly unconscious of both.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Princess Lili Estradina, The Duchess

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes one of the nobles Undine meets when she's in France after her divorce from Ralph and still single. During her previous trips to Europe, Undine loved befriending people with fancy titles, and so it makes sense that Undine likes Princess Estradina, as well as her mother, the Duchess.

As much as Undine claims to admire the Princess, that narrator's description of the Princess suggests that Undine can't help noticing the Princess's flaws. The Princess's clothes, for example, are plain and unglamorous, not like what Undine would expect from a princess. Similarly, the Princess's uncertain age implies that she seems like someone who is trying to pretend to be younger or older than they really are. While Undine usually notices the flaws of the rich people around her (even if she doesn't mention them aloud), she seems unusually accepting of the Princess and the Duchess. Now, separated from her family and friends and without a husband, Undine is all alone in France, and this prompts her to be less judgmental about the people she spends her time with.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☛☛ “You couldn't, up to now; but now you're going to get married. You're going to be able to give him a home and a father's care—and the foreign languages. That's what I'd say if I was you...His father takes considerable stock in him, don't he?” She coloured, a denial on her lips; but she could not shape it. “We're both awfully fond of him, of course... His father'd never give him up!” “Just so.” Moffatt's face had grown as sharp as glass. “You've got the Marvells running. All you've got to do's to sit tight and wait for their cheque.” He dropped back to his equestrian seat on the lyre-backed chair.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Elmer Moffatt (speaker), Ralph Marvell, Raymond de Chelles, Paul Marvell

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

This passage includes a conversation between Elmer and Undine, when Elmer first suggests to Undine that she might be able to use her custody of Paul to get Ralph and his family to pay her enough money to afford an annulment (so that she can marry the Catholic French noble Raymond de Chelles). As this quote shows, Undine initially resists Elmer's suggestion. She doesn't like taking responsibility for Paul, and she seems to feel that it's best for everyone if Paul stays with Ralph and his family. But Elmer points out to Undine that there's no way the Marvell family would ever actually let Undine take custody of Paul.

Like many of Elmer's proposals, his suggestion here about Paul is a dangerous gamble that could backfire on Undine if the Marvells call her bluff and make her take Paul. Undine also seems to feel guilty about neglecting Paul, even if she has no immediate plans to treat him better. While, from Ralph's perspective, Undine seems like a greedy monster who is willing to use her own child to extort money, this passage shows that Undine's feelings were more conflicted and that she only resorts to using Paul's custody for personal gain when she has exhausted her other options.

Chapter 33 Quotes

☛☛ “But shall I tell you what I think, my dear? You and I are both completely out-of-date. I don't believe Undine cares a straw for ‘the appearance of respectability.’ What she wants is the money for her annulment.”

Related Characters: Clare Van Degen (speaker), Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell, Paul Marvell

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

This quote from Clare Van Degen comes after Ralph receives a letter from Undine in which she states her intention to enforce her custody over their son, Paul. Ralph despairs at first, believing that he signed away all his rights during the divorce proceedings and that there is nothing to stop Undine from taking away Paul. Clare, however, is more worldly than Ralph, and she realizes immediately that Undine's claim on Paul is really just a way for her to raise money. While such a thing might seem unbelievable, Clare notes that Undine has thrown aside all concept of reputation or respectability in order to get her money.

Using Paul to raise money for her annulment is a major turning point for Undine. While her previous selfish behavior sometimes hurt other selfish, scheming people, Paul is Undine's child and an innocent victim, and Undine's lack of compassion for him shows that if the situation gets desperate enough, she will always put herself first.

Chapter 35 Quotes

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

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

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell, Elmer Moffatt, Paul Marvell

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the moment just after Ralph invests \$50,000 with Elmer, hoping to get back \$100,000 in a short period of time so that he can afford to pay Undine enough to let him keep Paul. Throughout his divorce, Ralph has struggled with indecision, and scraping together \$50,000 for Elmer involved tapping every possible connection he had for a loan. But after his struggles, Ralph feels good about finally reaching a decision and committing to it.

Both Ralph and Undine experience hardships over the course of their divorce, and these hardships make them consider their own values. While Undine doubles down on her materialism, Ralph comes to realize that his relationship with Paul is the most important thing in his life. Although this passage seems triumphant for Ralph, the involvement of Elmer Moffatt—whose luck swings wildly back and forth—means that Ralph's future (and Paul's) is far from certain.

Chapter 36 Quotes

☛ For a moment he was conscious of seeing it in every detail with a distinctness he had never before known; then everything in it vanished but the single narrow panel of a drawer under one of the bookcases. He went up to the drawer, knelt down and slipped his hand into it.

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

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Ralph Marvell, Elmer Moffatt, Paul Marvell

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes a shocking moment when Ralph is on the verge of killing himself. The chapter ends at a suspenseful moment when Ralph has the gun to his head, then the next chapter confirms that Ralph did in fact kill himself. Although the passage comes at a low point for Ralph, nothing immediately leading up to this quote suggests that Ralph plans to commit suicide. In some ways, his death remains a mystery, showing how even an omniscient narrator can't fully explain the human psyche.

Perhaps the saddest part of Ralph's early death is that just three months after his suicide, his seemingly failed investment with Elmer Moffatt actually turns a profit. Tragically, Ralph lived in a fast-paced world where three months made all the difference. On the other hand, Ralph's problems went well beyond just the money. During his conversation with Elmer, he learned for the first time that Undine had already been married and divorced once (to



Elmer) by the time Ralph married her. This revelation shook Ralph because it forced him to consider how much of his marriage—and by extension the rest of his life—rested on lies. Ralph’s reference to making things “all right for her” is a grimly humorous reference to the fact that Undine won’t even need the annulment money if he kills himself (since she will be a widow instead of divorced).

Chapter 38 Quotes

☞ In a window of the long gallery of the chateau de Saint Desert the new Marquise de Chelles stood looking down the poplar avenue into the November rain. It had been raining heavily and persistently for a longer time than she could remember. Day after day the hills beyond the park had been curtained by motionless clouds, the gutters of the long steep roofs had gurgled with a perpetual overflow, the opaque surface of the moat been peppered by a continuous pelting of big drops.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Raymond de Chelles

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes yet another scene in which Undine looks out a window and takes stock of her life. This moment comes not long after Undine’s marriage to the French marquis Raymond de Chelles (made possible by Ralph’s death), during what should be a triumphant time for Undine. But while Undine does briefly enjoy her time with Raymond, she soon finds out that he is not as much of an improvement over her previous husbands as she thought he’d be.

Like the Stentorian, Raymond’s chateau at Saint Desert is much more luxurious than what most people will ever experience. Despite this, Undine can’t be happy in the moment because she’s too distracted by thoughts of the even better life she could have. In some ways, Undine is further from her dream than ever—at least at the Stentorian she could see her goal of Fifth Avenue, but from Raymond’s chateau, Undine can’t even see Paris, which feels impossibly distant from the isolated country home. It’s possible that Undine is suffering from repressed guilt about Ralph’s death, but given Undine’s behavior elsewhere in the novel, it seems that what’s really bothering her is that she achieved one of her life’s goals—only to find the outcome


less satisfying than she imagined it would be.


Chapter 40 Quotes

☞ “Sell it? Sell Saint Desert?”

The suggestion seemed to strike him as something monstrously, almost fiendishly significant: as if her random word had at last thrust into his hand the clue to their whole unhappy difference. Without understanding this, she guessed it from the change in his face: it was as if a deadly solvent had suddenly decomposed its familiar lines.

Related Characters: Raymond de Chelles (speaker), Undine Spragg, Peter Van Degen

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 323

Explanation and Analysis

This passage conveys Raymond’s indignant reply to Undine’s suggestion that they sell off Raymond’s chateau at Saint Desert. The differences between Raymond and Undine have been clear since the first time they met: he is a Catholic, European aristocrat who comes from old money, while she is a Protestant, American socialite who comes from new money. More broadly, Raymond embodies tradition and patience, while Undine embodies novelty and impulsiveness. While the two of them each ignored their differences for the early part of their marriage, Undine’s suggestion that Raymond sell Saint Desert is Raymond’s breaking point. Now, he realizes that he and Undine have entirely different values.



The chateau at Saint Desert has been in Raymond’s family for a long time, and it represents all the old traditions he values. Undine, on the other hand, has no patience for traditional values—she wants instant gratification, so she wants to sell the chateau now. Her family’s old New York residence—the Stentorian—is the exact opposite of Raymond’s chateau, being a new building and a temporary residence. In some ways, Undine’s decision to sell the chateau recalls her decision to sell Peter Van Degen’s pearls, suggesting that perhaps Undine will separate from Raymond as she did with Peter before him.

Chapter 41 Quotes

☝ It was of no consequence that the details and the technicalities escaped her: she knew their meaningless syllables stood for success, and what that meant was as clear as day to her. Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue, and while he talked of building up railways she was building up palaces, and picturing all the multiple lives he would lead in them. To have things had always seemed to her the first essential of existence, and as she listened to him the vision of the things he could have unrolled itself before her like the long triumph of an Asiatic conqueror.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Elmer Moffatt

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Undine's reaction as she listens to Elmer's various business successes in New York, which have finally brought him from his humble origins in Apex to a position of power on Wall Street. Humorously, Undine doesn't really understand what Elmer is saying. The details of Elmer's corrupt business ventures, both in Apex and in New York, remain murky for her. For Undine—and indeed for most members of New York's upper class—the specifics of Elmer's deals don't matter, so long as he makes money, and so long as the authorities don't stop him. This passage also confirms just how devoted Undine is to materialism: she considers owning things to be “the first essential of existence,” and what she admires most about Elmer is that he's so rich, he could own anything (even if the things he currently owns, like railways, don't interest her that much). This section emphasizes Undine's shallowness, but it also suggests that perhaps Elmer is the one character whose values genuinely align with Undine's.

Chapter 44 Quotes

☝ “Hullo!” he exclaimed, surprised; and as he stood aside to let her enter she saw him draw out his watch and glance at it surreptitiously. He was expecting someone, or he had an engagement elsewhere—something claimed him from which she was excluded. The thought flushed her with sudden resolution. She knew now what she had come for—to keep him from every one else, to keep him for herself alone.

“Don't send me away!” she said, and laid her hand on his beseechingly.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Elmer Moffatt (speaker), Raymond de Chelles

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 347

Explanation and Analysis


This quote describes Elmer's surprise at Undine showing up at his hotel in Europe and begging him to let her stay. Although Undine's marriage with Raymond has been failing for a while, this is the climactic moment when Undine makes herself vulnerable by rejecting Raymond and asking Elmer to be with her. Although Undine has never exactly been shy, her time with Raymond made her uncharacteristically passive. Since her early days in New York, Undine has known the value of sitting back and observing, but her traditional, authoritative husband Raymond made Undine act more obediently than she ever had before. Elmer, on the other hand, helps Undine rediscover her old impulsive self. While it's debatable whether Elmer is actually a good influence on Undine, he helps her reconnect with her old identity, and this means that he offers the potential for a happy ending, at least in Undine's terms.

Chapter 46 Quotes

☝ Even now, however, she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Elmer Moffatt

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 362

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes how Undine feels shortly after remarrying Elmer. Elmer seems to offer Undine everything she could ever desire. Whereas Ralph always ran out of money and Raymond was too sedentary, Elmer seems to possess infinite money, and he takes Undine on a series of trips around the world. Undine has become as rich as the residents of fashionable Fifth Avenue—possibly even richer—and yet, a part of her still isn't satisfied. Ambition, greed, and jealousy have become such central parts of Undine's personality that she isn't sure how to act when she

has nothing left to strive for. As this quote shows, she actually feels something like guilt, as if her lack of imagination to think up new wants is a personal failing. The passage illustrates a difficult truth that runs throughout the whole book: that no matter how much a person's external circumstances change, at the end of the day, they'll always have to face what's on the inside.

●● But under all the dazzle a tiny black cloud remained. She had learned that there was something she could never get, something that neither beauty nor influence nor millions could ever buy for her. She could never be an Ambassador's wife; and as she advanced to welcome her first guests she said to herself that it was the one part she was really made for.

Related Characters: Undine Spragg, Elmer Moffatt

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 364

Explanation and Analysis

This quote contains the final few sentences of the book.

While from one perspective the ending of the book seems happy—Undine marries a man who seems to truly love her and who can fulfill all of her extravagant desires—the melancholy tone of the final lines suggests that the ending may not be as happy as it first seems. Just a little bit earlier in the chapter, Undine fretted over not knowing what to desire next, but it doesn't take her long to settle on a new goal: becoming an ambassador's wife. Unfortunately for Undine, Elmer informs her that it isn't possible for an ambassador to have a previously divorced wife. Throughout the story, Undine always wants the impossible, whether it's married men or incredible wealth. And somehow, in the end, she usually ends up getting what she wants—only to find out she still isn't satisfied.

But while the novel ends on a disappointing note for Undine, it's also a humorous ending. Undine's belief that she was really made to be a diplomat's wife is ridiculous, both because she hadn't even thought of the goal until a few minutes ago and because, for all her social skills, Undine generally isn't a very diplomatic person. And so, like the events that came before it, the ending of the novel mixes comedy and tragedy, showing how happiness and sadness can be intertwined.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Undine Spragg, who is staying at a luxurious hotel in New York called **the Stentorian** with her mother (Mrs. Leota B. Spragg) and a woman named Mrs. Heeny, receives a letter and takes it away so that she can read it on her own. Mrs. Spragg looks like a melting wax figure, but Mrs. Heeny looks solid and practical. When Undine is finished with the letter, she crumples it up and throws it away. Mrs. Spragg asks if the letter is from Mr. Claud Walsingham Popple (whom Undine met at a party the previous night), but Undine says it isn't, it's from Mr. Ralph Marvell's sister (Laura Fairford), inviting her to a dinner party.

Mrs. Heeny says she knows of a portrait painter named Claud Popple and that he's "in it," but that he is not quite "AS in it" as Ralph. Undine asks if this means the Marvells are fashionable, and Mrs. Heeny says yes, she's already told her this many times—in fact, Ralph is even more fashionable than Claud. Hearing this, Undine goes back to the crumpled letter from Ralph's sister (Laura Fairford) and reads it again.

In her letter, Laura Fairford invites Undine to a dinner party. Undine finds this strange because Laura has never even seen her, but Mrs. Heeny says that Ralph *has* seen her and that often a young man will use his sister as an excuse to meet a young woman again. Mrs. Heeny advises Undine, however, that a girl should pretend she needs her mother's permission to do anything. Undine goes to her room to consider her response.

Two years ago, Mrs. Spragg brought Undine to New York to enlarge her social circle, but so far, Undine has made little progress. Now, Mrs. Heeny advises Mrs. Spragg that Undine must get in with the right crowd because the wrong crowd can stick with a person and drag them down.

The opening lines of the story suggest that Undine is a member of upper-class society in New York City—or at least that's what she aspires to be. The fancy hotel setting combined with the conversation about social engagements and dinner parties all suggest luxury. But instead of glamorizing this wealthy lifestyle, Wharton satirizes it by highlighting the shortcomings and absurdities of the characters. Mrs. Spragg, for example, might have money, but her disheveled appearance suggests that she doesn't have sophistication. Similarly, the hotel is called the Stentorian, which means "loud" and also suggests that its residents aren't sophisticated, just showy with their wealth.



Mrs. Heeny's speech demonstrates that even within the upper echelons of New York society there were layers, with some people and families holding more sway than others in the social order. Undine wants to make sure she ends up at the very top of this order, and so she takes Mrs. Heeny's advice seriously.



As Laura Fairford's letter shows, the social rules of the New York elite were complex. Undine, who is still a relatively new resident of New York, doesn't yet understand all of these conventions. In fact, such rules seem to specifically exclude outsiders who don't understand local customs.



Mrs. Heeny understands the importance of social connections, not just how good connections can help with social climbing but also how bad connections can hurt a person's rank in the reputation-based New York social circles.



Mr. Abner E. Spragg (Undine's father) comes back to **the Stentorian**. Mrs. Spragg proudly tells her husband about the dinner party that Undine has been invited to. She tells him that they were right to come to New York after all. But Mr. Spragg doesn't seem happy. In a low voice, he says that he saw Elmer Moffatt recently. Mrs. Spragg is concerned and makes her husband promise not to tell Undine about seeing Elmer.

Although Mr. Spragg doesn't explain here who Elmer Moffatt is or why he's significant, Mr. Spragg's hushed tone conveys that Elmer may be a menacing figure. And so, the first chapter ends with the hint that beneath its glitzy exterior, New York City's high society also has a dark side.



CHAPTER 2

Undine's room at **the Stentorian** is white and gold, with a view of Central Park and a view of **Fifth Avenue** just past it. Undine begins to study the letter she received from Laura Fairford. She is disappointed that the note doesn't have a monogram on it and begins to think less of Laura. At last, she begins to write a reply letter, pretending to be her mother (Mrs. Spragg). She rewrites the letter several times, changing only how she writes the closing of the letter.

Undine can see Fifth Avenue, but she can't reach it. This represents how Undine knows her goals and the social circle she wants to join but lacks the means to do so. Fifth Avenue is also significant because, in addition to being a fashionable place to live, it is also in the process of becoming a major commercial district with luxury shops, and so Undine's desire for Fifth Avenue reflects her materialistic worldview.



Undine then calls over her French maid, Celeste, to help her pick an outfit. Although she has an extensive wardrobe, she doesn't feel that she has any good dinner dresses, since she rarely has a chance to wear them. Eventually she decides on one and sends Celeste away.

Although Undine is not wealthy enough to belong to the Fifth Avenue crowd, her family is still wealthy enough to employ a maid. Undine may feel inadequate, but Celeste's presence shows that Undine still lives a privileged life compared to other people.



As a child in **Apex** (a town in the Midwestern U.S.), Undine was never very interested in playing with other children; she preferred to dress in her mother's clothes and look at herself in the mirror. Now, Undine imagines what it will be like to go out in public and see real people looking at her. She regrets not paying more attention to Ralph earlier, focusing instead on Claud Popple.

Undine's childhood interests foreshadow her concerns as an adult. Her love of the mirror reflects her vanity. Undine's hometown of Apex is fictional and represents the opposite of the classy Fifth Avenue lifestyle—which is why Undine wants to leave it behind.



Undine comes out of her room just as Mrs. Heeny is about to take her leave of Mrs. Spragg. Mrs. Heeny lingers, telling Undine she looks stunning. She reassures Undine that Ralph is indeed at the top of New York society, along with the rest of his family.

Mrs. Heeny is not, in fact, a member of New York high society, but she lives out her own dream vicariously through Undine. From Mrs. Heeny, Undine learns the value of observation.



Since coming to New York, Undine has already gotten engaged once, to a handsome young Austrian. Shortly after promising herself to him, however, Undine ran into Mabel Lipscomb (née Blitch), who was originally from New York, but who went to the same Midwestern boarding school as Undine. They were rivals in school (along with another girl named Indiana Frusk). Eventually, Mabel moved back to New York and married a stockbroker named Harry Lipscomb.

Undine's materialistic personality encourages her to be competitive. This means that she treats all of her friends as potential rivals. Although she won't admit it, Undine seems to envy her friend Mabel, and her own desire to succeed in New York may be at least partly an attempt to try to outdo Mabel.



Still in the past, Harry Lipscomb investigated Undine's new Austrian fiancé and found that he fled Krakow to avoid criminal charges for scamming servant girls. Undine broke things off, and on Mabel Lipscomb's advice, the Spragg family took up residence in **the Stentorian** (where Mabel herself is staying).

After the Spraggs first arrived at **the Stentorian**, Mabel Lipscomb introduced Undine to the local society. While Undine was interested at first, she soon realized that Mabel's circle isn't high enough for her—what Undine really wants is to be part of **Fifth Avenue** society. Claud Popple was the first person from this higher New York society that Undine recognized.

Back in the present at **the Stentorian**, Undine goes to her parents and finds Mr. Spragg sitting next to Mrs. Spragg with her head drooping. Undine hints to her father that she'd like something new to wear to her upcoming party, and despite having bills piling up, Mr. Spragg allows his daughter to go buy something new.

CHAPTER 3

Laura Fairford's dinner disappoints Undine. Laura's house isn't very impressive, and the dinner itself isn't anything exotic, just broiled meat. There are eight guests, none of whom impress Undine, although she figures maybe the other guests are more impressive than they look. Undine recognizes Mrs. Clare Van Degen as perhaps the most illustrious member of New York society there.

Undine sits next to Ralph and finds him friendly but even more timid than the last time she met him. He is small and pale, with a little blond mustache. Although Laura Fairford talks well at the party, Undine feels that the people of **Apex** talk even more, with a larger vocabulary too. Everyone joins in the conversation, and they occasionally reference topics like books or paintings that Undine doesn't recognize.

Eventually, Clare happens to mention that she is getting her portrait done by Claud Popple. Some other guests note that Claud never fails to mention how much of a gentleman he is, and Undine realizes they are making fun of him. Clare is dismayed by this reaction and asks Ralph why he recommended Claud to do her portrait. Ralph assures her that Claud will do a good job.

Undine's engagement with the handsome Austrian reveals the dangers of being superficial. She judges the Austrian on the surface and becomes so blinded by his superficial charms that she misses out on the fact that he is an experienced scammer.



Because Undine wants to outdo Mabel, she needs to find a social circle that's even more exclusive than Mabel's, and so her gaze turns to Fifth Avenue. She sets her sights on Claud Popple, the first man she notices, which seems potentially dangerous, given her recent history with the deceptive Austrian.



Despite being fairly wealthy, Mr. Spragg always worries about bills. Undine, on the other hand, doesn't understand the value of money—to her, money simply appears whenever she can convince her father to part with it.



Undine often tries to find ways to look down on people that she envies, which is why she nitpicks Laura's dinner. Undine is insecure about her own position in New York, and so she reassures herself by putting down other people. Nevertheless, her disappointment doesn't quell her desire to try to join the Fifth Avenue crowd.



Undine's history in Apex shaped her ideas about sophistication. She prefers showy, ostentatious conversation, and her lack of knowledge about books and art means that those topics bore her.



Claud, who loudly announces how much of a gentleman he is, seems to belong to the unsubtle Apex school of sophistication more than the subtler New York one—this is probably why he was the first person in the crowd to attract Undine's attention. Undine isn't completely naïve, however, and she soon learns by observing carefully that Mrs. Heeny was right and that Claud isn't the most respected person in the group.



The women go to the drawing room. While Undine appreciates how Laura Fairford doesn't mention that Undine is new to New York, she gets uncomfortable when Laura asks her questions about books, paintings, and theater. When the men come back from the smoke room, Mr. Henley Fairford begins talking to Undine, which she takes as a sign that the other women have rejected her.

As everyone goes to leave, Clare puts a hand on Ralph's arm and says she hopes he'll go to dinner and an opera with her next Friday. At first, Undine thinks she might be invited too, but instead, Clare just asks her to stop by and see her some afternoon. She is excited when Ralph offers to escort her home, but she is quickly disappointed after he simply takes her outside to get a cab.

Throughout the book, Undine tends to have an easier time getting along with men than with other women. She focuses so much on becoming a part of New York society that she doesn't even care that she has so few interests in common with someone like Laura Fairford.



Undine senses that there is some connection between Clare and Ralph, even though Clare is already married. Nevertheless, she ignores this and hopes that Ralph is interested in her. By calling a cab instead of walking Undine all the way home, Ralph fails to live up to Undine's lofty ideals of a gentleman.



CHAPTER 4

Undine returns to **the Stentorian**. The next morning at breakfast, she tells Mr. Spragg that he needs to get her a box at the opera for the next Friday. He and Mrs. Spragg had hoped that Laura Fairford's dinner would make Undine a little less excitable, but it seems to have had the opposite effect. It's already unusual for Undine to be down at breakfast, since she usually wakes up too late and just has Celeste bring her chocolate in bed. Undine's request surprises her parents; her father asks if orchestra seats would do, but Undine insists on a box, even though she's going by herself. Eventually, she adds that maybe she'd invite Mabel Lipscomb to pay her back for how well she's treated her in New York so far.

By invoking Mabel Lipscomb and the idea of reciprocity, Undine starts to convince Mr. Spragg to get the tickets. Undine pleads that she only wants an opera box once, and her father notes that Undine seems to only want most things once. Still, he protests that he's low on cash at the moment. Undine decides to go out for a horse ride, because she knows it makes Mrs. Spragg nervous.

Mrs. Spragg is indeed worried and greets Undine enthusiastically after her horse ride. Undine tells her mother she still wants an opera box. Her mother tries to explain that while Mr. Spragg was rich for **Apex**, he's not quite so rich in New York. Undine asks why they ever left, but her mother tells her they came to New York so Undine could meet people. Still at a stalemate, Undine decides to go see an art gallery that Laura Fairford mentioned to her at the dinner party.

Undine wants a box at the opera because it's a public place where people will be able to see her. After the dinner party where Undine struggled to keep up with the conversation and where Ralph seemingly rejected her, Undine wants to prove her worth in New York society by putting on a public display of wealth. Undine can be tricky when she wants something, and she learns here that the best way to convince her father is to disguise her selfish motivations as altruistic (by saying she wants to treat Mabel).



Although Undine is far from patient, she knows how to bide her time when she wants something. By going on a horse ride to make her mother nervous, Undine hopes to wear down her father's resolve and make him give in and buy her an opera box.



The name of Apex is ironic, because "apex" suggests the top, but someone who is at the top in Apex might not be that important in New York City. Although Undine previously had no interest in art, she is a fast learner, and she realizes that faking an interest might be her best way to make social connections.



Undine goes to the art gallery, but she's more interested in looking at the people than the art, like a woman with a tortoise-shell eye-glass with a pearl chain. An unpleasant-looking young man with bulging eyes comes up to Undine and makes conversation about what an awful crowd it is that day. But then the lady with the eye-glass calls the young man Peter, and Undine realizes that he is Peter Van Degen, son of a famous banker. Undine is happy but remembers none of the art she saw when she goes home.

Undine's focus on the people instead of the art makes it clear why she's really at the gallery—to be part of the crowd. In fact, she succeeds and connects with Peter almost instantly. Although the other characters are less open than Undine about their motives, art galleries seem to play an important social role for the other characters too.



Back at **the Stentorian**, Undine is disappointed thinking that she'll probably never see Peter again, and she's also disappointed to see that Ralph stopped by and left his card (since, if he stopped without first making an appointment, this suggests he isn't serious about her). She is even more disappointed when Mrs. Spragg informs her that Ralph actually came to see Mrs. Spragg herself, not Undine. Mrs. Spragg thought Ralph might have a message for Undine, but he simply talked for a while before leaving without really explaining what he wanted.

Undine's insecurity makes her see the worst in positive situations. Although she has potentially made new connections with both Ralph and Peter, she remains dissatisfied with her progress. Ralph's behavior is strange, particularly when he visits Mrs. Spragg—unlike Undine, Ralph doesn't seem to know what he wants, which is why he sometimes seems interested in Undine and sometimes not.



Undine reflects on the past and how she's managed to get things out of her parents before. Her first big goal was to find a way to get out of **Apex** in the summers. Initially, when she was home from boarding school, she went to a cottage her parents owned in the summer, but it always seemed to Undine to be less exciting than what other girls were doing. Undine began insisting that she had to see New York.

Undine's past reveals that often gets what she wants. Still, because of her materialistic personality, whenever she gets what she wants, she finds a new thing to long for. This is why the cottage isn't enough for her, especially not after she hears what the other girls do in the summer.



Back in the present, Mr. Spragg comes into Undine's room and lets her know that he has gotten her an opera box not just for one Friday but for every other Friday. Mrs. Spragg worries about the cost, but Mr. Spragg says that he just wants Undine to be able to keep spending time with the new crowd of people she's meeting. In private, Mrs. Spragg asks Mr. Spragg if he happened to see Elmer again, but he says once was enough.

Mr. Spragg caves to his daughter's demands and in fact goes well beyond them, suggesting that he spoils her. Despite his constant concerns about money, Mr. Spragg comes from Apex and has simple wants, so even as he worries about debt, he seems to have more money than he knows what to do with.



CHAPTER 5

At the opera, Undine is thrilled to finally be on the same level as the people in the boxes. Mabel Lipscomb joins her. Undine uses her opera glasses to scan the crowd. She notices that just one box is open—Clare's (since she is still dining with Ralph). Just then, Undine begins to feel that she herself is being watched and notices Peter's bulging eyes on her. He is sitting with the woman who had the tortoise-shell eye-glass before. Mabel notes that Claud Popple is also in attendance.

Undine once again uses art as an opportunity to focus on people instead. Clare and Peter are married, and yet they sit separately, and each bring someone else to the opera, suggesting that their marriage isn't close. Peter's bulging eyes suggest that perhaps he hasn't learned discretion as well as some other members of New York's upper class.



Just then, Clare and Ralph arrive to take their box, seemingly alone. Mabel Lipscomb asks Undine if they should call over to greet Ralph, but Undine quickly says no. The opera starts. During intermission, Claud Popple and Peter stumble into Undine's box. They talk, with Peter mentioning that his wife, Clare, thinks that even going to restaurants is beneath her. Eventually, Claud and Peter leave the box, with Peter promising to see them again afterward.

Just then, Ralph appears at the back of the box to see Undine. She is disappointed, however, that when he talks, he remains distant and formal. Eventually, he leaves, but he asks first if she'll be at home the next day.

Undine senses that Clare and Ralph want their privacy, even though she doesn't fully understand the nature of their relationship yet. Claud and Peter invite themselves into Undine's box (coming over from their less expensive seats), suggesting how shameless they are about trying to make beneficial social connections.



Ralph is more discreet than Peter and Claud, coming to Undine's box later and remaining distant. He represents a more traditional version of New York sophistication, although this sometimes holds him back.



CHAPTER 6

Ralph goes home and sits in an armchair by the fire. The Marvell family, which is connected to the noble Dagonet family, has a long history in New York and a long history of sending sons to Harvard or Columbia to become gentlemen. His family is not as rich as it once was, but Ralph has only simple wants, like books and the occasional holiday. Ralph's cousin is Clare Dagonet (who became Clare after she married Peter).

Ralph's family wants him to marry a nice girl, but he has resisted so far. He begins to reconsider, however, after meeting Undine. He used his earlier visit with Mrs. Spragg to learn more about Undine's background. He learned that Mr. Spragg was poor when he first came to **Apex**, but eventually, he managed to take over some land from a bad debt and build a new waterworks called Pure Water that made him rich. Ralph likes that Mrs. Spragg did not pretend that their family had a rich, illustrious background. He worries that spending more time with the Popples or Van Degens will make Undine more like them.

Ralph is used to women being attracted to him, but he rarely reciprocates the feeling, except for briefly with Clare, back when she was still Clare Dagonet, not Van Degen. This is why he feels so confident in his current judgement that Undine must be special.

After five chapters that mostly followed Undine's perspective, the novel suddenly shifts to follow Ralph. Although Undine remains the main character in the novel, the narrator is omniscient and tells her story from other characters' perspectives, as well.



This chapter reveals that Ralph likes Undine a lot more than he lets on. Perhaps Undine is no good at detecting subtlety, or perhaps Ralph himself is too inhibited to express his real feelings. While Undine herself doesn't care where her father got his money, Ralph knows Mr. Spragg made his fortune on some potentially disreputable business, and this subplot about crooked deals in Apex continues to develop in the background of the novel.



Ralph confirms that he has (or at least had) feelings for Clare, as Undine suspected. Although Ralph makes the decision to finally act on his feelings for Undine, this passage makes her seem like his second choice.



CHAPTER 7

Two months later, Mrs. Heeny comes to visit Undine. She points out a Tiffany engagement ring that Undine is wearing and argues with Mrs. Spragg about whether it's a new purchase or an heirloom. Mrs. Heeny agrees to help Undine do her hair before she goes out that night. In fact, she is going to dinner to see the man who gave her the ring. Undine hopes she won't disappoint him.

While Undine is getting ready, Mabel Lipscomb comes by to see her. She says she can help dress Undine because she was the one who introduced Undine to her suitor. As it turns out, Undine is having dinner at the Dagonet place—because Ralph (a cousin of the Dagonets) is the one who gave Undine the ring. Undine ends up seated at the table next to old Mr. Dagonet, who is less imposing than she expected. She can tell that Mrs. Marvell doesn't approve of her impending marriage to Ralph. Laura Fairford (Ralph's sister) tries to make everyone get along.

At the table, Undine feels like she must play the part of being in love with Ralph, even though she isn't acting and feels that she really does love him. Mr. Dagonet asks about Mabel Lipscomb. When Undine tells Mr. Dagonet that Mabel's husband is a stockbroker, Mr. Dagonet sounds disappointed, so Undine lies and says that Mabel is planning to get divorced soon because her husband is holding her back. Undine hopes this lie will make Mr. Dagonet think better of Mabel. Ralph interrupts to say that Undine had better think twice before divorcing him. Undine jokes that back in **Apex**, people consider it a good thing if a woman leaves a man who doesn't meet her expectations.

CHAPTER 8

The discussion about divorce makes dinner a little tense, but Laura Fairford tries to smooth things over by escorting Ralph and Undine over to the theater for a show. Laura brings with her an older, gray-haired gentleman named Mr. Charles Bowen, whose relationship to Laura is unclear to Undine. As they take their seats in the theater, Undine hears a stranger complimenting her and is extremely pleased.

Although the end of the previous chapter strongly hints that Ralph is the one that proposed to Undine, the beginning of this chapter deliberately leaves the identity of Undine's fiancé ambiguous. This suggests that for her, the most important thing is the engagement itself (and the Tiffany ring) instead of the identity of her future husband, further highlighting Undine's materialistic personality.



Mabel can see that Undine may soon surpass her in New York society, so she tries to claim credit for playing a role in Undine's rise by introducing her to Ralph's social circle. While Undine's insecurity leads her to look down on people, it also sometimes allows her to see through pretension, such as here where she recognizes that Mr. Dagonet is not as impressive as his reputation might suggest.



Despite her shallow and materialistic tendencies, Undine does show moments of humanity, and here she seems to have genuine affection for Ralph. This scene also portrays Undine as sympathetic by illustrating how far she'll go to win her in-laws' acceptance, even lying about her friend Mabel in order to try to make Mabel sound better. Nevertheless, Undine also bristles at some of her in-laws' attitudes, and she seems to joke about divorce purposely to shock them.



Divorce is an important theme in the novel, and this dinner party establishes that despite its happy beginning, Ralph and Undine's marriage won't be any fairy tale. Despite Undine's efforts to gain acceptance, all it took was a couple ill-suited jokes to make the Dagonets uncomfortable.



Undine feels that this evening is a way of making up for the earlier time at the opera when she was disappointed. As she looks around, she notices many people she knows, including Clare in her box. Claud Popple comes over to visit Undine and Ralph, saying he'd love to paint Undine. Ralph seems opposed to it but doesn't forbid her. This causes Undine to frown and turn away from Ralph but just when she does, she sees a familiar ruddy-faced man (Elmer Moffatt). Undine tells him she doesn't want to speak with him just then, but they can meet later. Meanwhile, Ralph has gone over to see Clare and they witness Undine talking to the ruddy-faced man.

When Undine gets back to her bedroom at **the Stentorian** that night, she is surprised to see Mrs. Spragg waiting there, eager to hear all about it. She asks Undine if anything went wrong or if she saw anyone she didn't want to see, but Undine says of course everything went well.

CHAPTER 9

The next afternoon, Undine goes out walking in Central Park in her plainest outfit. She is worried about accidentally running into her fiancé, Ralph, or even worse, the Austrian riding-master that she was engaged to earlier. In the park, she arrives at the place where she's arranged to meet with Elmer. He seems surprised that she actually showed up, and while she says she's glad to see him, he doesn't believe her.

Undine says she was surprised to learn that Elmer was in town—Mr. Spragg didn't tell her about seeing him earlier. Undine says she never felt as afraid of Elmer as her father does. Elmer brings up how back in **Apex**, Undine was engaged to marry a notable local man; she was still so young that the newspaper called her a "child bride."

Undine says she didn't mean to avoid Elmer the previous night. She tells Elmer she's engaged again. Elmer reveals that he is working as a secretary for Harmon B. Driscoll, and Undine is surprised to learn that Elmer is living in New York. Elmer had to get out of **Apex** after some "unpleasantness" between him and Undine made Mr. Spragg and Mrs. Spragg turn against him, and they turned the rest of Apex against him too.

This passage makes it clear that Undine holds on to old grudges and disappointments. She constantly competes not just with other women but with past versions of herself, as well. Ralph and Undine's disagreement over Claud's portraits provides an early glimpse of how their values differ. Meanwhile, the character Elmer Moffatt remains mysterious but seems to signify trouble brewing wherever he appears.



Mrs. Spragg's strange questions make it clear that somehow, she already knows about Elmer Moffatt's presence at the opera, but she wants to hear about it directly from Undine. Undine, however, shuts her mother out by refusing to discuss the topic.



Undine's plain clothes are unusual, since in almost every other situation, Undine dresses so that people will notice her. Her cautious behavior suggests that Elmer could represent a threat to her new engagement to Ralph.



Undine failed to tell her mother about Elmer at the opera, but her mother also failed to tell her that her father saw Elmer in New York, meaning the failure of communication goes in both directions. This passage reveals some of Undine's backstory, notably a previous engagement. Counting the Austrian, that means Ralph is at least Undine's third engagement.



Mr. Spragg may not be a major player in New York City, but this passage reveals that he wielded a lot of influence in Apex, turning the whole town against Elmer. This passage hints at a previous relationship between Undine and Elmer without revealing the exact nature of that relationship.



Undine begs Elmer not to mention anything about their history together in **Apex** to anyone in New York. She says on the East Coast, people don't even like it when a girl has been engaged before. Elmer says he has no intention of telling anyone, but he continues to prod her with questions. Undine says that all she wants is to marry Ralph without anyone discovering her past. Elmer asks for just one favor in return—if through marriage she meets anyone who might be a good business contact for Elmer, she should introduce him. Undine promises that she will.

Undine uses euphemistic language, but reading between the lines, this passage makes it clear that she married and divorced Elmer back in Apex. Although the people of New York are supposedly more modern than the people of Apex, they seem to hold much more old-fashioned views about marriage and divorce, which is why Undine wants to keep her previous relationship with Elmer a secret from Ralph and his family.



Undine heads back to **the Stentorian**, hoping for solitude, but Ralph is there waiting for her. They talk about wedding plans. Ralph asks her to take off the veil she's wearing, and she is reluctant at first. When Undine does take off the veil, Ralph notices she's been crying. She claims it was just hot out, which made her angry. She says she wishes they could get married even sooner, and Ralph says that's actually a good idea.

Although Ralph cares for Undine, this passage makes it clear that he doesn't understand her that well. Ralph looks past Undine's flaws to see what he wants to see, and so when Undine suggests moving the wedding date up, Ralph assumes that Undine is just as eager as he is to get married.



CHAPTER 10

When Mr. Spragg first arrived on Wall Street, he kept many of his qualities from **Apex**, but there was something different behind his eyes. Now, Mr. Spragg is shocked to learn how expensive New York weddings are, particularly now that Undine is moving the date up for hers. Mr. Dagonet has come to discuss the wedding with Mr. Spragg, and Mr. Spragg's attempts to joke with him mostly fall flat. They discuss Ralph's work in the law field, which Mr. Dagonet insists is a "profession," not a "business."

Mr. Spragg may seem like an unsophisticated man, but his ever-present sense of humor suggests that he is better than most at seeing through the contradictions and absurdities of upper-class life in New York. For example, while Mr. Dagonet sees nothing wrong with asking Mr. Spragg to contribute money to supporting Undine and Ralph, Mr. Spragg finds it funny that a man with a reputation as grand as Mr. Dagonet's might actually have less money than Mr. Spragg.



It turns out that Ralph doesn't like doing things that make money—he mostly just writes poetry and receives three thousand a year from his grandfather, Mr. Dagonet. Mr. Dagonet says he couldn't teach Ralph how to work because it would've been too expensive. Eventually, Mr. Spragg realizes that Mr. Dagonet is asking him to help contribute to supporting his daughter and his future son-in-law, since it's best for everyone if Ralph stays away from business.

Ralph is the stereotypical child of privilege who never had to get a real job. Mr. Dagonet takes pride in keeping Ralph out of work and feels shame about not being able to provide everything for Ralph, even though a part of him seems to also regret that his grandson has become so dependent on him to survive.



Mr. Spragg finds that supporting Undine and Ralph will cost him so much money that he recommends that Undine break off the engagement. Undine is furious when he brings this up, shouting that she isn't getting married for the money. Mr. Spragg suggests that if she really loves Ralph, maybe she'd be OK starting their marriage without much money. Undine, however, is indignant that her father would allow her to drag Ralph down. Mr. Spragg says he'll see what he can do.

Undine claims that she isn't marrying Ralph for the money—and she might truly believe this—but she also refuses to live modestly with Ralph. Given his sense of humor, Mr. Spragg may be joking when he suggests Undine break off her engagement with Ralph—or perhaps in his own way he's trying to warn her that Ralph isn't as rich as she might expect.



Mr. Spragg talks to Mrs. Spragg about how he just doesn't think he can come up with the money to support Ralph. Mrs. Spragg brings up an even bigger concern: Undine recently ran into Elmer. Mr. Spragg is alarmed but again promises to see what he can do.

Mr. Spragg's money problems are persistent but also abstract. He seems to be doing better financially than some respected New York families like the Dagonets, but their rules of etiquette prevent them from acknowledging money issues openly.



Instead of doing anything, however, Mr. Spragg ignores the problems for a little while. Then one day, Elmer comes up to him in his office and forces his way into the elevator. Mr. Spragg says he's busy, but Elmer insists that Mr. Spragg will want to hear what he has to say. He talks about how he's become Harmon B. Driscoll's secretary due to his inside information about underhanded business dealings in **Apex**. Mr. Spragg himself was involved in these dealing but got out—but Representative James J. Rolliver is still involved, and he's now a rival to the Driscolls.

Almost every character from Apex has some connection to shady business dealings that involve Representative James J. Rolliver. This Apex corruption subplot highlights the murky origins of wealth. Mr. Spragg becomes a respected businessman in New York, but he made his fortune using the same tactics as the slippery Elmer Moffatt.



Elmer gets to the point: he wants to get out of Harmon B. Driscoll's office. He promises not to interfere with Undine's wedding if Mr. Spragg just shows up at the Driscoll office before 5 PM and tells what he knows about Representative James J. Rolliver. Mr. Spragg refuses at first, so then Elmer asks him questions about his daughter's wedding date. Mr. Spragg still seems reluctant, but just then Ralph shows up at the office. Ralph apologizes for interrupting, then he says he thinks he knows Elmer from somewhere. Elmer says he doesn't think so and leaves the office.

Mr. Spragg's shady business dealings in Apex catapulted his career, but they also made him vulnerable to blackmail from people like Elmer, who know about his past. Elmer's veiled threats against Mr. Spragg are personal, since Mr. Spragg was the one who broke up Elmer's marriage with Undine and turned all of Apex against him. Ralph nearly witnesses this whole scene, but as usual, he remains too naïve to see what's really going on.



CHAPTER 11

It's a sunny day in July, and Ralph and Undine are in Italy on their honeymoon—they've been traveling throughout Italy for four months. It has been a blissful time, although at the moment, Undine is complaining about the heat. Ralph says if it's too hot, they could always just travel somewhere new, like Switzerland, but Undine doesn't like any of his suggestions. Ralph picked the summer for their trip so that there would be fewer people around, but Undine is disappointed to be seeing the place at the wrong time.

Between chapters, the novel occasionally takes leaps ahead in time. In the space between Chapters X and XI, Ralph and Undine get married and spend several months honeymooning in Europe. This chapter catches up with them near the end of their honeymoon, when the initial bliss has worn off and disappointment begins to set in for each of them.



Ralph and Undine ride back in a carriage, and Ralph realizes that Undine's real problem isn't the heat but the lack of crowds—that's why she doesn't want to go to Switzerland where it's cooler but no more crowded. Ralph wants to please Undine, but he also doesn't want to tell her how quickly he's running low on money, mostly due to her extravagant desires.

Ralph begins to see Undine's true nature, realizing how she is vain and needs approval from strangers. Undine doesn't exactly hide her vanity, and so the fact that it took Ralph several months of marriage to realize what she's like suggests that he isn't especially perceptive.



That night, Undine’s silence makes Ralph nervous. He tells her he just saw something wonderful—a vision of a book he intends to write. Undine doesn’t seem to be interested in his grand vision and says she’s homesick. She says Europe isn’t as interesting as she expected. Ralph puts his vision aside and says that if Undine’s bored, perhaps first they should go to a more crowded place in Switzerland. This time, Undine is pleased and agrees to go.

Ralph doesn’t understand that the things that interest him—like his vision of a magnificent book he plans to write one day—don’t necessarily interest Undine. He has gotten through the first few months of marriage without major conflict, but as the months go on, the differences between him and Undine become harder and harder to ignore.



CHAPTER 12

Ralph feels that he could have kept hold on his book vision near the quiet waterfalls of Italy, but in busy St. Moritz, Switzerland, he finds that the vision eludes him. Undine, however, is much happier and seems to think better of Ralph. Undine’s lack of foreign language skills causes her to favor spending time with a crowd of other English-speakers at their hotel.

Ralph’s marriage to Undine forces him to make compromises, putting aside his vision of a book in order to please his new wife—although perhaps the book is a daydream rather than a serious goal, given Ralph’s dislike of work.



Ralph is a little annoyed to find a cavalry-officer they met in Siena, Italy at their hotel. One day, Undine goes out on an excursion with some members of her new social circle without inviting Ralph. Ralph figures it’s a good time to start work on his vision, but he can’t stop thinking about how Undine left him behind. When she gets back late, she looks happy, and Ralph feels left out. Many of the people in Undine’s crowd have titles, like the Grand Duchess, and Undine always uses these titles instead of their names. But Ralph is not as impressed with them as Undine is.

Partly, Ralph feels excluded from Undine’s life because he doesn’t understand her, but it also seems like Undine makes little effort to bridge the gap, leaving Ralph out of certain parts of her life. Undine’s preference for calling her new acquaintances by their titles rather than their names suggests that she values them for what they represent rather than who they actually are.



As if to challenge Ralph, Undine only spends more time over the next few days with her new acquaintances from the hotel. Ralph, however, is even more worried about a check he is supposed to receive from Mr. Spragg, which might not even be enough to cover their expenses. One day, Ralph finds Undine crying and thinks her father might be ill, but in fact, he has just been investing his money and so will have to skip three months of checks. Undine is sad about going back to New York, but Ralph says he would’ve had to get back soon anyway.

While Undine may have had good intentions at the start of her marriage to Ralph, as time passes, she finds it harder and harder to put aside her materialism and vanity. It’s both sad and humorous that Undine reacts to a missing check from her father as if she’s just received news that he is seriously ill, since it suggests that she values money more than family.



Undine asks Ralph if anyone in his family could help them out with money. Ralph is reluctant to ask Mr. Dagonet for more, although when Undine persists that he should ask his sister (Laura Fairford), he says he’ll see. Eventually, Ralph does send Laura a cable. Laura gets back to him quickly, but only with enough money to get them back to New York. Undine does what she can to stall the journey back, buying clothes along the way in Paris.

Ralph comes from a respectable family where they rarely discuss money in the open, but Undine has no qualms about asking openly for what she wants. Ultimately, Undine proves to be the more persuasive one in their relationship, and she forces Ralph to act according to her values.



In Paris, Ralph happens to see Peter walking down the street, looking like someone who doesn't have to worry about money. He greets Ralph amiably and they talk about Ralph's honeymoon. Peter invites Ralph to a party, but Ralph says he and Undine must get sailing immediately (or else he'll run out of money). Nevertheless, when he gets back to Undine, she seems too happy that he doesn't want to tell her they need to leave.

Peter spent a lot of time at the art gallery and the opera with a glamorous woman who wasn't his wife, so Ralph is suspicious of Peter's intentions with Undine (as well as envious of Peter's greater wealth). As always, Ralph hesitates to assert himself, and he puts off telling Undine the bad news about them leaving.



The delay in leaving Paris causes Undine to look into buying jewels. Ralph tries to pin down a date to sail back to New York. There's a fast, expensive boat leaving soon and a slower, cheaper boat leaving later; Undine is disappointed because she wants to board the faster boat but doesn't want to leave so soon. Ralph lets her put off the choice until the evening.

This short section about boats encapsulates Undine in a nutshell: the thing she wants is always the exact thing she can't have. Undine wants it both ways with the boats, even though that isn't a possibility.



CHAPTER 13

After going out to see a play on his own, Ralph gets back to the hotel, expecting to see Undine gone, but in fact, she is talking intimately with Peter at a tea table. They hardly notice Ralph's arrival. They all talk for a while, then Peter leaves, mentioning that he must see them again soon.

Despite Peter's reputation as a playboy, Undine shows no shame about being caught with him. Now that the honeymoon period is both literally and figuratively almost over, Undine has no problem openly challenging her husband's values, like his preference for modesty and chasteness.



After Peter leaves, Undine teases Ralph by saying she didn't shop too long while he was out—in fact, she saved them money. She made Peter offer to take them back to New York on his yacht. But Ralph doesn't like the idea. His cousin Clare never rides with her husband on the yacht, meaning they'll be alone with Peter. According to Ralph, Peter's yacht has a reputation of not being a place for decent women. Undine fires back that this is only because Clare is still so infatuated with Ralph that it forces Peter to take up with other women.

Undine knows that Ralph won't like her proposed plan to go with Peter, and so she tests his limits to see what she can get away with. Ralph becomes more open about what he fears—Peter's reputation with women—but this only causes Undine to double down and point out how Ralph himself may be a hypocrite for still having feelings for the married Clare.



Ralph starts to get angry with Undine. He says Peter has been manipulating her, but Undine says all he needs is a good woman to influence him. Nothing Ralph can think to say seems to change Undine's mind. He stands firm, however, and eventually gets her to give up on the yacht trip (although he has to ask Laura Fairford for more money to get home).

Ralph and Undine both act naïve in their own ways. Ralph foolishly believes he can change Undine, while Undine foolishly believes she can change Peter. They both lack the ability to see and accept people as they are, and this lack of understanding leads to conflict.



Shortly before their departure, Ralph goes to visit Clare at her hotel. They have a pleasant meeting, but at the end, Clare warns him not to let Peter take advantage of Undine. Ralph replies that Undine is good at defending herself, though inwardly, he's not so sure this is true. Meanwhile, Undine hasn't restrained her spending at all, even though she knows they don't have much money.

As Ralph's marriage with Undine gets rockier and rockier, Clare becomes an important confidante for Ralph. She understands exactly what Ralph is going through, since her husband is the one that Undine has been spending so much time with lately.



Back at his own hotel, Ralph finds Undine crying on the couch. He asks what's wrong, but Undine says that anyone should be able to see what's wrong, implying that she's pregnant and has put on weight. Ralph says she'll feel differently at some point, but Undine asks when and talks about losing a whole year of her life to the pregnancy. Ralph wonders if she's mistaken about how she feels, but Undine says she isn't mistaken and that she has even already consulted someone. Undine says she suddenly hates the sight of all the things she bought in Europe. She says she's going to hate herself more and more each time she looks in the mirror.

This narration in this section is deliberately ambiguous. The wording suggests that Ralph and Undine are headed toward something inevitable, and at first, it sounds like it could be a divorce (and that the person that Undine consulted was a divorce lawyer). Undine's hatred of herself in the mirror could be a hatred of the person she's become in her marriage. As the novel goes on, however, it becomes clear that Undine is pregnant and that the person she consulted was a doctor. She hates herself in the mirror and her new clothes because she is gaining weight from pregnancy.



CHAPTER 14

Claud Popple has had his ups and downs as a portrait painter, but a wealthy patron's interest in his work has put him on an upward path lately. He keeps a very neat studio, but he tosses off paintings less neatly. Sometime long after Ralph and Undine's honeymoon, Peter comes by to watch Claud painting Undine. Peter jokes around about the portrait, but Claud takes offense at the potential insult to his work. Undine finds Claud's descriptions of his work to be very eloquent. Undine used to find Ralph eloquent, but he was a little too eloquent, referencing things she'd never read or heard of before. Undine also likes the emotions she seems to stir in Claud Popple, but she would find it exhausting to have to always talk at his level. Peter, on the other hand, seems to talk at exactly Undine's level.

Claud Popple does the bare minimum to survive as a member of New York's upper class, but it turns out that it's just enough to help him keep his portrait business going. Undine has liked Claud from the very beginning because, like her, he is more interested in the external trappings of upper-class life, unlike Ralph who truly dreams of being a great writer (even if Ralph rarely acts on his big dreams).



At times, Undine wonders if her current marriage is as bad as some of the mistakes she made back in **Apex**. She really feels this way when Claud Popple invites several of her acquaintances to come see her finished painting. No one at the gathering knows much about art: they just believe a portrait should have clothes that look realistic and a face that doesn't look too realistic. Peter in particular approves of the portrait.

The section humorously demonstrates that Undine isn't the only one who doesn't understand art. While she feels left out because of her ignorance about art, it turns out that the people around her also don't know much about art and simply judge it based on what's popular and on simple rules they've learned.



At the portrait viewing, Peter happens to mention how the Driscolls aren't holding their usual ball because they're all out of money lately. Apparently, Elmer threatened to give Harmon B. Driscoll a different kind of ball (as in, a ball and chain) because of what he knows about crooked dealings in **Apex**. The mention of Elmer causes Undine to go pale.

Elmer represents a threat to both Undine and Mr. Spragg, since he could reveal secrets from Apex that would destroy both their reputations in New York. Luckily for Undine, Elmer seems to be less interested in vengeance and more interested in how he can personally benefit from any given situation.



Peter asks why Undine is suddenly so white, but she says she's just tired of posing. Undine says she'll take a cab back to her new home on West End Avenue—despite her desire to be on **Fifth Avenue**, West End was the best her father could afford. She was glad to be away from Fifth Avenue when she was pregnant, but giving birth to her son, Paul Marvell, has interfered with her plans to get into a better house near Fifth Avenue.

While the end of the previous chapter ambiguously hinted at Undine's pregnancy, this section is the first to confirm that she does indeed now have a son. It's fitting that the chapter takes so long to mention Paul, since Undine herself seems to often forget about her new son.



Peter says Undine will never get a cab on such a snowy night, so he offers to take her. Undine agrees, even though she knows Ralph doesn't like her being seen out and about with Peter. Eventually she settles in for the ride, but all of a sudden, she realizes that it's Paul's birthday and she was supposed to take him to his grandmother's, but she forgot.

Undine knows that riding with Peter will make Ralph mad, and she knows that forgetting Paul's birthday is even worse. She seems to be testing the limits of how far she can push her marriage before it breaks.



CHAPTER 15

Meanwhile at the Dagonet place, Laura Fairford is waiting for Undine to bring Paul but after the long delay figures Undine must have simply forgotten. She talks with Charles Bowen about how Undine is always late, particularly since Ralph has started working in the office and spending long hours there. Charles Bowen seems to take Undine's side, however, saying that the average American looks down on his wife.

This chapter explores the consequences of Undine's absence from Paul's birthday. Laura Fairford likes to preserve harmony, so she phrases her criticism of Undine indirectly. Meanwhile, Charles Bowen, who seems to be unmarried, has no problem giving advice about marriage.



Just then, Ralph's late arrival interrupts Laura Fairford and Charles Bowen's conversation about American marriages. Ralph thinks that perhaps he's missed the party, but then he finds the cake uncut and learns that Undine never brought Paul to his own birthday party. Ralph hears a horn outside and thinks it's Undine, but it's Clare. Ralph finds Clare's presence calming, particularly as things have begun to get more tense with Undine, with Undine lying about some of the expenses she racks up.

The uncut cake represents how Ralph and other characters have had to put their own lives on hold in order to cater to Undine's whims. Ralph's increasing dissatisfaction with Undine drives him back to his old love Clare, but he remains inhibited and mostly doesn't act on his feelings.



While talking with Ralph, Clare happens to bring up Elmer, who has been making a name for himself on Wall Street, despite his mysterious origins. Clare recalls the night at the opera when they saw Undine talking to Elmer, so Ralph finds it odd that Undine never mentioned the man to him. Clare gives Ralph a ride home. He expects to see Undine there, but a maid informs him that she isn't back yet.

Clare is a keen observer who knows what she's doing by bringing up Elmer Moffatt. She believes that Ralph has a right to know about what Undine is up to, even if Ralph himself sometimes seems like he prefers to remain ignorant about his wife's shortcomings.



Ralph sits down and reads the paper until eight thirty, but then he starts to get impatient. He wonders what excuse Undine will use when she finally gets back. At last, she comes back. When Ralph confronts Undine about missing the birthday, Undine blames the nurse for not taking Paul over. She says the portrait viewing went late, even though Clare told Ralph it was a tea. When Ralph asks if Undine took a cab, she tells him that Peter gave her a ride back. Ralph wants to ask more questions but holds back.

Because of his conversation with Clare, Ralph knows that Undine is lying to him. Nevertheless, he doesn't act on this information, showing once again how inhibited he can be. Undine is no fool herself, and she admits to riding back with Peter, figuring that it's better to confess it rather than be caught in a lie.



CHAPTER 16

Ralph ponders his life and how there were signs that he should've noticed long ago. He feels that he has avoided confronting Undine about Peter because he's afraid of learning the truth. He suspects that Peter isn't her lover but that—even worse—he provides her with admiration. He goes into the office, and the routine helps him feel a little better.

Ralph's life was easy because of his privileged upbringing, but his marriage to Undine forces him to confront uncomfortable truths. He believed that Undine's lack of connections to New York society made her innocent, but he sees now that it also leaves her constantly craving validation from people around her like Peter.



Undine, meanwhile, is surprised at how well Ralph took her missing Paul's birthday. She still likes some aspects of Ralph, but their money problems are driving a wedge between them. Still, she likes that Clare likes Ralph, since she likes having things that other people want. Undine is also happy to hear at a dinner that the investigation into Harmon B. Driscoll has mysteriously stopped and Elmer's sudden good luck seems to have disappeared, and so the Driscolls will hold a ball after all.

The novel shifts perspectives to show that just as Ralph doesn't really understand Undine, Undine doesn't really understand Ralph. Undine thinks she got away with something after the gallery party, when in fact, she has caused Ralph to worry about their marriage even more than he already did.



The Driscoll ball is a lavish affair. Undine enjoys seeing everyone's admiration, although she feels that perhaps Peter is admiring her a little too much. Peter has recently gifted her money, and she spent it all immediately. After the successful ball, however, she has a nervous breakdown, right around the same time when Paul is very ill, adding even more to their family expenses. Undine feels like Peter sometimes looks at her as if wondering where all his money went.

Undine hasn't even left Ralph yet, and it already seems that any potential relationship she has with Peter might be equally doomed, for similar reasons. Despite Peter's much greater ability to fund Undine's lifestyle, he resents how she feels entitled to his money, and Undine resents him right back—although she depends on him too much to reject him (and his money).



One day, Peter announces he's sailing for Europe. He says maybe Undine can visit him in Paris at some point, but Undine says she probably won't get away farther than the Adirondacks because of Paul. Peter asks if there's any way he can straighten things out for her, but Undine reminds him that she's married, and Peter gives up the idea, saying he's married too.

Peter is used to getting what he wants, and perhaps because he's a man, he can stretch the limits of his marriage without facing any serious consequences—a privilege that Undine herself doesn't have. The Adirondacks are much closer to New York than Europe; this suggests how Undine's lack of wealth limits how far she can go, both metaphorically and literally.



CHAPTER 17

Undine realizes it was a mistake to accept money from Peter. She wanted immediate gratification but now understands that it would have been better to lay a solid foundation for the future. She resents having to go to the Adirondacks, where there's no one she wants to see. She goes to see Mr. Spragg at the office to ask about going to Europe. Mr. Spragg treats his daughter's requests for money as a joke, but she insists she's serious about getting to Europe.

Mr. Spragg doesn't believe Undine has a good reason to need to go to Europe, so she tells him she needs to go because she's unhappy at home. Her father protests that Ralph treats her well, but Undine says she's been unhappy since the very beginning—his family hates her, and he thinks like his family. She says they particularly resent that she is the reason Ralph has to work (to pay her bills).

Undine found the right way to upset Mr. Spragg. He says that Ralph barely works at all. Undine adds that the Dagonets and Marvells are ashamed to associate with Mr. Spragg and Mrs. Spragg, even though they'll gladly accept Mr. Spragg's money for Ralph. Undine says that given all of this, is it any surprise that she'd like to get away?

Mr. Spragg says that the problem with going away to somewhere like Europe is that you always have to come back and face your problems again anyway. Undine disagrees—perhaps she could start a new life. She says if she had another chance, she'd marry the right man. Just then Elmer comes into the office. Despite his recent loss against Harmon B. Driscoll, Elmer still looks defiant.

Elmer says he's there to see Mr. Spragg on business. They go off together and close the door behind them, while Undine tries to think of what she'll say to her father when he returns. Eventually Elmer leaves. Mr. Spragg tells Undine he was just there about a real estate scheme, but that after Elmer's recent fall, Mr. Spragg can't do much to help him. Suddenly, Undine smiles and tells her father there's something she'd like him to do for her.

Undine regrets taking money from Peter not because she feels that it's wrong but because she feels it was bad strategy. By monetizing their relationship early, she has stirred up bad feelings, making it less likely that Peter might one day become her new husband and provide for her in the long term.



Many of the things Undine says in this passage are true, so her real talent is not lying but finding ways to twist the truth to fit with what she wants. She accurately diagnoses the cause of many of her problems with Ralph, even though she shows little motivation to actually address these problems.



Undine's father likes to think of himself as a sensible man with money, and Undine knows how to flatter his self-image while still getting the money she wants from him. She knows her father doesn't like Ralph's work ethic, and so she uses this fact against her father.



Mr. Spragg correctly notes that the real problem with Undine isn't where she lives—it's what's on the inside that's making her unhappy. Undine doesn't want to face this truth, however, so she continues to believe that she'll find happiness if she simply lives in the right country or meets the right person.



Mr. Spragg has already secured his fortune, and so, while he got involved with Apex schemes in the past, he wants to put that life behind him. Elmer, on the other hand, hasn't secured his fortune, and so he shows more interest in risk-taking.



CHAPTER 18

Undine is standing outside her father's office. She's only ever failed to get her way with her father once before, and she doesn't feel like she'll fail this time. She cautiously brings up the topic of divorce. While Mr. Spragg doesn't oppose divorce, he is shocked when Undine suggests that she'd consider divorcing Ralph because she'd much rather be with Peter. After talking with her father, she takes the elevator down and is surprised to see Elmer waiting for her. She tries to avoid him, but he insists. He tells her to follow him to his office—it'll be worth the trip.

Undine goes with Elmer to his office. At the office Elmer explains everything: He wants to meet Ralph, since Ralph could be useful for business and years ago Undine promised to introduce Elmer to business contacts. Ralph happens to be working for a firm where a big deal is underway, but Elmer doesn't want to approach the firm directly.

Undine invites Elmer to a dinner with Ralph, Laura Fairford, Clare, and Charles Bowen. Ralph is impressed with Elmer and the others are interested in his role in the Driscoll affair (which is Undine's excuse for inviting him), although he doesn't otherwise impress the women there. Ralph says that what's striking about Elmer is that despite his loss in the Driscoll case, he doesn't seem all that discouraged.

Undine asks Ralph what he and Elmer discussed earlier when they were smoking. Ralph mentions a business proposal that Elmer made that could be huge. He says that should make her happy, given how bad at making money he's been so far. Undine, however, feels weak and begins to cry. Ralph realizes she's potentially on the verge of another nervous breakdown.

The next morning, Undine is too weak to get out of bed. Her doctor explains to Ralph that she needs several days of rest, followed perhaps by a change of scenery. As Undine recovers, she begins asking about going to Europe more and more often.

Elmer shows up two days later to see Ralph at his West End Avenue residence, since the meeting is too sensitive to take place at Ralph's office. Although Elmer impresses Ralph at first, his second meeting makes him begin to wonder if Elmer is involved in something shady. Still, Ralph is eager to reverse his poor record at his real estate company. He decides to ask Mr. Spragg for advice.

On the one hand, Undine's father is traditional enough that he hesitates when he hears that his daughter wants to get divorced after such a short period of time. On the other hand, however, Mr. Spragg has had misgivings about Ralph from the start. In addition, Mr. Spragg is so focused on money that he knows divorcing Ralph could be a smart financial decision for Undine, especially if marrying Peter is a real possibility.



Elmer's focus on his business interests turns out to be both a blessing and a curse to Undine. Elmer holds back on exploiting the information he has about his marriage to Undine, which could make her new life in New York very difficult, but he also presses to see Ralph at a time when it's very inconvenient for Undine.



Despite the fact that Elmer lost the Driscoll case, it still raised his profile, suggesting that fame and name recognition, no matter the source, has some value in New York society. Put differently, Elmer's whole life makes the argument that all publicity is good publicity.



Given Elmer's involvement in shady deals and Ralph's overly trusting nature, Undine surely realizes that pairing the two of them is a bad idea. She seems to show remorse here, perhaps after she realizes that Ralph is going along with the scheme mostly to please her.



Undine may be faking her illness, or she may simply be taking advantage of the circumstances. Undine is opportunistic and often thinks short-term rather than making detailed long-term plans.



Ralph's by-the-book attitude makes him a liability at his firm, illustrating how getting ahead there often means stretching the rules. Still, Ralph's desire to please people outweighs his desire to follow the rules, and so he ultimately decides to hear about Elmer's scheme.



Mr. Spragg tells Ralph that he doesn't see the trouble with the arrangement, as long as no one involved is under any sort of special obligation. (Ralph doesn't mention that it's Elmer who proposed the deal.) Ralph decides to go along with the deal, since hesitating might only make things worse. Elmer is also eager to get things resolved, and so they complete the deal just under two weeks later.

On his way out of Elmer's office, Ralph runs into Mr. Spragg. Mr. Spragg asks how Ralph knows Elmer, and Ralph mentions the dinner Undine hosted recently. Mr. Spragg asks if Undine is still set on going to Europe, and Ralph confirms she is, so Mr. Spragg says he'll let her do it. Ralph himself is in favor of her going, hoping that perhaps things will be better when she gets back.

Undine is pleased to hear about Europe but tries not to seem too happy about it. As her departure gets closer, however, she finds it harder to hide her excitement. A day or two before her departure, she takes Paul to see Mr. Dagonet, and on the way back, she runs into Elmer. Elmer says it's nice to meet Paul and offers to carry him, which Undine accepts. Paul is afraid at first, but eventually he likes how tall Elmer is, since that means he can carry him even higher than Ralph.

Elmer says that Ralph really helped him make a fresh start and thinks he helped Ralph make a fresh start too. Undine is happy to hear it. She mentions her upcoming trip to Europe, which surprises Elmer. Undine brags that she owes her trip all to Elmer. They walk more, and Elmer mentions some **Apex** gossip about how Indiana Frusk got Representative James J. Rolliver to abandon his family for her. Undine marvels at this, thinking Indiana was lucky to get her first husband, a druggist's clerk with whom Undine herself had broken off an engagement.

CHAPTER 19

Charles Bowen is sitting at a restaurant in Paris, thinking about a letter he might eventually write to Laura Fairford. He is dining with a French marquis named Raymond de Chelles, and they discuss their thoughts about marriage. Just then, Raymond happens to notice Undine at a table with Peter and asks who she is. Charles Bowen explains who Undine is and that she's already married, although both he and Raymond find her lovely that evening.

Mr. Spragg doesn't see any problems with Elmer's proposed deal (when he doesn't know Elmer proposed it), suggesting that Mr. Spragg still condones bending the rules, he's just learned specifically not to trust Elmer.



The naïve Ralph hopes that Undine will think better of him after going to Europe, when in fact she is using the trip as a way to get away from and potentially divorce Ralph. Mr. Spragg seems to understand all this, and he seems fine with his daughter leaving Ralph, although he doesn't tell Ralph this. Mr. Spragg isn't as openly selfish as Undine, but his deep concerns about money mean he is materialistic in his own way.



Undine's excitement (and her attempt to hide it) suggests that if she ever was sick, she has long since recovered. Despite Undine's mistrust of Elmer, she lets him carry Paul, suggesting how reckless she is with her son. Alternatively, it's possible Undine is deliberately trying out a new father for her son to imagine life after a divorce. Ralph's physical shortness represents his inadequacies, at least in Undine's eyes.



Despite the dangers of doing business with Elmer, Ralph ultimately made out pretty well, suggesting that in the real estate business it might counterintuitively be more dangerous to play it safe than to take risks. Meanwhile, just as Undine is at her moment of triumph, she feels that she hasn't done enough, once she learns that her old rival Indiana Frusk has somehow married someone even more impressive than she has.



Charles Bowen lives an idle life and functions in the story more as an observer than a driver of the action. Raymond, on the other hand, is a man of action, and when he sees Undine, he knows exactly what he wants. This focus on action contrasts sharply with Undine's more inhibited husband, Ralph.



Charles Bowen supposes that Undine wants her privacy with Peter, so he's surprised when Peter invites him and Raymond to join their dining party. They move to Undine's table, where she is with some of the people she met in Europe the last time she was there. To Peter's dismay, however, Undine soon arranges for Raymond to be near her at her table.

Undine treats Peter much the same way she treats Ralph—by not even attempting to disguise her interest in other men. While Undine mostly used Ralph's jealousy to her advantage, Peter is less of a pushover and may not submit as easily to Undine's wishes.



CHAPTER 20

Six weeks later, Undine stands at the window of her hotel looking down at Paris. She feels that her life is finally headed in the right direction. Compared to the Paris she sees now, her past summers seem stale and boring, even her honeymoon in Europe. She has just received two letters. One is from Ralph, telling her that, while he hoped she'd enjoy his money, he also hoped she'd enjoy it less quickly. The other is from Laura Fairford, telling her that lately Ralph has been overworked and in a bad mood.

As is typical for his character, Ralph doesn't fully express himself in his letter, only passive aggressively hinting at his financial concerns without getting into his deeper concerns about the whole foundation of their marriage. Just as she did at the beginning of the novel when she invited Undine to dinner, Laura Fairford speaks on Ralph's behalf in her letter. This passage explores how men and women communicated differently, specifically how men were encouraged to show more reserve.



Undine feels that the main factor making her enjoy Paris more is her new friendship with Raymond. She finds him attractive, and while she knows that his own attention toward her might not last, she finds it valuable due to the way it makes Peter jealous. She wants Peter to finally be clear to her about his intentions.

Undine sees Peter more as a conquest than a future partner. Her goal is to use him to secure her financial future. This suggests that Undine sees marriage as a kind of business transaction—and that she has no qualms about employing underhanded tactics, like using Peter's own jealousy against him.



One day, Peter confronts Undine about why she just suddenly disappeared for a couple days, and she tells him she went away to Raymond's chateau. Peter believes Raymond just wants to "compromise" Undine. Undine replies that, based on his reputation, Peter could do the same to her. Peter asks her about where they're going to dinner that night, but Undine says she already has plans with Raymond. Peter says Raymond is making a fool of Undine, but Undine replies that it doesn't matter what she does in Paris, since Ralph has ordered her home next week anyway.

Peter is a hypocrite who expects Undine to be faithful to him, even as he cheats on his own wife and helps Undine cheat on her husband. Like Ralph, Peter avoids looking directly at difficult truths, but while Ralph generally directs the blame at himself, Peter looks outside and blames Undine for failing to live up to his idealized version of her.



Peter begs Undine not to leave Europe just yet. His request moves Undine, but she resists Peter in the moment because she has her eyes on a long-term goal. She allows him to kiss her for the first time to say goodbye to her. Peter tries to make her stay. Undine tells him she simply can't go on with her present life, and the only way she won't go home is if she decides on a new life. Peter takes this to mean that she is thinking of marrying Raymond. Undine refuses to give a straight answer about this. Just then, a telegram from Laura Fairford, interrupts their conversation, informing Undine that Ralph has pneumonia and that Undine should head back at once.

This passage depicts Undine at her most manipulative. Although Undine ultimately wants to end up with Peter, she is willing to do anything to get there, including making Peter suffer by thinking that she wants to marry Raymond instead. Undine plays a dangerous game; in trying to instill urgency in Peter to make him propose, she risks scaring him off for good. Her previous successes, including with Ralph, have made her confident—maybe too confident.



Peter asks why Undine has suddenly gone so pale. She just crumples the telegram up and says that Laura Fairford is telling her that Ralph wants her back at once. Peter says he'll do something to make Undine stay, but she says she doesn't just want someone to pay her bills. She again seems to imply that the only way she'll stay in Europe is if she marries Raymond. Peter angrily walks out, and Undine worries she's gone too far, but then Peter comes back. He says he'll do anything to keep her in Europe.

Undine becomes so selfish at this point that she barely even shows concern when she hears that Ralph is seriously ill—perhaps because she herself recently used an illness to get what she wanted, and she expects that other people do the same. Despite Peter's long resistance, the chapter seems to end with him finally seeing things Undine's way, proving her tactics successful.



CHAPTER 21

It's June in New York after a spring of chaotic weather, and Ralph is exhausted. For a while, he received weekly letters from Undine in Europe, which he valued less for what they said and more for giving him an excuse to write back to her. Her letters don't seem particularly concerned with Ralph's welfare or even Paul's.

This chapter from Ralph's perspective shows the consequences of Undine's globetrotting. Although Ralph's letters suggest that he still doesn't understand his wife that well, his patience and his devotion to Paul make him more sympathetic.



At first, Undine's absence felt freeing to Ralph, but soon he realizes that even when she's gone, he can't fully escape her influence. His job continues to drain his energy, even though his deal with Elmer raised his standing in the company. Occasionally, he takes Paul over to see Mr. Spragg and Mrs. Spragg, hoping to bring her back by bringing their families closer together (although Mrs. Spragg in particular seems to resist getting closer).

Unlike Undine, Ralph doesn't have clear goals in life, and this causes him to flounder when given freedom. Although Undine's goals may be selfish and short sighted, they give her purpose and direction, whereas Ralph is less goal oriented, mostly just trying to please the people around him, whether it's at work or with his family.



Sometimes, when Ralph visits Mr. Spragg and Mrs. Spragg with Paul, Mrs. Heeny is also visiting. She often gives Paul sweets that the Dagonets forbid him from having. Ralph finds it hard to talk with his in-laws, particularly once Undine stops writing and he runs out of news from her.

As recent New York transplants, the Spraggs don't have much in common with Ralph, who comes from an old-money family that has lived in the city for ages. Undine connected their two worlds, and without her, Ralph struggles to communicate with his in-laws.



One afternoon near the end of June, Ralph begins to wonder if Clare is still in town. He goes to visit her in person, hoping her presence will be a comfort. She is glad to see him—he asks why she didn't invite him sooner, and she says she hoped he'd come to see for himself. Ralph gives Clare a long account of his marital problems and his drudgery at his job. When Clare asks about Ralph's writing, he seems to avoid the subject. Although Ralph is happy talking at first, eventually he gets tired and says he must leave.

Despite the fact that their romance apparently never worked out, Ralph and Clare remain on good terms. Ralph, however, never considers cheating on his wife, even as he suspects his own wife may be cheating on him (with Clare's husband). Clare understands Ralph well enough to sense that his writing isn't going well, and so she drops the subject. This level of understanding comforts Ralph, who is used to Undine deliberately testing the limits of what he'll put up with.



When Ralph gets home, he finds a letter that was sent to him from Paris, apparently forwarded by Undine. He expects a bill, but in fact it's an advertisement for a Parisian detective agency that investigates "delicate" situations. He laughs and throws it out, then groans.

It's unclear why Undine sent the advertisement and if it was even intentional, but the effect is that Ralph can no longer ignore how obvious it is that something is deeply wrong with his marriage.



CHAPTER 22

Ralph wakes up with a memory of having been recently crying. He tells himself he must get up to go to the office. He becomes ill and goes through life in a daze. People around him stop mentioning Undine. Laura Fairford stops by to help take care of Ralph. Eventually, in his illness, Ralph becomes delirious and forgets that Undine isn't around. Mr. Spragg also visits Ralph and tells him that Harmon B. Driscoll is again facing a possible indictment and that Ralph should come to Mr. Spragg's office as soon as he's up and moving again.

The sudden downturn in Ralph's health physically represents his mental state as he watches his marriage fall apart. Ralph becomes delirious and loses touch with reality, which is sadly fitting, given how he refused to accept reality even when he was healthy. Harmon B. Driscoll's sudden reappearance in the plot shows how tumultuous life could be, not just for Ralph but for all the characters.



Ralph eventually feels well enough to meet Mr. Spragg in his office. Ralph is shocked to learn from Mr. Spragg that Undine is back in the United States, somewhere in Dakota. Ralph slowly begins to understand that Mr. Spragg is telling him that Undine left him and is in fact preparing to divorce him, blaming him for desertion. Mr. Spragg assures him that he appreciates what he did for Undine, but *desertion* seemed like the best option for everyone when applying for divorce.

Although Mr. Spragg says kind things to Ralph, he may not be as friendly as he appears on the surface. His suggestion that Ralph go along with "desertion" on the divorce papers seems to benefit his daughter Undine more than it will benefit Ralph, even though Mr. Spragg presents it as a mutually beneficial option.



Ralph says he intends to make the divorce as difficult as he can. He asks Mr. Spragg if Undine expects Peter to marry her. Mr. Spragg says his daughter is currently alone and hasn't mentioned any future plans. Mr. Spragg says he'd have given anything for the divorce not to happen, but it definitely will, so Ralph should prepare for it.

Despite Ralph's threats, Mr. Spragg maintains his friendly demeanor, perhaps because he knows that Ralph won't actually follow through on what he promises. Like Elmer Moffatt, Mr. Spragg doesn't believe in grudges because they're bad for business.



CHAPTER 23

In the Adirondacks, Ralph sits on the balcony of a lake house and looks out at the clouds on the water. He doesn't have anyone in his life that he can talk about Undine with—the whole thing will become a scandal, and the people in his life avoid scandals. His family doesn't really understand divorce, least of all Mr. Dagonet.

Undine may be much vainer than Ralph, but Ralph still has his own concerns about his reputation. Ralph, however, cares less about the newspapers and more about how his family will react, particularly his difficult grandfather.



Ralph begins replacing photos of Undine around the house. He feels both angry and ashamed of himself about how things have gone lately. Eventually, he is satisfied not to see Undine looking at him from all those pictures, and he decides not to fight the divorce after all. He gets angry however, when Laura Fairford comes over and speaks to Paul as if Undine is dead and never coming back.

Ralph suffers from an internal conflict. On the one hand, he wants to erase Undine from his life, as illustrated by his removal of all her pictures. On the other hand, however, he finds this change frightening and bristles when other people acknowledge his failing marriage.



One day, Ralph is on the subway and happens to see his own name in a newspaper someone else is reading. The article focuses on Undine, and the headline references a husband who is too absorbed in business to make his home happy.

Ralph realizes that Mr. Spragg misled him into believing that his divorce could be amicable, when all along Undine was planning to attack Ralph in order to protect her own reputation.



CHAPTER 24

Still in Paris, Indiana Frusk (newly married to Representative James J. Rolliver) tells Undine that she should've come to her first for advice. It's been a little less than a year since the triumphant day when Undine looked out her Paris hotel window. Indiana's main advice is to get a divorce as soon as possible, since you never know when you'll need it. Undine asks if Indiana took her own advice, and Indiana goes quiet. Nevertheless, Indiana feels that Undine gave Peter too much time to think by going back to Dakota for six months.

Like many characters in the story, Indiana likes giving advice more than she likes taking it, illustrating the deep hypocrisy at the heart of affluent society, where people fail to live up to their own values. Time has passed, and this chapter reveals what previous chapters hinted—that Peter and Undine weren't compatible after all. Undine feels particularly disappointed by this result because she has to witness the success of Indiana Frusk, a rival Undine used to consider beneath her.



Undine explains that the real problem is Clare, who finds divorce "vulgar." Indiana Frusk asks what Undine's plan was when she came back to the United States. She says Peter was going to go to Reno while she went to Dakota, so that it wouldn't look like they were acting together. They were going to meet up in Chicago, but Peter never showed, and he never writes letters, regardless of the circumstances.

Undine refuses to think ill of Peter, even after he rejects her, choosing instead to place the blame on Clare. Perhaps Undine has not totally given up on Peter, or perhaps the concept of being rejected is too painful for Undine, given how much she loves admiration.



Indiana Frusk tells Undine it's a shame about Peter but asks if there's anyone else she could make use of now that she's newly divorced. Undine remains set on Peter, and it turns out that Indiana's husband, Representative James J. Rolliver, knows Peter and has seen him recently. Undine thanks Indiana and offers to introduce Indiana to her European friends. In fact, however, Undine feels that her position in her social circle is too precarious to risk introducing Indiana. Her New York friends have already shunned her over the divorce. Some of her friends feel Raymond would have been a better choice than Peter.

As she tries to remake her life after divorce, Undine stays cautious. While she relies on Indiana for advice, Undine also seems slightly embarrassed by her, which is why Undine only pretends to want to introduce Indiana to her European social circle. The fact that Undine's friends prefer Raymond bodes well for him, since Undine seeks public admiration for her decisions (even though she has no problem privately disappointing people like Ralph).



Undine has not seen Raymond since coming back to Paris this time, preferring to leave any meeting with him up to chance. One day, however, she sees Raymond sitting at the other end of the same tea-room where she's sitting. He recognizes her, but it's crowded, and he doesn't come over.

After applying too much pressure on Peter and scaring him off, Undine deliberately takes a slower approach to courting Raymond. Undine can learn from her actions, but she usually chooses not to. Instead, she uses the new lessons to further her own selfish goals.



Over the next few days, Indiana Frusk continues to be a big part of Undine's life in Paris. One morning, Indiana tells her that she invited Peter to dinner but that he turned her down after guessing her connection to Undine. Undine threatens to go right to Peter's hotel and see him directly, but Indiana advises against it. She says that Peter has turned against Undine in part because of how she ignored Ralph when he was sick. Undine insists the story is exaggerated.

It's unclear whether Peter really abandoned Undine because he heard about how she treated Ralph or if that was just the most socially acceptable excuse he could think of. In any case, Peter got a preview of what it was like to live with Undine (and have her spending his money), and hearing about Ralph's condition likely further warned Peter about the consequences of marrying Undine.



CHAPTER 25

For the next few months, Undine feels like a failure. Paris in the winter is nowhere near as boisterous as the summer. Since her divorce, she feels that she has lost something and is in danger of becoming associated with the wrong crowds; at times, she almost prefers to be alone.

Undine usually gets what she wants, and so losing Peter causes her to have a minor identity crisis, leading her to temporarily shun things that form the core of her identity, like her preference for crowds.



Undine continues to mull over the events of the previous year, particularly her failed affair with Peter. Living with Peter was the first time in her life when she could buy anything she wanted, but she realizes in hindsight that Peter was not as happy as she was. She thought she had fully ensnared him before she left for Dakota, but she was wrong. Her time in Dakota was miserable, since she was mostly just there for the divorce, and she spent some time with Mabel Lipscomb, who was in town for the same reason. But then a gentleman came for Mabel, and Undine realized Mabel's future is set, while her own remains uncertain. Undine resents Mabel for leaving her alone.

Because Undine is self-centered, she didn't realize at the time that Peter wasn't as happy as she was. She regrets losing Peter, but perhaps more than that she regrets that her power to influence people seems to be diminishing. Mabel is going through a similar situation and could be a source of comfort for Undine, but instead, Undine views her as a rival. Undine's desire for success makes her jealous and resentful of anyone who succeeds without her.



CHAPTER 26

Undine finally returns to New York. She goes to see her parents but regrets that Mr. Spragg and Mrs. Spragg can't move from **the Stentorian** to somewhere closer to **Fifth Avenue**. Undine finds it difficult to talk to her parents and goes silent whenever the topic of their grandson, Paul, comes up.

Undine's return to New York is a return to reality, and like her father predicted, she has to come back and face all the same problems that she left behind. Undine still tries to avoid talking about the most serious issues, like Paul.



Undine tries to stay away from the **Fifth Avenue** crowd, but she can't avoid hearing about them in the society column of the papers her parents get. Peter often makes the column due to his world traveling, frequently mentioned alongside his wife, Clare. Mrs. Heeny clips any social news that Undine happens to miss. The worst for Undine is when she hears Mabel Lipscomb has remarried. After getting the news, she tells Mr. Spragg that he must take her to the opera that night.

After his failed flirtation with Undine, Peter seems to realize that his reputation is in danger, so he makes sure to make several very public appearances with his wife. As Undine despairingly reads the society pages, she gets the idea to go back to the opera, perhaps since that's the place where all her successes started the previous time.



Undine goes with Mr. Spragg to the opera and sees many people she knows, including Clare. Although Undine thinks Clare might act friendly, she avoids approaching anyone. When they get back from the opera, Undine takes off her cloak, and Mr. Spragg notices for the first time a pearl necklace that she often wears. She reveals that they're from Peter. At first, she's angry when her father suggests sending the pearls back to Peter, then she begins to think it might send a nice message.

One day, Undine abruptly hands her pearls to Mrs. Heeny and tells her to take them. Mrs. Heeny is confused. At first Mrs. Heeny thinks Undine means to take the pearls to be re-strung, but in fact, Undine wants to sell them—and for Mrs. Heeny to keep the sale a secret. The pearls give Undine some money to work with. She considers returning to Europe but doesn't want to go alone because she feels that would look desperate, so she decides her parents must come with her.

Mr. Spragg at first resists Undine's request that he come to Europe with her. Eventually, however, both he and Mrs. Spragg are just flattered that they can be useful to their daughter, and so they agree to go, even though they haven't even been out of the country before. In Europe, however, Undine soon begins to find her parents a hindrance, since they can't adapt to European ways. Eventually, her parents decide to go back, and Undine stays behind, deciding to turn to Indiana Frusk (now Rolliver) for help.

CHAPTER 27

One day when Undine is moping about the state of her life in Paris, a young woman approaches her and asks if she's Mrs. Marvell. The question annoys Undine, but the young woman gets her attention when she reveals that she is Princess Lili Estradina, the cousin of Raymond. They talk, and the Princess invites Undine to come see her mother. Undine feels that she and the Princess are already becoming close. She finds both the Princess and her mother, the Duchess, to be fascinating people. The Princess, who could be anywhere in age between 20 and 40, dresses in either baggy, masculine clothes or extravagant draperies. The Duchess better fits with Undine's ideas of what an aristocrat should look like—she looks old and has lost much of her youthful beauty, but she still has dignity.

Undine knows that an old-money stalwart like Clare will remain polite, even after Undine had a very public flirtation with Clare's husband (New York's high society discouraged public confrontations). The pearls that Undine is wearing represent how she hasn't fully let go of Peter yet.



Undine's decision to get rid of the pearls suggests that she has finally accepted that Peter will never propose to her—and so she wants to cut her losses by trying to at least get some money from the pearls. After wrestling with despair and disappointment, Undine turns back to materialism for solace, looking at how she can profit off a bad situation.



Having recovered some of her old self, Undine loses her temporary preference for being alone. Undine's parents aren't her preferred crowd, but they seem to be better than nothing, and so Undine invites them to come with her to Europe. Unlike Undine, however, her parents struggle to adapt to their new environment, having barely adapted to life in New York.



As previous chapters revealed, Undine fancies Europeans with fancy titles. But while previously Undine delighted in reeling off the titles of her noble friends, she is a little more jaded after her divorce with Ralph and her failed affair with Peter. While the Princess and the Duchess still retain some glamor for Undine, she also begins to notice the flaws they hide beneath their fancy titles. The Princess, for example, certainly doesn't have a princess's fashion sense, and even the dignified Duchess looks more like a relic from a previous era.



Princess Estradina is separated from her husband but not yet officially divorced. Undine feels that the Princess and the Duchess understand her and are protecting her. But when one night at the hotel Undine runs into someone from her old Parisian social circle, she fears that the Princess and the Duchess will find out about Undine's past.

Undine is trying to escape her past, and this is why she finds the Princess and the Duchess so comforting: they don't know about Undine's past, so it's like she has a blank slate. But Undine's fear about being found out suggests that she hasn't actually started over—she has just found yet another way to temporarily run from her problems.



CHAPTER 28

Princess Estradina suggests to Undine one day that they should go to Nice. Undine is still worried that one of her old friends will turn the Princess against her, but she's excited at the prospect of going to Nice. They have a nice trip at first, but then the Princess says she must go visit a sick friend. Undine doesn't believe her and is angry about being abandoned. She goes to a tea-room and is surprised to see Elmer in the crowd.

The Princess was vague about the details of her divorce earlier, and it seems here that she is using Undine to disguise what she's really up to. Undine herself often does this sort of thing, and now she finds that it's less fun to be on the receiving end. But before she can draw any sort of lesson from this, she happens to spot Elmer Moffatt, who, with all his sudden, unexpected appearances, seems to embody something like chance or fate.



Although it has been a long time since Undine has had any sort of contact with Elmer, she is annoyed to see that he isn't alone—he's with a woman in a very showy feathered hat. Elmer looks happy with his companion; Undine feels that Elmer wants her to see him looking happy, which she finds pitiable. Undine's thoughts are interrupted when she feels Raymond taking her hand.

Once again, Undine gets a taste of her own medicine. While previously she tried to make Ralph and Peter jealous by flirting with other men, now she finds Elmer trying to make her jealous with another woman. But once again, a sudden interruption stops Undine from learning anything from the experience.



Although Raymond seems as infatuated with Undine as ever, she has learned to be cautious. He just happens to be in Nice to see his aunt, the Duchess. Over the next few weeks, Undine and Princess Estradina come back to Nice several times, but Undine refuses to let the Princess invite Raymond to any of their lunches. The Princess confesses at one point that she's really going to Nice in order to see a lover that she can't see publicly (because of her marriage), and she hoped to return the favor by putting Undine in contact with Raymond. But Undine maintains that she has no desire to see Raymond.

While Undine learned some lessons from her failed relationship with Peter, she still hesitates to be honest about her interest in Raymond. While the Duchess and Princess's society might differ from New York City's high society, both groups value discretion, leading people to hold back what they want to say for fear of saying the wrong, impolite thing.



CHAPTER 29

In early spring, Undine is once more in Paris. She feels successful, having declared that she will only see Raymond in the presence of his aunt, the Duchess, a decision that has also raised Undine's standing with Princess Estradina. Despite her attempts to appear strong, Undine is always pleased when Raymond does come to visit his aunt. Still, despite all of Undine's success, she keeps running into problems with money.

Spring represents new beginnings, and Undine's budding courtship with Raymond seems to reenergize her. But after her past failures, Undine avoids getting too comfortable, unable to fully enjoy spending time with Raymond because she worries that things will go wrong again.



Marrying Raymond will be difficult for Undine, since the Catholic Church doesn't recognize divorce, meaning that marrying a divorced woman can greatly injure a person's social standing. Undine tries to keep Raymond satisfied by doing what she can, but she can sense that perhaps his patience is wearing thin. Still, she maintains that she will either marry him or give him up.

Undine thinks back to a letter she received recently from Mrs. Spragg, who is still missing her grandson, Paul. Undine feels a tightness in her throat when she thinks of Paul growing up without her. She wants to find a good man who can be a father to him and begins to cry. Just then, Raymond comes through the door. He introduces her to the concept of annulling a marriage.

Undine gets to working thinking about annulment, but she is a little distracted as she notices that her social standing with Princess Estradina seems to have been falling ever since she returned to Paris. Princess Estradina has been treating Undine like she's invisible, which really annoys Undine. Eventually, she hears that Raymond's mother, the Marquise de Chelles, has found out about Undine's past and disapproves. They believe Undine isn't a suitable marriage candidate for their son (because of her divorce, which is forbidden in the Catholic Church), and so they believe she is spoiling Raymond's other prospects for marriage. Undine takes this as a declaration of war and plans to prove Raymond's family wrong by getting her annulment.

CHAPTER 30

A few days after discussing annulment with Raymond, Undine runs into Elmer again. While she wasn't certain that Elmer noticed her last time, this time he greets her and seems eager to see her. They talk, and Elmer declares that he loves it so far in Paris. Undine is surprised to hear about how Elmer's life has been progressing out of view for her. He, however, has heard about her life, since her divorce made the newspapers.

Undine invites Elmer back for tea. As they ride back, Undine seems to agree with Elmer about all the good qualities Paris has, but she tells him that sometimes she gets very lonely. Elmer suggests, however, that she's probably only lonely when she wants to be. Undine is annoyed to learn that she doesn't seem to be at the center of Elmer's thoughts. Undine suggests they should see each other again at some point, but Elmer says he's headed back next week.

France is a predominantly Catholic country. Catholicism has been around longer than Protestantism (Undine's religion), and so this section sets the two of them up as opposites: Catholic vs. Protestant, European vs. American, Old vs. New. This makes it clear that any relationship Undine has with Raymond will involve a clash of ideas and values.



While strict Catholics don't believe in divorce, they do believe in annulment. Whereas divorce simply ends a marriage, annulment ends a marriage and claims the marriage was never legitimate in the first place. Although Raymond is the one who requires the annulment, the idea appeals to Undine too because it represents a new beginning and a rejection of the past.



Although in general, Europeans and Catholics have a stronger connection to tradition, in many ways, Princess Estradina is just as fickle as her Protestant American counterparts. After campaigning for Undine to marry Raymond, she suddenly seems to regret it once Undine actually gets close to marrying Raymond. Undine tried to use these French nobles to escape her past—but even in Europe, she can't stop them from finding out about her marriage history.



Undine despised Elmer the last time she saw him, but all it takes is one friendly greeting for her to change her mind about him. Elmer understands that the things Undine wants most in the world are admiration and acceptance. Elmer kept track of Undine's life in the newspapers, suggesting that he still thinks about her.



Undine welcomed Elmer gladly because she believed that she was at the center of his thoughts. But when she realizes that he has other things on his mind, she gets resentful. Even as Undine draws near to securing a marriage proposal from Raymond de Chelles, she continues to expect devotion from men like Elmer, highlighting her perpetually unsatisfied personality.



While Undine is genuinely disappointed that Elmer will be headed back, she says there's something he can do for her. Elmer guesses that it has something to do with the gentleman she was with in Nice the other day (Raymond). When Undine mentions needing money for an annulment, Elmer makes fun of her, wondering if she wants him to bribe the Pope on her behalf, but then he becomes more sympathetic and asks if Paul is with her. Undine regretfully says no but claims that she got "everything" in the divorce. Elmer says that personally, if Paul were his, he'd fight to his last dollar to hold on to him in the divorce proceedings. He asks why Undine doesn't just send for Paul, but Undine says she can't afford to, plus the Marvells would never give him up. But Elmer helps her see that perhaps getting Paul would convince the Marvells to start sending her checks. Elmer mentions that he has more potential legal trouble brewing before saying that it was pleasant to see Undine again.

Although Elmer and Mr. Spragg don't always get along, they share a similar sense of detachment that allows them to see the absurdities in the world around them and endures them with a sense of humor. Undine takes her social climbing very seriously. Elmer also wants to improve his social rank, but he doesn't care about his reputation as much as Undine—he's just willing to do whatever it takes to keep making money. Elmer's talent for identifying schemes helps him realize that Paul could be an important bargaining chip for Undine. The fact that Elmer would suggest this—and that Undine would go along with it—suggests how deeply both of them have immersed themselves in a culture of selfishness and materialism.



CHAPTER 31

Almost two years have passed since Ralph first learned that he was getting divorced. He has tried to adapt his life to these big changes with mixed success, unable to decide what his values are. He still thinks about his book on occasion, but other people in his life seem to be less and less interested in what he's doing. Everyone encourages him to write, but he only really starts after people stop encouraging him. His book vision is very different from what it used to be, with his old ideas seeming too grand and heroic.

As the novel goes on, time skips become longer and more frequent, helping convey the feeling that time is speeding up. Ralph felt angry and hurt in the immediate aftermath of his divorce, and even two years later, he still grapples with it. Nevertheless, he has finally started writing his book, suggesting that perhaps he is ready to move beyond daydreams and finally take action.



Since his divorce, Ralph hasn't gone to see Clare at her home, although he occasionally sees her when they both go to see his sister, Laura Fairford, out in the country. One evening, he finally tells Clare that he's been writing, and her attention helps to reassure him.

Clare has always been close to Ralph, but she becomes an even more important ally after the divorce. Clare helps connect Ralph to his younger, more hopeful days, and she also understands marital trouble well, given her very public issues with her playboy husband, Peter.



Ralph spends the night at Laura Fairford's place, feeling pleased about where his book is at, but the next morning in the papers he learns that Undine intends to marry a French nobleman and is confident that the Pope will annul her previous marriage. Ralph asks Laura if she already knew about this, but she dodges the question. Clare tries to reassure Ralph that the annulment will make him even freer, but Ralph feels that he already has all he needs from the divorce.

Ralph tells himself that his progress on his book is enough to keep him satisfied, but his actions seem to contradict those thoughts. In fact, Ralph still seems deeply interested in hearing more about Undine's life, even as he claims that he doesn't care. This reflects how difficult it can be to let go of the past, even painful parts.



CHAPTER 32

As more days pass, Ralph begins to feel that Clare is right and that if Undine remarries, he really will begin to feel freer. He figures that even if Undine failed with Peter, she is cunning enough that she won't make the same mistakes again.

One day, when Ralph is in a good mood, he gets a message from his mother that Mrs. Spragg called and said Mrs. Heeny was coming to fetch Paul. Later, Ralph gets a letter addressed to him which seems to be a legal letter concerning Paul's custody, which the courts have solely awarded to Undine. Ralph feels this must be some mistake and that surely his own lawyers would have never signed off on anything like this. Then he remembers: in order to avoid scandal for Paul, Ralph went along with everything the Spragg family's lawyers requested.

Full of rage, Ralph goes to see his old divorce lawyer. When the lawyer arrives, he informs Ralph that he simply acted exactly as Ralph asked him to. Ralph asks if there's anything he can do, and the lawyer suggests that the only option is to prove Undine has some ulterior motive for wanting custody of Paul.

Ralph goes to see Mr. Spragg and Mrs. Spragg while they're at dinner. Ralph asks what's going on with Paul, and Mr. Spragg calmly asks if he got the letter yet. Ralph says the whole thing is preposterous and he'll resist it. Mr. Spragg simply notes that he's sorry Ralph didn't exercise the option of demanding Paul's custody back when he had the chance.

CHAPTER 33

Over the course of Ralph's visit, he manages to convince Mr. Spragg to talk with Undine's lawyers to try to prevent them from taking away Paul. But Mrs. Spragg seems eager to support her daughter in trying to get Paul. A few days later, Ralph goes to Mr. Spragg's office and gets the news that a letter has confirmed that Undine won't budge on Paul. Mrs. Heeny will be taking him to Paris at once. Mr. Spragg doesn't necessarily support this, but he doesn't try to help Ralph anymore either.

Like Undine, Ralph constantly believes that he needs just one more thing to be happy. While Ralph doesn't spend money as extravagantly as Undine, his inability to be satisfied with what he has parallels Undine's own materialism.



Ralph believes that he's already endured the worst of his divorce, but in fact, Undine has more in store for him. Following Elmer's suggestion, she plans to use Paul's custody as an excuse to get money from Ralph. Because earlier Ralph signed the divorce papers without contesting anything, he has no legal grounds to fight the request, showing the dangers of being a trusting person in such a cutthroat society.



Ralph is used to people taking care of him—like how his grandfather used to give him money—so it comes as a shock to learn how little people like his own lawyer actually care about his welfare.



Undine may seem unusually selfish by using her own son as leverage to get money from her ex-husband, but in fact, many of the other characters seem to approve of her decision, including Mr. and Mrs. Spragg. This suggests that while Undine is indeed materialistic, she gets away with her behavior because people like her parents tolerate it and even encourage it.



As usual, Mr. Spragg resists taking a strong position. He acts friendly towards Ralph, and he might even feel genuine sympathy, but he also shows little desire to contradict his daughter. Unlike Mr. Dagonet, Mr. Spragg feels no responsibility to protect Ralph from harsh realities.



As Ralph leaves Mr. Spragg's office, he recalls that Mr. Spragg's office is where he first met Elmer. He quickly forgets Elmer and begins daydreaming about how he might hide Paul away to prevent him from being taken. He then goes to Clare to tell her all about his recent problems. He complains the cost of fighting Undine in court will be expensive. Clare suggests that instead of involving the courts, maybe he should just pay some money to Undine directly. Ralph thinks Undine wants Paul for respectability, but Clare feels it's even simpler: Undine wants more money. Clare promises to help get Paul back, although she warns that it could be expensive, since Undine will be too embarrassed to sell Paul cheaply.

Once again, Ralph takes refuge from the difficulties of his real life by daydreaming. He dreams of taking action and becoming the sort of man who would do anything to protect his family, but previous chapters have made it clear that Ralph's daydreams seldom translate into the real world. Just as Undine has Elmer to give her advice, Ralph has Clare, and unlike the Spraggs, Clare doesn't mince words when describing what Undine's intentions are.



CHAPTER 34

For several weeks, Ralph frets over how to raise enough money to buy back Paul—his lawyers confirm that Clare's guess about Undine's motivations is correct. Ralph is reluctant to allow Clare to help him financially, but she insists that she's willing to do it. His search for funds brings him to the office of Elmer. Apparently, Elmer was supposed to be a valuable witness in an investigation, but when he came back from Europe, he gave few details in his testimony.

Undine's decision to leverage Paul is particularly cruel because she knows that Ralph doesn't have the money—but she also knows that Ralph has connections who might be able to help him raise it. Cruelty isn't the point for Undine—she feels that she's in a desperate situation herself and has no other options—but her lack of concern for Ralph's feelings (or Paul's) shows how far she'll go to get her way.



Elmer's office looks much nicer than it did the last time Ralph was there. Elmer listens but says that everyone is looking to make fast money lately, just like Ralph. He tells Ralph he can get him \$100,000 in three weeks, but he needs to be willing to put up \$50,000 first. Ralph expected something like this, but he still worries about how he'll put together the money.

Ralph had financial success with Elmer before, but Elmer's life has been a series of ups and downs, so there's no guarantee that Ralph will be just as lucky a second time. Especially after considering inflation, \$100,000 is a huge amount of money, showing just how much it takes to satisfy Undine.



Ralph goes to Clare to tell her about his meeting with Elmer. He says it seems that Elmer has some connection to Representative James J. Rolliver, who runs things in **Apex**. Clare doesn't care about the details—she'll give him money regardless. Ralph has already raised some money from his relatives, but Clare insists on making her own contribution, despite Ralph's protests that he might lose it all. As Ralph goes to leave, Clare glances at him, and suddenly they start to kiss—right under a portrait of Peter.

Although James J. Rolliver doesn't physically appear in the story, his name keeps coming up. Like Elmer, his fortunes seem to go up and down, and the reference to Rolliver here seems to suggest Ralph's own uncertain future. Ralph's desperate situation encourages him to break taboo and finally kiss Clare. Even as he does so, however, he can't forget about Peter, as looming presence of Peter's giant portrait symbolizes.



CHAPTER 35

Ralph manages to get Elmer the money within 48 hours. He feels happy to have resolved his long period of indecision before meeting with Elmer. He has enjoyed watching Paul grow up, and his book is coming along too. Ralph doesn't get to see Clare often in person, but they communicate frequently on the phone or by letter, and she acts like she used to when they were young.

Meanwhile, Ralph hears more rumors about Elmer. Apparently, Elmer was supposed to testify against Harmon B. Driscoll, but Driscoll paid Elmer a significant amount to stay quiet. This hush payment gave Elmer the momentum to become a major player on Wall Street. For the first time, Elmer's success seems like it might last.

Ralph reads the papers for news from **Apex** that Elmer's scheme has gone through. But the news doesn't come, and when Ralph tries to call Elmer, but he's out, and when Elmer gets back, he's evasive. Ralph then gets a letter from Undine's lawyers reminding him of the deadline for their financial agreement. He goes to see Elmer in person. Elmer's words and well-dressed appearance help give Ralph confidence.

Ralph's lawyers get an extension from Undine's about the payment, but more time passes and still Elmer's deal doesn't go through. Finally, Ralph happens to hear from Henley Fairford that the **Apex** deal actually fell through. Ralph tries to get ahold of Elmer for a few days with no luck. Finally, he shows up in person at Elmer's office and, after a long wait, he gets a meeting with Elmer.

Elmer confirms for Ralph that the **Apex** deal hasn't gone through. He says not all hope is lost—perhaps it'll go through next year. Ralph accuses Elmer of misleading him, but Elmer says it's still a safe deal that will pay off eventually. Ralph explains Paul's custody situation and why he can't wait any longer for the money. Elmer understands and agrees that Undine won't settle for any less than she's asked for. In fact, he reveals that he knows so much about divorcing Undine since he's already done it himself.

Things seem to be going well in Ralph's life. Small decisions used to paralyze him, but now that he has decided to risk \$50,000 on Elmer's scheme, he paradoxically feels less stress because at least he has decided to take some sort of decisive action. While his relationship with Clare continues to go well, their lack of physical meetings suggests that some old taboos are hard to break.



Previously, it seemed like Elmer might suffer the consequences of his shady dealings and his willingness to quickly change sides in disputes, but in the end, he prospers, suggesting that high society rewards people with flexible morals.



During their last deal, Elmer and Ralph both needed each other to get ahead, but the balance of power has shifted so that Ralph needs Elmer a lot more than Elmer needs Ralph. Elmer tries to reassure Ralph, but it's clear that he doesn't have as large a stake in the deal as Ralph himself does.



Elmer's evasiveness suggests that perhaps he isn't completely surprised by the outcome in Apex. Ralph, however, still never expects bad things to happen to him—likely due in part to his privileged upbringing—and so he greets the bad news with shock.



Elmer doesn't have the same sense of urgency as Ralph—he makes the money no matter when the deal goes through, but Ralph needs the money immediately for Paul's custody. Although Elmer definitely misled Ralph, he speaks calmly and tries to reassure Paul because, like Mr. Spragg, Elmer believes that there's no business value in stirring up bad feelings for no reason.



Elmer's confession shocks Ralph. Elmer talks about how he promised to stay quiet so that Undine's past wouldn't offend Ralph's family. Elmer explains that back in **Apex**, he and Undine eloped, although they only had about two weeks before Mr. Spragg stepped in with his lawyers to undo the marriage, with some help from Representative James J. Rolliver. Ralph thinks back to all the ways Undine has lied to him about Elmer. Elmer says something about how Ralph just has to sit tight on his investment, but Ralph is in a daze as he leaves the office.

Elmer's motives for confessing about his marriage to Undine are mysterious. He seems to be trying to win Ralph's sympathy by showing that he understands the situation that Ralph is going through. But if Elmer is trying to pacify Ralph, his words end up having the opposite effect, and Ralph leaves the building shaken by how little he really knew about his ex-wife, Undine.



CHAPTER 36

Ralph walks down Wall Street, noticing cracks in the pavement and trash in the gutters. He thinks suddenly that he should be at the office but instead goes home in a daze. He thinks more about how Undine lied about Elmer to use him. Now, he realizes she's been lying to him from the moment she met him.

Although Ralph was in a good mood earlier, his current bad mood causes him to notice the flaws in everything, like the cracked sidewalks of Wall Street and the dirty gutters. He feels that his life was a lie and that his previous, more optimistic way of looking at the world was wrong.



A servant's knock at the door disturbs Ralph's thoughts. The servant asks Ralph to help resolve a dispute she's having with another servant. The woman leaves, and Ralph dreads having to get involved. He's still worried about the money he owes Undine if he wants to keep Paul. He hears the servant coming back, so he bolts the door of his room. He then reaches into a hidden panel in a drawer and suddenly pulls out a revolver and puts it up against his head. He thinks that if he's gone, at least it will help his ex-wife out.

This passage is one of the most shocking in the book. Up until this point, Ralph seems sad but still able to maintain his daily routine and deal with setbacks. All of a sudden, however, Ralph's actions reveal that he is potentially suicidal. The section is suspenseful, hiding the fact that Ralph even owns a gun until the last second. While the chapter deliberately ends on a cliffhanger, right at the moment when Ralph has a gun to his head, the next chapter makes it clear that things didn't end there, and that Ralph did indeed pull the trigger and kill himself.



CHAPTER 37

Several months later, Paul is shy in his new grandparents' drawing room, where portraits of ladies and gentlemen hang everywhere on the walls. Raymond encourages Paul to kiss his new grandmother, the Marquise de Chelles. As Undine watches, she's happy to see that Paul is so adorable to everyone, although she's a little annoyed that her in-laws have decided that she must find space for the boy and his nurse in her part of the Hotel de Chelles, which her in-laws own.

After the previous chapter ended on a cliffhanger, this chapter starts with the image of Paul in France, making it clear that, whatever happened at the end of the previous chapter, Ralph didn't get his way and lost the custody battle. As is often the case, Undine's victory ends up being self-defeating because even though she triumphs over Ralph, she ends up having to share space with Paul.



One thing Undine likes about her new living situation is that Raymond is more willing to admit when he feels more jealous than Ralph ever was, making Undine feel powerful again. But she soon realizes that as she gains more power over Raymond, she loses some of her own independence. She has to tell her husband how she spends just about every hour of her day. She is particularly surprised and dismayed to learn that Raymond disapproves of Undine's friendship with Princess Estradina, believing that Undine is too young and beautiful to be hanging around with the Princess's crowd.

Meanwhile, Princess Estradina and the Duchess themselves turn against Undine, who they believe has caused the growing rift between them and Raymond's family. The Chelles were themselves skeptical of Undine, but they allowed Raymond to marry her because they were tired of him being a bachelor for so long.

Months ago, when Mrs. Heeny first arrived with Paul, she stayed for about two weeks. Undine enjoyed hearing New York gossip, while Mrs. Heeny enjoyed getting a peek at European aristocracy. But when Mrs. Heeny accidentally almost mentioned Ralph, it brought down the mood, since Ralph remained a painful subject for Undine.

About three months after Ralph's death, Undine got news from her lawyers that Marvell's estate had received \$100,000 from the **Apex** Consolidation Company. The money goes to Undine because she never formally surrendered her custody over Paul, even if she did hold off on enforcing it in the immediate aftermath of Ralph's death. Although the money is legally Undine's, she wishes she had gotten it through some other means. But with the coming of summer, the height of the Paris season, Undine begins to think of other things besides Ralph.

CHAPTER 38

It has been raining in Saint Desert for longer than Undine can remember as she looks out the window of a chateau at a park. One year earlier, Undine had been reluctant to leave Paris for Saint Desert, but she figured she wouldn't be away for long. At first, Undine liked it at Saint Desert. The usually sweet Paul had begun to irritate her in their crowded Paris residence, but the chateau gave him more space to play outside. But then things change when Raymond's father dies.

With Raymond, Undine learns the dangers of getting exactly what she wants. Although Raymond is richer than Ralph and more openly affectionate, he comes with his own flaws. While Undine claims to like making Raymond jealous, it seems clear that she struggles to adjust to having a more watchful husband and retroactively appreciates how much freedom Ralph gave her to do as she pleased without supervision.



Although marriages are supposed to be joyful celebrations of unity, throughout the novel they seem more likely to drive characters apart, demonstrating yet another way that these high-society characters fail to live up to their lofty ideals.



This section is the first part of the book to confirm that Ralph is dead, implying that he pulled the trigger at the end of the previous chapter. Ralph's death leaves many questions unanswered—even with an omniscient narrator the death is shocking, perhaps reflecting how difficult it is to ever know what a person is really thinking.



The irony of Ralph's death is that if he had just waited three months, one of his biggest concerns—his \$50,000 investment with Elmer—might have solved itself. But Ralph didn't have the time: he lived in a fast-paced, present-focused society where three months really did make all the difference. Ralph's death illustrates the consequences of putting too much emphasis on short-term thinking.



The name Saint Desert suggests isolation, which is appropriate, since the chateau at Saint Desert is located far away from bustling Paris. While a private chateau might be a paradise for some, Undine is so in love with crowds and being the center of attention that she suffers in isolation.



At first, Undine thought it might be a good thing to see Raymond promoted in his family by his father's death. But now, during the mourning period, Undine finds herself feeling cramped again as the whole Chelles family comes to the chateau at Saint Desert. The days begin to blend together for her. Eventually the other family members leave Undine alone with her husband and son, but she soon realizes that they won't be headed back to Paris anytime soon and that Raymond's new position doesn't come with any financial benefits, since French law doesn't allow fathers to favor eldest sons with their inheritances.

Raymond wants to tend to some family land, and this requires him to be there in person. He will allow Undine to make a spring visit to Paris, but Undine hoped that instead, they might live permanently at the Hotel de Chelles in Paris. While Undine has learned a little bit more about the value of money since her last marriage, she still doesn't particularly care about managing her expenses. But she finds that Raymond is more logical than Ralph, and this makes it harder for her to get her way with him.

One day, Raymond has to go to Paris to sort out some issue with his brother, Hubert de Chelles, who has a reputation as the family troublemaker. Undine fears that Raymond will have to pay money to help Hubert and that it will mean a longer stay in Saint Desert for her. Raymond promises that he has bailed his brother out for the last time, but Undine has heard this line before. It turns out Raymond's brother is marrying an American heiress and must square away his debts before the wedding.

Raymond then reveals that he has allowed for Hubert de Chelles and his future wife to live in the Hotel de Chelles in Paris for 12 years if they agree to renovate it. Undine is outraged that he'd do such a thing without consulting her, but Raymond says she never wants to hear about business affairs, and someone has to be thinking about money.

CHAPTER 39

In May, Undine finds herself back at the Hotel de Chelles, reluctant to have to share it with Hubert de Chelles and his new wife but grateful just to be out of Saint Desert. They have renovated the place beyond what was required, knocking down walls and Americanizing the décor.

Even after her new marriage, Undine can't stop thinking in materialistic terms, wondering how the death of Raymond's father will affect her own standing in the world. Though she wants to benefit from Raymond's father's death, she instead must face the truth that some events, like death, don't necessarily come with any positive outcomes.



Raymond's devotion to his family's land sets him apart from Undine, who has little affection for her hometown of Apex; even in New York, Undine spent much of her time living out of a hotel rather than somewhere permanent. Undine learns that Raymond's devotion to land and tradition makes him harder to sway than Ralph was.



Previously, Undine disliked looking in mirrors. Here, it seems that she dislikes Hubert because his extravagant financial habits force her to consider how she herself might look from the outside. Hubert also activates Undine's competitive instincts, since he competes directly with her for a share of the family money. Humorously, marrying a rich heiress turns out to be expensive, because Hubert needs to pay off his debts to prove that he's a worthwhile marriage candidate.



Raymond either doesn't understand his wife's feelings or he deliberately excludes her from decisions where he knows she may disagree. Although Ralph couldn't provide as much for Undine as she wanted, he was easy to manipulate, and Undine struggles to adjust to Raymond's more assertive personality.



Like Undine, Hubert seems to prefer American values, like instant gratification, over more traditional European values. This is why he marries an American heiress and redoes the old family hotel. Raymond tolerates Hubert's actions, perhaps in part because he has little control over Hubert, whereas tradition does allow him to control his wife, Undine.



As more time passes, Undine is surprised and disappointed to see that Raymond is not as different from Ralph as he seems. He also spends his time reading or dabbling in creative pursuits like painting, which Undine doesn't understand. In addition, he takes up an interest in politics. Undine prefers Raymond when they're in Paris, where he gives her more freedom to go off on her own.

While talking with some Paris friends, Undine gets the idea that perhaps she should have a child with Raymond, since not having a child with him seems to be hurting her reputation. She tells Raymond that the Marquise de Chelles blames her for their lack of a child and that she wants to make things better. Raymond, however, brushes the idea aside, saying his mother's ideas are old fashioned.

Undine is embarrassed that she can't convince Raymond to have a child, since she's used to getting her way with husbands. Her days pass slowly and start to blend together. Meanwhile, Raymond is friendly but more interested in his own matters. Undine thinks about her future and can't see anything changing about her situation. The Chelles seem to expect Undine to give up travel and settle into their old traditions and routines.

One day in September, when Undine is back at Saint Desert, Princess Estradina comes by. At first, Undine thinks that the Princess has decided to stop being friends with her, but before leaving, the Princess suggests that despite looking well, Undine has gotten a little too "stout" and could use some excitement in her life. The Princess says Undine shouldn't let the Chelles keep her shut inside all day. Undine responds that she didn't know Raymond would be so jealous before she married him. The Princess scoffs at this, suggesting that she doubts that Raymond is truly going out of the house because he's interested in "politics" and that politics never keep a man busy after midnight.

CHAPTER 40

After Princess Estradina leaves, Undine continues to idle away the long days at Saint Desert. She amuses herself by trying to annoy the Marquise de Chelles. During brief visits to Paris, Undine does get more freedom, but she feels she never spends enough time in the city to develop social connections. She still buys nice dresses, but they stay in her wardrobe, just as her dresses used to do when she stayed at **the Stentorian**. The dullness of her life begins to make Undine herself look duller, and she tries new trends to refresh her look.

Although Undine adapts some aspects of her personality over the course of the novel, her disdain for art and other solitary activities remains constant. For a materialist like Undine, art involves too many intangibles. Undine prefers more tangible things, like money and the objects it can buy.



Undine's decision to have a child seems sudden and possibly surprising, given how much she hated being pregnant with Paul. But given how successfully Undine used Paul to manipulate Ralph, it's possible Undine hopes to do the same with Raymond. Even though Undine herself doesn't seem to like children, she's ashamed that she's unable to convince Raymond to have a child.



While previously Raymond kept a close watch on Undine, he now gives her more leeway to roam. This should, in theory, make Undine happy, but she just takes this as evidence that Raymond is starting to ignore her, illustrating once again how Undine's restless personality often leaves her unsatisfied no matter the outcome.



During her marriage with Ralph, Undine got used to being able to trick her husband. In fact, she often didn't even have to trick him—she could spend time out in the open with Peter Van Degen and Ralph would barely even react. This gave her false confidence that she would always be able to control her marriages—when in fact Raymond has been hiding things from her right under her nose. The Princess implies that when Raymond pretends to be going to political events, he's really going to see other women. Once again, Undine hates when a character treats her the way she used to treat other characters.



Despite Undine's superficiality, there is also something universal about her desire to be accepted. At the beginning of the book, she was a social outcast (at least by New York standards) who never used any of her party dresses. Now, as she buys nice dresses that just sit in storage at Saint Desert, she finds herself right back where she started.



Raymond stops commenting on Undine's high expenses, which Undine takes as confirmation that Princess Estradina was right when she implied Raymond was having affairs, and now Raymond is trying to make up for his own flaws by allowing her to spend more. Winter passes, but as spring nears, Raymond makes no mention about going to Paris. Eventually, Undine brings up the subject, and he says they can't go to Paris due to their heavy expenses lately. Undine says she'll just go by herself, but Raymond feels this is unseemly.

Although Raymond may seem to uphold old-fashioned values, he ends up being just as hypocritical as Undine and her friends from New York. After making a big deal about Undine's divorce and his Catholic values, he proceeds to break his own religious rules by seemingly committing adultery. Rather than wrestling with his own hypocrisy, he doubles down by refusing to let Undine go to Paris on her own. Raymond worries about what Undine might do for his reputation if she goes out and about alone, even though his own affairs are public enough that Princess Estradina knows about them.



Raymond and Undine each accuse the other of not understanding their needs. Undine suggests that Raymond should just sell Saint Desert, which clearly horrifies him, so she keeps going on about how Americans like to sell things they can't afford. Raymond insists that Undine just doesn't understand.

Raymond correctly notes that people like Undine are too quick to discard the past, but his own shortcomings and hypocrisy call his judgment into question.



CHAPTER 41

Undine is shocked at how little influence she seems to have over Raymond. At one point, she even suggests that if they disagree so much they should separate, but Raymond simply says that separation simply isn't something that people like him do. Undine decides to go to Paris on her own for 24 hours, claiming that she's looking for a new nurse for Paul. In reality, she has a plan of her own.

Despite his reputation as a traditionalist, Raymond picks and chooses which of his traditions he follows—he is allowed to have affairs, but Undine isn't allowed to separate from him. Although Undine remained unusually passive during the earlier part of her marriage to Raymond, her increasing dissatisfaction causes her to make plans and take action again.



At Saint Desert while Raymond is away on a trip, a visitor comes. Undine has been expecting him. The man inspects the tapestries in the house and then says he has brought along an American collector. Undine says the tapestries aren't for sale, but the dealer says that his American collector only buys things that aren't for sale. Undine says she'd need to hear a price, so the dealer invites his American collector to take a look.

Undine knows that Raymond would never approve of someone entering his house and assigning a monetary value to his family treasures, but Undine does it anyway because she knows it is an effective way to undermine her husband's authority.



As it turns out, the American collector is Elmer. He looks at a bust for a moment before recognizing Undine with a shock. Elmer looks the same as he always did, with the same ruddy face. Undine also seems surprised to see him. Elmer tells his dealer that he's taking a later train because he wants to stay and talk with Undine.

Once again, Elmer makes a surprising reappearance in the story, right at the moment when it seems like another character's luck is changing. Elmer and Undine have had their differences in the past, but after her long isolation with her French husband, Undine finds Elmer Moffatt's brash American personality to be refreshing.



After looking at some tapestries, the dealer goes back to make his train, leaving Elmer alone with Undine. Elmer mentions that he just got dinner in Paris with some of Undine's old friends, like the Driscolls and Indiana Frusk (now Mrs. Rolliver). Elmer seems to be listing off all these names to prove he's part of that crowd now. Undine says he must be very rich, and Elmer laughs and says he is. Undine says she probably can't stop him from getting the tapestries, and Elmer says nothing can stop him from getting anything he wants.

Undine asks Elmer why he helped her in the past when she was trying to marry Raymond. Elmer says he doesn't keep grudges and figured helping Undine might be good for business. He says he's surprised to see Undine has settled down, but she says it's not all by choice. She says she often gets lonely at Saint Desert. Elmer gives some details about how he and Representative James J. Rolliver finally pulled off the **Apex** deal. Undine asks what he has planned next, other than business. Elmer says he'd like to do everything—to have the best of everything life has to offer.

CHAPTER 42

Undine finally gets her wishes, as Hubert de Chelles and his wife leave the Hotel de Chelles to go to a chateau owned by his father-in-law. Raymond agrees to go to Paris for two months, although he puts heavy restrictions on Undine's spending. Undine complains to one of her remaining friends that Raymond is boring, but her friend suggests that perhaps Undine herself has become a bore to Raymond, a horrifying conclusion that Undine herself has already considered.

Meanwhile, Raymond confronts Undine after he receives a letter from the dealer who came to Saint Desert. Undine confirms that she invited him and that she feels no shame about it. Raymond accuses her of messing with something sacred that she doesn't understand, especially not as an American. He tears up the offer letter that he received from the dealer. Undine gets angry, saying that no one has ever dared treat her this way and that she wants to walk out at once.

CHAPTER 43

Undine watches Raymond leave, knowing that despite their recent argument, he'll be courteous the next time they see each other. She can't find any way to get through her husband's hard exterior.

Although Elmer is finally rich, he still acts like he has something to prove, listing off his various social connections to convince Undine that he has finally made it. Elmer seems to be flirting with Undine, but just as he does with business deals, he remains slippery and elusive to give himself plausible deniability. Undine longs to get back to her old social world, and so she listens intently to Elmer's descriptions of it.



Even when he is trying to win Undine over, Elmer maintains a detached, businesslike attitude. This contrasts sharply with Ralph, who was sensitive and more likely to make decisions based on emotions. Perhaps inspired by her long isolation, Undine offers a rare moment of vulnerability, telling Elmer about how her dreams of a noble French husband don't live up to the reality.



After her meeting with Elmer reminded Undine of her old self, she finds it even harder to accept her current life with Raymond. Undine secures a minor victory by getting to spend more time in Paris, but her conversation with her friend reveals that Undine is starting to consider how she might get out of her current marriage.



Predictably, Raymond gets angry when he finds out that someone came inside his chateau to appraise his tapestries. Raymond claims to be protecting a sacred tradition—he means art and history, but he could just as easily be referring to the tradition of patriarchy and a husband's customary authority over his wife.



Like many members of high society (on both sides of the Atlantic), Raymond prefers not to express strong emotions, even in private.



Undine fantasizes how, if given the opportunity, she could use up all the wealth even of a man as rich as Elmer. In fact, she'd be doing just that if she had only remained his wife. She thinks back to **Apex** and how when Elmer first arrived, no one knew anything about him. He started making a name for himself, at first more with the men of the town than the women because of his coarse manners. Eventually, he was invited to give a prominent speech for the local Temperance Society.

Elmer's speech for the **Apex** Temperance Society went over wonderfully. Afterward, there was an ice cream supper in a church basement. Elmer's speech earlier in the day was so popular that people called on him to say more. Elmer, however, caused a scandal when he gave a speech about how he enjoys everything about drinking except the next day. After giving the speech, he tried to sit in a chair that wasn't there and fell down. But despite the temporary social embarrassment, Elmer stayed around working various jobs. Sometimes, people praised this as industrious; other times, they condemned it as lazy.

In **Apex**, Undine judged people's worth based on how good they were at getting what they wanted. Despite that, she found herself most interested in Elmer at one of his greatest moments of failure, shortly after he caused another minor scandal by being spotted one Sunday morning with a young woman who was "less known" to the churches than to "the saloons of North Fifth Street." Undine ran into Elmer on Main Street, and he invited her to take a walk. Although she didn't approve of Elmer's actions, she liked being independent and doing something that would make the other people in Apex mad.

On the day of their walk in **Apex**, Elmer told Undine that he was down on his luck. Undine said that based on his behavior after the Temperance function, it seemed like he was down by his own choice. Elmer then told her that the only reason he was sticking around in a small place like Apex was because of her. Undine got angry at first, but suddenly they were kissing, and Undine entered one of the brightest periods of her life. She snaps back to the present in Paris and realizes that Elmer is still within reach.

CHAPTER 44

Undine guessed correctly when she assumed that Raymond would go back to life as usual after their argument the other day. They begin to live more and more apart. Undine decides to call her old friend Indiana Frusk to invite herself over, and it turns out that Indiana is already planning a banquet that she is happy to invite Undine to. At the banquet, as Undine hoped, she finds Elmer.

Even from his early days, Elmer demonstrates a lack of manners. But he also shows some of the charisma that will help him succeed in business in New York. This passage references a time before Prohibition, when temperance (abstaining from alcohol) was a popular social movement but not yet the law in the U.S.



Even back in Apex, Elmer showed an aptitude for switching sides, first making a popular speech in favor of temperance, then later on the same day, apparently getting so drunk before his second speech that he tried to sit down and missed his chair. The incident harmed Elmer's reputation, but for the persistent and resilient Elmer, no setback ever seems to cause lasting damage.



Even before coming to New York and trying to break into high society, Undine realized the value of reputation and of trying to manipulate people. Elmer causes a scandal by spending Sunday morning with a woman who seems to be a sex worker rather than going to church. While Undine doesn't approve of Elmer's specific actions, she seems to sense that many people in Apex act hypocritically around sex and marriage, leading her to admire Elmer's brazen disregard for public opinion.



Elmer and Undine have many traits in common, including their materialism and their ambition, so it makes sense that the two of them would get along. The fact that Undine still remembers her time in Apex with Elmer fondly suggests that maybe Elmer truly is different from her other husbands and suitors.



Undine's reunion with Indiana Frusk suggests that she is moving to reclaim her old life. Notably, her preference for old friends grows proportionally to her increasing distance from Raymond.



At the banquet, Undine sits next to Elmer, and people notice how cordially he greets her. Elmer seems to be a person of interest at the banquet, with people quietly pointing him out. For a while, Elmer makes no mention of his visit to Saint Desert, but during a private moment, he asks Undine about the tapestries. Undine tells him it was a mistake for the dealer to write a letter to Raymond.

Elmer says he had to make an offer on the tapestries because he leaves France in a week. Undine is disappointed to hear this, but Elmer says even if he stayed in France, it's unlikely he'd see much of Undine. Undine asks why not. She says she's always wanted to be friends with Elmer.

The next day, Elmer comes to visit Undine while she happens to be taking tea with her sisters-in-law. The women watch Elmer cautiously, but Undine tells him she intends to see her friends, regardless of who's watching. She begs Elmer to put off leaving so that she can get him into some private collections he hasn't seen yet. Elmer is intrigued and stays to see one duke's collection and then goes to see other collections, spending time with Undine almost every day.

Undine knows what she wants once again, and she puts aside being cautious. She has given up on any hope of Mr. Spragg ever making it big on Wall Street, so there's no use relying on him as a way to improve her social standing. She feels her position with Elmer is precarious and that if he leaves France, she might suddenly drop out of his life.

One day, someone comes to the chateau with a bill for Undine. The Marquise de Chelles is there and seems to be judging Undine, but Undine tells her she doesn't care who knows about her bills. The Marquise says she'll drop the subject, but this only makes Undine angrier. Undine makes a visit to Elmer at his hotel room that catches him by surprise. She puts her hand on his, asking him not to send her away.

CHAPTER 45

Elmer's hotel room contains many ostentatious signs of wealth, like Greek marble. Undine repeats that Elmer must not send her away, then says that things are going so wrong in her life. She asks him if he remembers strolling down Main Street in **Apex** with her. Elmer seems nostalgic but insists he really must get back home.

Undine clearly plans on trying to win Elmer back and potentially even wants to remarry him, but she remains discreet; if Elmer has similar plans, he, too, is keeping them to himself. Nevertheless, people at the party notice how Elmer and Undine act around each other, suggesting that they can't hide their feelings all that well.



Although Elmer clearly enjoys spending time with Undine, he finds it hard to shake his old impulse to keep roaming. Even after his phenomenal success, Elmer remains ready to adapt and change himself.



Elmer and Undine both act cautiously, finding appropriate excuses to spend time with each other rather than ignoring convention. Perhaps after Mr. Spragg intervened in Elmer and Undine's first marriage, they have both learned the value of, at least on the surface, going along with social customs instead of trying to challenge them.



After passively spending so much time in the shadow of Raymond de Chelles, Undine once again sets lofty goals for herself. She knows she wants to leave Raymond so she plans to try to secure someone even better: Elmer.



By this passage, Undine has decided to leave Raymond, and so she doesn't pay attention to little dramas like the complaints of the Marquise de Chelles that would have upset her before. When Undine grabs Elmer's hand at the hotel, it's a small gesture, but it makes her intentions clear.



Undine immediately feels at home in Elmer's hotel room because he values the same flashy (perhaps even tacky) displays of wealth that she values. She tries to invoke good feelings in him by appealing to nostalgia.



Undine asks Elmer if he ever misses her, and he says he does. She replies that being with him was the only time she really cared about in her life. She asks if Elmer has another woman, and he says he's too busy for anything like that. Undine says she and Elmer should do as they please together—after all, a marriage is just a business contract, even if some Europeans fail to see it that way.

Undine knows that Elmer is a businessman, and so she tries to appeal toward that logical side of him when presenting her case for why he should have an affair with her. Undine specifically resists suggesting marriage, perhaps because she has learned the consequences of rushing into a marriage contract, or perhaps because she has internalized some of Raymond's Catholic ideas about marriage and divorce.



Elmer says he doesn't want to just have an affair with Undine. He knows what it's like to be an outcast from back when he lived in **Apex**, which is how he'd end up again if news of their affair got out. If Undine wants him, she'll have to become his wife again. He formally proposes to her. Undine hesitates. She says she's Catholic and would prefer to just be friends at first, then later maybe work up to more than that. Elmer says he already has places he can go if he wants a causal relationship.

Elmer remains practical and frank, implying that he never got married because he can just go to a sex worker if he wants sex. Undine protests by saying she's Catholic, which is humorous, given how recently she converted and how little she seems to practice any religion. Her excuses all seem to be a way for her to avoid commitment.



Undine and Elmer seem to be at an impasse, with Elmer insisting that he'll go back to the United States if Undine doesn't marry him, while Undine wants to make him stay without marrying him. Elmer says Undine doesn't have the courage to do what she should really do: come back with him. Undine protests again that she's Catholic, but Elmer points out that she was born Baptist. If she comes back to America, she can get an American divorce and forget all about European marriage customs. Undine can't come up with a counterargument. Elmer gives the date he's leaving and says he'll need a yes or no answer before then.

After being married to Raymond for so long, Undine has lost some of her drive and decisiveness. Elmer encourages her to find it again. Unlike the deeply tradition-bound Raymond, Elmer is practical and makes decisions based on current results, not past ways of doing things. Elmer proves himself to be a good match for Undine, not necessarily because he brings out the best in her, but because the two of them have similar flaws related to their shared, materialistic worldviews.



CHAPTER 46

In the library of a private hotel, Paul looks out a window at Paris in twilight. He's nine years old and has just got back from his fancy private school for the Easter holidays. Undine has married Elmer, and they've just returned from America, having been on many trips around the world during their first two years of marriage. Paul is used to them being absent and sending telegrams from abroad.

Throughout the novel, Paul has been the innocent victim of Undine's social climbing. The final chapter begins by depicting Paul as a lonely child. Undine's own efforts to have a social life have condemned her son to have the kind of isolated life that she herself hates.



Paul still likes Raymond best out of all his fathers, but Raymond has totally disappeared from his life. Elmer has bought a hotel for his family to live in, and Paul wanders around the big building alone. He remembers a conversation with Mrs. Heeny (whom Undine brought back from America) about how she has some newspaper clippings to show him sometime. Paul finds Mrs. Heeny, and they talk. Paul tells Mrs. Heeny that he doesn't even remember much of Ralph. Mrs. Heeny gives Paul several newspaper clippings about his mother's life to help him better understand his situation.

Paul asks Mrs. Heeny why Undine married Elmer. Mrs. Heeny says it was because Undine got divorced. She provides newspaper clippings about it, but Paul doesn't really understand them. Just then, Elmer and Undine arrive. They greet Paul happily, although Undine has to rush off to get ready for dinner almost immediately.

Paul happens to notice some tapestries that used to hang in Raymond's chateau at Saint Desert. Elmer says Paul has a good eye to remember them. Paul doesn't dislike Elmer, but the tapestries remind him of his "French father," causing him to cry. Elmer says that if Undine isn't around, he'll try to be there for Paul.

Meanwhile, Undine is preparing for her first big social event since her marriage, one with people she actually wants to see. Several of her New York and Paris friends have been invited—even Peter. Undine finally has everything she could ever want, and yet she can't shake the feeling that she'd want many other things if she only knew what they were. Elmer is better at fulfilling Undine's wishes than either of her previous husbands, but he's not without his own faults.

Undine talks with Elmer about plans for their dinner that night. Elmer brings up a mutual friend who managed to get a job as ambassador to England. Undine suggests that that's the sort of position Elmer should go for, but Elmer says no one wants a divorced ambassadress. Undine laughs but takes offense at this unspoken rule against divorce. Car motors outside reveal that the first guests are on their way. Undine looks brilliant in her glittering jewels, but as she goes to greet her guests, she secretly despairs that she'll never be an ambassador's wife, since that is what she was really destined to do in life.

Paul's affection for Raymond seemingly played no role at all in Undine's decision to leave Raymond for Elmer. In fact, Undine seems to do all she can to foist the responsibility of raising Paul onto other people, bringing back Mrs. Heeny to act as a sort of de facto nanny while Undine herself is out. Mrs. Heeny uses newspaper clippings to teach Paul about his mother's life, symbolizing just how deeply Undine chooses to live her life in public, where everyone can see.



Paul is too young to understand divorce, but even Mrs. Heeny seems to have limited knowledge on the topic. She talks of divorce as just a thing that happens sometimes (which might be how it seems to someone who only reads the newspapers), but she doesn't comment on why divorce happens.



During earlier upheavals in his life, Paul was young enough to take everything in stride. As he gets older, he begins to comprehend how parts of his life are unfair—such as how he may never see Raymond again. Like Raymond and Ralph before him, Elmer realizes that he might have to step up to offset Undine's own lack of parental instincts.



Undine has waited a long time for this moment—when she makes her triumphant return to her old social circle. Still, despite her impending victory, she remains uneasy. Even though she has everything she wanted at the beginning of the book, she can't shake her constant desire for more. Her situation illustrates the consequences of committing too deeply to materialism.



By most metrics, Undine's story ends happily, since she gets everything she ever wanted. Yet just at the moment when Undine has everything, she comes up with something she wants but doesn't have—in fact something that it's impossible for her to ever have. Previously, Undine showed no interest in being an ambassador's wife; now, she wants it precisely because she can't have it (due to her history of divorce). What could have been a happy ending instead becomes a reminder about the consequences of being too materialistic and of seeking too much external validation.





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