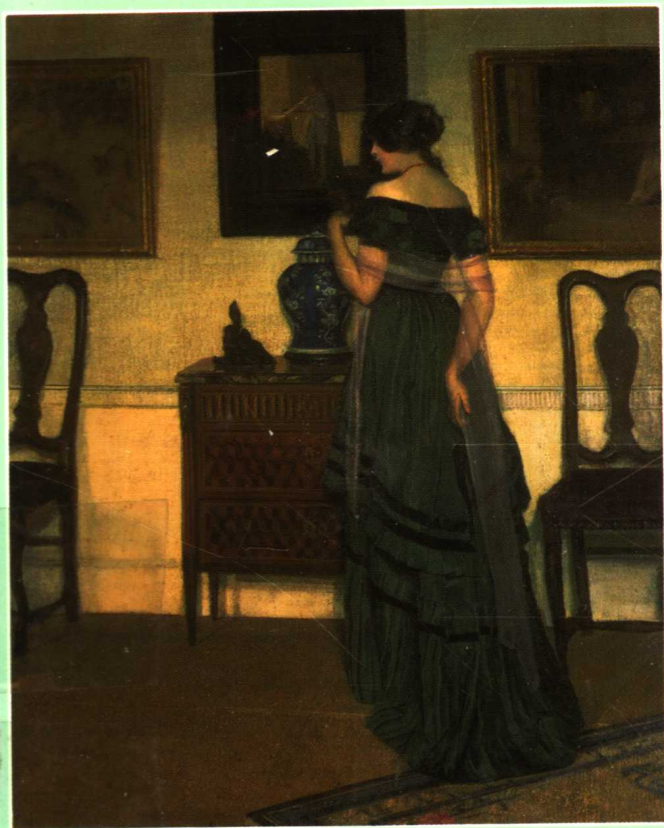


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# The Custom of the Country by Edith Wharton



# THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

EDITH WHARTON



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## Edith Wharton

The upper stratum of New York society into which Edith Wharton was born in 1862 would provide her with an abundance of material as a novelist, but it did not encourage her growth as an artist. Educated by tutors and governesses, she was raised for only one career: marriage. But her marriage, in 1885, to Edward Wharton was an emotional disappointment, if not a disaster. She would suffer the first of a series of nervous breakdowns in 1894. In spite of the strain of her marriage, or perhaps because of it, she began to write fiction, and published her first story in 1889.

Her first published book was a guide to interior decorating, but this was followed by several novels and story collections. They were written while the Whartons lived at Newport and New York, traveled in Europe, and built their grand home, The Mount, in Lenox, Massachusetts. In Europe she met Henry James, who became her good friend, traveling companion, and the sternest but most careful critic of her fiction. *The House of Mirth* (1905) was both a resounding critical success and a best-seller, as was *Ethan Frome* (1911). In 1913 the Whartons were divorced, and Edith took up permanent residence in France. Her subject, however, remained America, especially the moneyed New York of her youth. Her great satiric novel, *The Custom of the Country*, was published in 1913, and *The Age of Innocence* won her the Pulitzer Prize in 1921.

In her later years, she enjoyed the admiration of a new generation of writers, including Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald. In all, she wrote some thirty books, including an autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934). She died at her villa near Paris in 1937.

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# BOOK ONE



# I



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

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

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

'Did you *ever*, Mrs Heeny?' Mrs Spragg murmured with deprecating pride.

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

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

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

face, with puffy eye-lids and drooping mouth, suggested a partially melted wax figure which had run to double-chin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

'Do you know him, Mrs Heeny?' Mrs Spragg inquired.

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

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

'Why, do you know the Marvells? Are *they* stylish?' she asked.

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

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

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

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

'Do you mean to say Mr Marvell's as well as Mr Popple?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Mercy, no! Married ladies.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs Heeney looked at her hostess with friendly compassion. She was well aware that she was the only bright spot on Mrs Spragg's horizon. Since the Spraggs, some two years previously, had moved from Apex City to New York, they had made little progress in establishing relations with their new environment; and when, about four months earlier, Mrs Spragg's doctor had called in Mrs Heeney to minister professionally to his patient, he had done more for her

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

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

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

Mrs Spragg consentingly slipped the rings from her small mottled hands. It was soothing to feel herself in Mrs Heeny's grasp, and though she knew the attention would cost her three dollars she was secure in the sense that Abner wouldn't mind. It had been clear to Mrs Spragg, ever since their rather precipitate departure from Apex City, that Abner was resolved not to mind—resolved at any

cost to 'see through' the New York adventure. It seemed likely now that the cost would be considerable. They had lived in New York for two years without any social benefit to their daughter; and it was of course for that purpose that they had come. If, at the time, there had been other and more pressing reasons, they were such as Mrs Spragg and her husband never touched on, even in the gilded privacy of their bedroom at the Stentorian; and so completely had silence closed in on the subject that to Mrs Spragg it had become non-existent: she really believed that, as Abner put it, they had left Apex because Undine was too big for the place.

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

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

'Who's that? Undine?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Undine's mother heaved another and more helpless sigh. 'I wish *you'd* tell Undine that, Mrs Heeny.'

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

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

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

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

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

'Undine's been asked out to a dinner-party; and Mrs Heeny says it's to one of the first families. It's the sister of one of the gentlemen that Mabel Lipscomb introduced her to last night.'

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

and Mrs Spragg was therefore eager to have him know that Undine really owed her first invitation to a meeting under the roof of the Stentorian.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr Spragg smiled at last. 'Well—I guess she *will* have,' he said prophetically.

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

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

'Oh, Abner,' she moaned again, her eyes also on her daughter's door.

Mr Spragg's black eyebrows gathered in an angry frown, but it was evident that his anger was not against his wife.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

She turned back into the room, and going to her writing-table laid Mrs Fairford's note before her, and began to study it minutely. She had read in the *Boudoir Chat* of one of the Sunday papers that the smartest women were using the new pigeon-blood notepaper with white ink; and rather against her mother's advice she had ordered a large supply, with her monogram in silver. It was a disappointment, therefore, to find that Mrs Fairford wrote on the old-fashioned white sheet, without even a monogram—simply her address and telephone number. It gave Undine rather a poor opin-



ion of Mrs Fairford's social standing, and for a moment she thought with considerable satisfaction of answering the note on her pigeon-blood paper. Then she remembered Mrs Heeny's emphatic commendation of Mrs Fairford, and her pen wavered. What if white paper were really newer than pigeon-blood? It might be more stylish, anyhow. Well, she didn't care if Mrs Fairford didn't like red paper—*she* did! And she wasn't going to truckle to any woman who lived in a small house down beyond Park Avenue . . .

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

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

This point settled, she flung open her door, calling imperiously down the passage: 'Céleste!' and adding, as the French maid appeared: 'I want to look over all my dinner-dresses.'

Considering the extent of Miss Spragg's wardrobe her dinner-dresses were not many. She had ordered a number the year before