

Up at the Villa Study Guide

Up at the Villa by W. Somerset Maugham

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Plot Summary

Mary Panton is recovering from the ordeals of losing her husband and dealing with attorneys in the mess that's left of their financial situation, when she has the opportunity to spend some time as a guest at a Tuscan villa owned by the Leonards. She finds herself spending a great deal of time seeing the sights, but then stops the running around and spends time at the villa, on the porch or in the garden, and it's there that her soul begins the process of recovery. She is joined by a family friend, Edgar Swift, who has always loved Mary and now seems to be waiting for the perfect moment to ask her hand in marriage. Mary remains unsure right up to the moment that Edgar, who is leaving to accept an appointment as governor of Bengal, asks for her hand in marriage. Rather than giving him an answer, Mary asks for a few days to think it over and promises an answer on Edgar's return.

Mary is obligated to attend a party hosted by the Princess San Ferdinando and spends some time with a young flirt named Rowley Flint. Rowley is thought by many to be a ne'er-do-well, though he explains that he's simply a young man with money, so he has no need of a career. He flirts with all the women, and when Mary drives him home, Rowley proposes marriage. Mary says that he isn't serious and that an affirmative answer from her would frighten him, but says that it's her conversation with him that makes her certain she should accept Edgar's proposal. Over the course of her conversation with Rowley, Mary says she'd often thought that if she encountered a poor person whose life she could touch, she would do so with anything in her power.

It's also at this party that Mary meets a young violinist named Karl Richter. Karl and Mary meet by chance later that evening. Mary learns that Karl, a refugee, is doing whatever he can to make ends meet, having fled his homeland and the Nazi regime. Mary finds herself drawn to Karl because of his story and she finds herself in the position to touch this man in the way she'd described to Rowley. They make love, and when Karl begins talking of their future together, Mary explains that she has a fiancé and that they can't be together, ever again. Karl threatens her, saying that she will never forget him and then, using the handgun given to her for protection by Edgar, shoots himself. Terrified, Mary calls on the only person she can think of for help, Rowley. When he arrives and discovers that facts make it impossible to now call the police with the story of a suicide, Rowley helps her dispose of the body. Mary, citing the need for honesty, tells Edgar of her indiscretion. He doesn't withdraw his proposal, but tells her that he won't take the governorship for fear that her crime will someday come to light, disgracing not only them personally but the office he is slated to hold. Mary, realizing that she doesn't really love Edgar, sends him away. When Rowley renews his proposal, Mary accepts.



Chapters One and Two

Chapters One and Two Summary

The story opens with a description of the sixteenth century Tuscan villa at the top of the hill where Mary Panton is staying. The villa is owned by the Leonards, who have offered it up for Mary's use. From the terrace or the gardens, Mary can see the highest points of the city of Florence. She initially spends some time driving around to see the sights, but later spends more time at the villa, and it's there that her spirit is renewed from the recent trials. Mary has recently spent a great deal of time with lawyers after the death of her husband. She says that he'd managed to squander all the money he'd had and that her purpose in being at the villa is to figure out what she should now do with her life.

On this particular day, Mary is at the villa awaiting the arrival of Edgar Swift. Edgar has told Mary that he's been called to Cannes to see a man named Lord Seafair. Mary believes that once there, Edgar will be offered a position in the government. Mary's thoughts turn to her memories of Edgar from years past. She says that he'd already proven himself an able political figure. Edgar had been a family friend from the time of Mary's youth. She says that when she was nineteen, her mother pointed out that Edgar was in love with her and Mary had dismissed the idea, saying that Edgar - at forty-three - was "an old man." Mary says that Edgar had come to Tuscany after completing an appointment as governor and that he'd remained for weeks after his arrival. She says that she believes he's waiting for a "favorable moment" to ask for her hand in marriage. When he arrives at the villa, Edgar says that he's been offered the position as governor of Bengal and that he plans to take it. He then tells Mary that one of the perks of the position is that he will have a comfortable life, but says he wants to share it with a wife. Mary pretends to agree, but says there are many eligible women who would accept the role of being wife to the governor, prompting Edgar to say that he wants her to be his wife. Edgar says that he'd been happy for her when she married but sad to find that the marriage wasn't happy for Mary. Though she's expected the proposal, Mary asks Edgar to wait until his return for an answer. Edgar takes that as a positive note, saying that it's a big decision and that if she's planned to say no, it would have been a simple matter to do so.

The talk then turns to a party in Florence that evening being given by Princess San Ferdinando that both Mary and Edgar were to have attended. Edgar says he's made his apologies and has given the princess the reason for his absence. As Edgar leaves by way of taxi, he calls to the manservant named Ciro. Edgar gives Ciro some money and says that Ciro is to make sure that Mary has a handgun, given to her by Edgar for protection, when she leaves for Florence that night.

In chapter two, Mary is preparing for the party, which is to be held at a restaurant on the banks of the river Arno, with the help of her servant, Nina. Nina, apparently prompted by Ciro, reminds Mary to carry the gun with her. On the way, Mary says that she should have stayed at home after learning that Edgar couldn't attend as her escort. She



continues to wrestle with the question of marriage and wishes she could stay at home to think things over.

The princess is American and is known for her "caustic" remarks which seems greatly at odds with her otherwise good humor. Also in attendance are Colonel Trail and his wife, along with an Englishman name Rowley Flint, who was invited to even out the attendees after Edgar announced he couldn't come. The conversation quickly turns to Edgar's absence and Colonel Trail is very complimentary of Edgar's pending appointment. At one point in the evening, the princess points out that marriage to Edgar would be good for any woman, citing the fact that Edgar might yet make his way to an even higher position. Mary returns that the princess should consider him, a jest made partly because Mary feels that the princess is "chaffing" her.

The princess has chosen this particular restaurant because she wants her guests to hear a particular singer, but she finds that he's not working that night. They are entertained instead by a violinist, whose poor performance prompts the princess to call the manager and ask for his dismissal. Rowley is wildly complimentary of Mary, but she tells him that people have commented on her good looks from her teenage years and that she barely notices compliments now. Rowley says that Mary is being "caustic," and she replies that she simply wants him to know that she's not interested, prompting Rowley to say that he's madly in love with her.

Chapters One and Two Analysis

Mary seems to know full well that Edgar is in love with her and has been for many years, but she fails to return his feelings of affection. It's interesting that Mary says Edgar is going to propose to her and that she expects the question to come at any moment, but when it does, she doesn't have a ready answer. It's not clear whether she was perhaps not as sure as she intimates or if she'd simply not made up her mind when the question is posed. When Edgar tells Mary that he's been in love with her since she was a child, Mary doesn't know how to respond and when Edgar says that he's certain she's regarded him as an "old fogey," Mary denies it. Her denial is interesting considering the fact that she later insists that the only way to have a good relationship with Edgar is to be completely honest with him. An interesting aspect of this proposal is that Edgar basically tries to sell Mary on the idea. He cites the advantages he can give her, the fact that he doesn't feel his age and has worked to keep himself in good shape physically. He seems to accept the fact that Mary doesn't love him but wants to make her see that marriage to him would be beneficial anyway.

When Mary is preparing to go to the party given by the princess, Nina reminds her to take the handgun. Mary says that Edgar is being silly and Nina responds that men in love have the right to be. This is an example of the fact that the servants know a great deal about Mary's life. though Mary believes them overly forward at times.

Rowley isn't very favorably seen by his peers and Mary says that his biggest disgrace is that he's never had to work. He is a flirt who attracts a great deal of attention, though



Mary says it's impossible to point out exactly what it is about Rowley that forms that attraction. What's interesting is that the princess, who is known for her lack of tact, says that she would run away with Rowley in a minute if she were more his age, though it would mean the princess - like all women who fall for Rowley - would be left behind to cry over him and endure the scandal.



Chapters Three and Four

Chapters Three and Four Summary

As the party draws to an end, a plate is sent around to the guests who wish to tip the violinist. Most drop in a five or ten-lira note but Mary puts in one hundred, drawing a comment from Rowley. Mary points out that he doesn't expect it, meaning the tip will mean a great deal to him. When the princess asks Mary to give Rowley a ride to his hotel, Mary finds she can't reasonably refuse and agrees to do so. When they arrive, Rowley asks Mary to take a drive into the country before dropping him off. When she hesitates, he asks if she's afraid of him or afraid of the country, prompting her to agree. As she drives, he asks if she's going to marry Edgar. She says that Edgar has proposed but that she hasn't yet answered. Rowley states that she isn't in love with Edgar, saying that if she were she would have been able to answer immediately rather than asking for time to think about it.

Rowley and Mary have a rather lengthy conversation about Edgar, the proposal, and Mary's situation. Mary says that she married Matthew Panton despite advice that she should not. She says that she was so completely in love with him that she would have married him despite any objections and no matter what the cost. She says that Matthew was charming, kind and fun until he was drinking and that even from the beginning she was distressed and ashamed of him when he went into drunken rages. Mary tells Rowley that she tried desperately to save Matthew from the drinking but that she couldn't, though sometimes they'd have horrible fights over it. Mary admits that she came to despise Matthew, knowing as she did about his secretive drinking and the affairs, but says she felt he was so dependent on her that she couldn't bring herself to end the marriage.

As this conversation draws to a close, Mary asks Rowley to hand her a handkerchief from her bag and Rowley finds the handgun. The conversation then turns from Matthew to Edgar and Rowley accuses Mary of extolling Edgar's virtues. Mary lists these as she sees them, including his personality and his career. When Mary turns the conversation to Rowley's bad reputation, Rowley says that he would be a fool to waste the opportunity he has to enjoy life without the concerns of a career. Rowley then proposes to Mary, saying that it has "just occurred" to him and that he "feels a great tenderness" toward Mary. When Mary says she isn't in love with Rowley, he says that she could fall in love with him if she gave herself a chance. As they approach the hotel where Rowley is staying, Mary says that she would gladly give Rowley something if she could give him a "unique" gift. Rowley asks if Mary is going to be alright going home and offers the parting shot that Mary should "marry your empire-builder and be damned."

In chapter three, Mary drives through Florence after leaving Rowley and heads toward home. She pulls over at a place where there's an excellent view and gets out to enjoy at the view. She soon discovers that there's a man already there. After looking at him for a few minutes, she realizes that it's the violist from the restaurant. He later tells her his



name is Karl Richter, but initially tells her that his landlady is in need of money which prompted his taking the job. He says that he knows the villa where Mary is staying by reputation but has never been inside. Mary impetuously invites him to visit and says that he might as well come with her now, citing the beauty of the gardens in the moonlight.

As Mary drives by a cluster of small cottages, Karl points out the "poverty-stricken" house where he lives. They arrive at the villa and Mary turns on the lights and takes Karl inside. She tells him that the villa belongs to friends and he says that she, so being so beautiful, should be the owner of beautiful possessions. He says that he hasn't eaten and she fries eggs and bacon, making a meal of that, bread and wine. He tells her that he escaped from Austria when the Nazis threatened.

The conversation between Karl and Mary turns to age and he says that he's twenty-three. She seems wistful, saying that he has the opportunities of youth in front of him, but Karl says that he's imprisoned by poverty. He admits to having no real plans for his future and presents a picture of hopelessness. Mary's thoughts turn to the conversation she'd had earlier that evening with Rowley, of being willing to give someone a gift if she is in the position of giving a unique gift to a person in desperate need of a bit of happiness. After their meal, Karl stops to turn on the record player and she asks him to dance with her. They walk through the garden, hand in hand, and he tells her that he'd "like to die this night" because he knows that nothing better than this can possibly happen to him in the future. Karl kisses her hand and, when she touches his face, kisses the hem of her dress. Mary is suddenly beset with the idea of giving him the gift of a sexual encounter and they go back into the house together.

Chapters Three and Four Analysis

There's an interesting conversation between Rowley and Mary about the virtues of true love, with Mary saying that she doesn't want love. Her words are spoken "violently," and it's probably the tone rather than the words that so fully capture Rowley's attention. Mary's words won't turn out to be true, though it's possible that at the moment she speaks them to Rowley and considering the hurt of her recent marriage, she believes them to be true.

Rowley brings up the question of sex, telling Mary that she can't possibly ignore her sex drive forever. Mary says that she's never felt sexual temptation though she's had men who declared their admiration for her. Rowley seems to have a better grasp of the fact that Mary's age is going to become a factor in her decision than does Mary. Mary seems to continually speak from the perspective of being hurt and angry over her marriage to Matthew and to constantly insist that she wants stability in her next relationship rather than excitement. She'll come to change her mind, realizing at the last minute that she can't marry Edgar.

Mary is fully aware of her beauty. It seems that Mary briefly considers an affair with Rowley but says that she won't because she doesn't have anything "unique" to give him. Mary then expands on the idea she presented when she gave the generous tip to



the violinist at the restaurant. She says that if there was a time she was faced with the opportunity give someone "a unique experience, an hour of absolute happiness, something that he'd never dreamt of and that would never be repeated," she would do this. Rowley seems to be only half comprehending her words but it's more likely that he doesn't understand the foreshadowing of his words. The foreshadowing is explicit, though subtle.

Mary's very nature would have meant that she not hang around Florence to talk with Rowley but she does, probably at least partly because of the impending marriage proposal and her desire to talk to someone about it. She would also have normally not remained outside with the young violinist, let alone have invited him to the villa. These changes from her normal nature are likely because of her indecision over the proposal. It seems likely that Mary is struggling with the idea that if she accepts marriage with Edgar, she's giving up any hope of a passionate relationship. Though she continues to insist that she doesn't want that passionate love, her actions seem to indicate otherwise.

Karl begins putting Mary on a pedestal as soon as they begin talking. When she tells him that she doesn't own the villa, he says that she should own beautiful possessions. When Karl seems amazed that Mary can cook, she says that she has been a working woman and has cooked for herself when there was no other option. Karl seems dismayed by this bit of news and admits that he'd rather think of Mary as a princess in a fairy tale. Mary, ironically, plays along with this bit of fancy and tells Karl that she really only knows how to cook because it was a gift given to her by her fairy godmother.



Chapter Five

Chapter Five Summary

After their sexual encounter, Karl is smoking a cigarette while sitting on the floor at Mary's feet. Karl talks about his life in Austria. Karl's father, a police officer in a small town, had shot himself on the day the German troops marched into the country. Karl, an art history major, had planned to be a teacher. When the Austrians shouted their enthusiasm at Hitler's promises, Karl stood by. When the resistance was formed, Karl joined. The resistance movement is populated by youngsters who don't understand the danger they are facing and they are soon compromised, arrested and sent to a concentration camp. Karl manages to escape but wanders the Italian countryside without identification, passport or a way to make a living. Karl tells Mary that if he had money he'd buy a gun and shoot himself, "just like my father did." He says that he's thought about a time when he'd have nothing left to live for and would jump into the Arno.

Mary tries to think of something to say but realizes that Karl's situation really is dire and that there's nothing hopeful she can offer that would make him feel better. Karl then tells her that his life is changed because of their encounter, but then reveals that he believes this hasn't been a one-night encounter but the beginning of a long-term commitment. When Mary says good-bye, he asks when he can see her again. She says that they can't see each other again and that to do so would "ruin her life." Karl then begins to plead, saying that he has to see her at least one more time. Karl then says he loves her and asks if she loves him, to which she replies to the negative. Then Mary tells Karl that he seemed so miserable that she'd chosen to have sex with him to give him "a few moments' happiness." Karl is immediately furious, saying that he hadn't asked for Mary's pity and that to have taken him "to heaven" only to send him back to the ground is extremely cruel.

The situation turns ugly as Karl's anger grows. Mary becomes afraid, but when she realizes that she still has the handgun in her purse, she's slightly less nervous. Mary tells Karl that she'll give him some money as a gift, and that angers Karl even more. He tells her that he could have sold out to the Nazi army and maintained his life in Austria. When he asks Mary how much money she has, she reaches into her purse and finds the gun, which offers her some measure of reassurance. Karl continues to rant and he tells her that he should kill her so that she is never able to hurt anyone else as she's hurt him. Karl advances and Mary pulls out the gun. Karl barely pauses and tells her that she should shoot him. He says that Mary can explain the incident away by saying that he was a thief and had broken into her room. He continues to urge that she shoot but Mary can't bring herself to do so. Karl picks her up and throws her on the bed. He lays down beside her and kisses her repeatedly. He then gets up and tells her that he's not going to remember her but that she will never forget him. When Mary seems more frightened, he tells her not to worry because he's not going to hurt her. It's dark in the



room and Mary hears his movements, then the sound of a gun firing and Karl's body crumpling to the floor.

Mary rushes to Karl and finds him dead on the floor. In shock, she hears footsteps and realizes that someone is outside her bedroom door. Nina calls to Mary, asking if everything is alright and saying that she'd "heard a bang." Mary says that she didn't hear anything and urges Nina to go back to bed. Nina leaves and Mary begins trying to figure out what to do now. Her first instinct is to drag him out of the house, but the body is too heavy and Mary realizes she doesn't know what good getting him out of the house will do.

Mary realizes that she made a mistake when she told Nina that she hadn't heard anything. As she calms slightly and tries to decide what to do next, she realizes that she has to have some help. She knows that Rowley is staying in the hotel where Edgar usually stays and dials the number which she knows by heart. She tells him only that she's "in frightful trouble," and asks that he come help her. Rowley says that he'll be there as soon as he can get there. Mary knows that he won't be able to get a taxi and expects that he'll walk but he arrives sooner than she expects, saying that he'd borrowed a bicycle. Mary takes him to her bedroom and shows him the dead body of Karl. Rowley's first inclination is to call the police, but Mary stops him. Mary points out that the dead man is Karl, the man from the restaurant. She explains how she encountered him on the way home and invited him up, then goes through the rest of the events of the evening. Mary says that she knows she's made a series of mistakes but says that she'd thought at the time she was doing what she was supposed to do.

Mary tells Rowley that her reason for the sexual encounter with Karl had been that she'd found the opportunity to give someone a bit of much-needed pleasure, just as she'd talked about earlier that night. Rowley says that the only way to handle the situation is to call the police and say that the young man had broken into her room and had shot himself when Mary woke, apparently fearing that her screams would summon the servants. Mary says the problem with that story is that Nina had been awakened by the shot and that Mary had sent her back to bed. Now that action means that Mary can't simply call the police because it will seem that Mary was trying to hide something.

Rowley next suggests that they get the body out of the house and hide the fact that the death ever occurred. Mary doesn't believe it can work, but Rowley points out that there is no reason to connect her with Karl, even if the body is later found. Rowley says that there's no reason anyone will search for Karl, who has few friends and no family to report him missing. Mary and Rowley know that they have only an hour to dispose of the body before the Italian peasants set out for their day's work. Mary brings the car to near the door and she and Rowley manage to get the body out of the house. Rowley uses a towel to keep the man's torso wound from leaking out more blood and mops up the blood on the floor of Mary's bedroom. It's noted that the majority of the blood has leaked out into Karl's torso and so there is little blood to content with, but Rowley makes certain that the body is handled so that more doesn't leak out.



Mary suggests the road that leads to a nearby village as a possible dump site. She says that there are drop offs and brush that will make good cover along the edge of that road. Rowley is driving and Mary worries that he's driving too fast but Rowley worries that they're not going to finish before daylight. Rowley finds what he believes to be an appropriate place and goes into the brushy area before making a decision. He says that it is acceptable and they are preparing to get the body out of the car when they see headlights coming down the hill toward them. There isn't time to get back in and move the car. Rowley orders Mary into the backseat, though Karl's body is back there. He tells her to kiss him and they lock in what will seem a passionate embrace. To the drunks in the truck, it looks as if Mary and Rowley have found a place for a romantic encounter. After they have passed, Rowley and Mary get Karl's body out of the car. Rowley takes the body down the hill a short distance and returns a few minutes later.

As Rowley goes farther up the hill in search of a place to turn around, Mary remembers that the bloody towel is still in the car. Rowley says he'll get rid of it and suggests that he might tie it around a rock and drop it into the Arno river. Mary then remembers that the handgun Karl had used to shoot himself is still at her house. Rowley says that they should have dumped the gun with the body to further the idea that Karl had shot himself if his body is found, but says there's nothing to do now but "trust to luck" that the body won't be found or that officials will believe that someone had found and taken the gun.

Rowley leaves Mary with the insistence that she take a sleeping pill, get some rest and attend the social event she'd been slated to attend later in the day. He says that if someone later questions her actions on the day of Karl's death, it would be best if she'd attended the social engagement and had appeared normal at that function. After Rowley leaves, Mary decides that she has to leave the villa as soon as possible and considers that it will appear normal for her to leave soon after Edgar's return if she accepts his proposal. She does take a sleeping pill and falls asleep fairly quickly.

Chapter Five Analysis

Karl seems to romanticize his father's suicide, though he doesn't dwell on it for long. Karl says that if he could afford a gun he'd also shoot himself, just as his father did. He points on his body to the place he'd place the barrel of the gun, and this entire scene is a foreshadowing of what's to come, though the reader won't appreciate the foreshadowing until reading on to the climax. An interesting point about Karl is that he says he "would have" committed suicide but doesn't say that he will now. He seems to be placing a great deal of his hope on the idea that he now has something to live for, though Mary can't yet possibly understand the importance of his words.

Karl's attitude about Mary's offer of money is interesting on several levels. Karl says that he doesn't want Mary's money, but this seems to be a point of pride speaking rather than Karl on any rational level. Karl then says that he could have stayed in Austria and sold out to the Nazi army. This seems to be his way of saying that if he takes money from Mary, it's like he's selling out. Another interesting point is that he says he won't take her money but then asks how much money she has available. It's not clear whether he



really wants to know and is considering that some amount might be worth his pride, or if he wants to be able to throw a large amount back in her face.

Mary tells Rowley that she'd seen in Karl the opportunity to do something good for someone, just as she'd explained earlier that evening. Rowley says that he'd thought she was talking "tripe" at the time, and hadn't thought she would really go through with it, even if she found the person who fit her criteria. Mary says that she'd thought she was doing something good but seems to realize that she hadn't thought through the situation and the possible ramifications.



Chapter Six and Seven

Chapter Six and Seven Summary

Nina awakens Mary the following day, saying that it's noon already and that Mary is supposed to be at the Villa Bolognese for a social event at one o'clock. It takes her only a moment to remember the events from the previous night, but Mary forces herself to act naturally, remembering Rowley's admonition to appear normal. She tells Nina that she'd had trouble sleeping after Nina had run into her room and so had taken a sleeping pill, using the story to explain the reason she'd slept so late. She asks Nina to describe the sound she'd heard and says that it was probably a car passing by the villa. As soon as Nina is gone, Mary rushes to the drawer where she'd put the handgun. She notes that Ciro would have realized that the gun had been fired and is relieved to find that it's still in the drawer.

Mary starts getting ready to go and continues to think about what she has to do over the course of the coming hours. She remembers Rowley's words to be certain that she doesn't do anything to arouse suspicion and that she act naturally so that if someone thinks about it later, there'll be nothing to make people think she'd acted strangely. Mary now realizes that she has to think about Rowley, who is equally involved in this situation. Mary thinks about Rowley and admits that some people may not have a high opinion of him, but that he'd been a good friend when she needed a good friend.

Nina tells Mary that she's beautiful as she prepares to leave and Mary knows that she is "in good form." She arrives at the Villa Bolognese, the home of the Atkinsons, who are described as a middle-aged couple. She's relieved to find that Rowley has also accepted an invitation to the event and is already there when she arrives. From the moment she arrives, she finds that everyone is in a really good mood. The host compliments her and Rowley greets her, doing the same. The princess is there and she tells Mary that she'd been telling about the party from the previous evening, including that she'd wanted her guests to hear the singer but that there had been a violinist instead. She asks Mary directly if she remembers the young man and Mary says she does, adding that he hadn't been a very good musician, to which the princess says, "If I played that badly, I'd shoot myself." The princess reveals that she's discovered from the restaurant manager that the young man was a refugee. The princess now seems to realize that she's caused the young man to lose a valuable source of income and says she believes she'll find him and give him some money to help him until he can find another job. Mary is relieved but tired out by the time the conversation turns to something else.

In chapter seven, Mary is in the garden when she receives a telegram that Edgar will be returning the following day, but she's expecting that Rowley will visit shortly. Nina tells Mary that Agata, the cook who lives in the village, has told the story of the young violinist who has disappeared. Nina, relating what Agata has told her, says that the young refugee left without paying the rent he'd owed for the past three weeks. Nina



says that the people who had rented him the room knew that he played at Peppitos and that he had some money when he left there, but that he'd never returned home. Mary impulsively promises to pay what's owed.

When Rowley arrives, he says that the conversations she'd had about Karl are nothing to be concerned about. He points out that everything points to Karl's choosing to run away - the fact that he'd lost his job and owed money to his landlord. Rowley points out what Mary has already considered - that he is involved as deeply as she. He says that if an investigation occurs, someone might accuse Rowley of having found Karl with Mary and going into a jealous rage. Mary says that she does appreciate his actions on her behalf to which Rowley replies that he'd have done it for any friend, citing his love of a risky situation. Rowley then asks for the gun, saying that if someone finds the body, the gun should also be found. Mary is frightened by the idea of him returning to the dump site, but he promises he'll be alright. After he's gone, Mary grows angry with him for putting her through additional turmoil.

Rowley returns without incident and Mary tells him that she doesn't understand why Karl killed himself. Rowley says it was because Karl's life was devoid of beauty and hope and that Mary had given him both. When he discovered that it was done not out of love but out of pity, he'd been humiliated, according to Rowley. Mary says that she'll never forgive herself and Rowley says he believes there's more to the story, including that the difficult life Karl had led unbalanced him. Mary then tells Rowley that she's going to tell Edgar about the incident. She says that Karl's suicide has made her understand that she wants to marry Edgar because he can take care of her, but says she wants to enter that marriage with a clear conscience. Rowley predicts Edgar won't take it well, but Mary insists that if he loves her enough, he won't be angry with her.

Chapter Six and Seven Analysis

Mary's fear has lapsed into outright paranoia by the time she gets up the day after Karl's suicide. Her first thought after Nina wakes her is that Ciro might have taken the handgun. There's really no reason for her to believe this except that Edgar had told Ciro to make sure that Mary took the gun with her. Her fears are prompted a bit more when she's at the party the following day and the princess says she plans to find the young violinist and give him some money. Mary later tells Rowley that she believes the princess won't be swayed from that course and that she will begin asking questions in her search for Karl. There's an interesting bit of journalistic license taken by the author when the princess says that if she played the violin as badly as Karl she'd shoot herself. The humor probably won't be lost on any reader, though it may seem a bit maudlin to some. Later, Nina talks about Karl, saying that he'd left owing rent to some very poor people. It's at this point that Mary says it seems that Karl - in death - was drawing a great deal more attention than he had ever commanded in life.

As Mary is preparing to leave the party given by the Atkinsons, she has a brief private moment with her hostess. Mrs. Atkinson compliments Mary, saying that she's beautiful and is an asset to any gathering. She then hints that she knows there might be a



marriage announcement between Mary and Edgar. Mary doesn't deny or confirm the rumor, but Mrs. Atkinson goes on to say that she hopes the story is true because she considers herself a great judge of character and that she believes Mary to be "good and sweet and natural." The words make Mary tear up and she has to fight to keep from crying. Mrs. Atkinson probably puts it down to Mary's happiness over her impending marriage to Edgar, but it seems more likely that Mary is actually again feeling remorse over Karl's death.

Mary's stated reasons for telling Edgar about Karl's suicide and her role in it are that she wants to enter the relationship with a clear conscience, but Mary should realize that Edgar is not likely to accept Mary's explanations without being angry. Rowley realizes that Edgar's "doting" love for Mary requires that he believe she be perfect or at least very near to it. It seems that Mary really wants someone to exonerate her from any blame in the matter and that's the true reason she tells Edgar.



Chapters Eight and Nine

Chapters Eight and Nine Summary

The following afternoon, Edgar calls Mary with the news that he's returned and asks permission to come to her at the villa. Edgar says the trip seemed long, but that he knew where she was all the time. Edgar says that he's finished the arrangements for his position and that he's to leave for that office in September. Edgar and Mary talk for awhile about the position, the compliments he was paid as he was talking over the position with other officials, and Edgar's excitement over the opportunity. Mary cites the conversation she'd had with Colonel Trail and tells Edgar that Colonel Trail had suggested Edgar might advance past this appointment. Edgar seems to believe this as well. He then turns the conversation to his proposal, saying that he hopes Mary will share his life with him and that he'd chartered a plane in order to get back to her more quickly in order find out whether she was going to accept his proposal. Mary knows that if she's going to tell Edgar about Karl, this is the moment she has to do it.

Mary begins by telling Edgar that she feels she has to be completely honest with him and will then let him make up his own mind about whether he still wants to marry her. She then tells him the story and afterwards he paces, taking some time before saying anything. He tells her that he's disappointed because he would never have expected such an act from her. He then says that he still wants to marry her but says that he'll do so as a private citizen rather than a government official. He says that he'd spend his life worried that her role in Karl's death might someday come to light. While he claims to be willing to stand by her personally, he says he doesn't want to risk the impact such a scandal might have on the office. He also says that having Rowley involved means it's more likely that the story will come out. Mary suddenly realizes that she doesn't want to marry Edgar, but Edgar won't allow her to calmly back down so Mary says that she had been willing to marry him when she thought he was going to be a governor but that sharing a life with him as a private citizen doesn't appeal to her.

Edgar seems to take her rejection in stride, though he acts at least somewhat humiliated. Mary knows that he's relieved at having had her take control of the situation and notes a moment during the conversation when his look seemed to say that he'd love to escape his proposal but wouldn't have withdrawn his offer.

In chapter nine, Mary is at the villa when Rowley calls. He asks to be allowed to visit and Mary agrees. He arrives fifteen minutes later and Mary notes the differences between Rowley and Edgar. Rowley says that he'd guessed that Mary and Edgar weren't going to marry when Edgar returned to the hotel and made arrangements to leave immediately. Rowley says that he's glad Mary isn't going to marry Edgar, saying that he was certain that she'd be "bored to death." Rowley then says that he believes the best thing to do is for Mary to marry him. Mary initially acts as if his proposal is a joke, but Rowley points out the reasons they would be compatible and Mary eventually



agrees. She tells him that she hopes Rowley realizes that he's taking "a terrible risk" and Rowley says that's a good think to do.

Chapters Eight and Nine Analysis

When Edgar arrives at the villa on the day Mary tells him about Karl, he tells her that she's "pretty as a picture." Mary admits that hearing Edgar say that "tickles" her and remembers that Mr. Atkinson also says it to her. She seems to think of Mr. Atkinson as a man much older than herself, and on this occasion she lumps Edgar into that same age category. It's interesting that she seems to be constantly trying to overlook the age difference in her relationship with Edgar.

Edgar's reaction to Mary's confession is what human nature would dictate it should be, though Mary seems to be surprised. Rowley says that Edgar's disappointment in Mary isn't because he loves her, but because he has her on something of a pedestal and has come to believe that Mary's actions are above reproach. When she does something less than perfectly, Edgar can't help but be disappointed. While this was an extreme case, it seems likely that Mary would have disappointed him at some point.



Characters

Mary Panton

The young woman who has borrowed a Tuscan villa from her friends, the Leonards. Mary is a headstrong, capable young woman. She is a recent widow and is staying in Tuscany in an effort to recover from the trauma of her marriage and its abrupt end. Mary believes herself immune to the whims of youth, but having been denied them at least to some degree during her own youth, finds herself unwilling to commit to marriage with a man who is much older than herself, though he can offer her a great many advantages in life. An interesting fact about Mary is that she believes herself to be a good person and recognizes her own good looks. It's these facts that drive the plot of the story to its climax, the death of Mary's young lover, Karl Richter. Mary cites her honest nature as the reason she needs to tell her fiancé, Edgar Swift, about her one-night affair with Karl, but it seems that she is also testing Edgar, seeking his reaction to her discretion. When she sees the disappointment on his face, she uses that as an excuse to avoid the marriage, though it seems she'd been actively seeking an excuse over the course of the story. Mary's reason for accepting another proposal seems equally as false, and it appears that she had been looking for a reason to accept the attentions of the younger, more attractive and dynamic Rowley Flint.

Rowley Flint

Rowley is presented as the ne'er-do-well character, though he justifies his lack of a career by saying that he has enough money to live on and sees no reason to work. He's handsome and charismatic, characteristics that make him the life of any gathering and the man who attracts the attention of almost every woman in attendance, married as well as single. It seems feasible that Rowley, faced with Mary's lack of sexual interest, is caught up in the conquest but realizes that nothing less than marriage will bring Mary to him as a lover. The story ends before this theory can be tested. Mary believes Rowley to be a true friend because he puts himself in danger on her behalf, but the reader must keep in mind that Rowley loves thrills and finds this danger to fill that need. He tells Mary this, but she continues to look upon his actions in the best light rather than evaluating them based on Rowley's characteristics. An interesting point is that Rowley wastes little time trying to seduce Mary while she is considering her engagement to Edgar and doesn't spend a great deal of effort trying to talk her out of that step. He does, however, step in and make a serious proposal of marriage as soon as Mary ends her relationship with Edgar. This should redeem him somewhat in the eyes of the reader.



Edgar Swift

Mary's elder by several years, Edgar is solidly established in his career and wants to marry Mary. Mary is initially flattered by the offer though she is more than half expecting it, but later comes to realize that Edgar believes her to be perfect and is actually more in love with this image of Mary than with Mary herself.

Karl Richter

The young man who is performing on the fiddle at the restaurant where the princess hosts a party, he chances to meet Mary and returns with her to her villa where they make love. Karl is a complicated character and is obviously overly-romantic and impoverished. He seems to be in a dire situation and it's this that apparently prompts his suicide after Mary tells him that they can never be together again.

Nina

The young maid who serves at the villa where Mary is staying. It's Nina who hears the gunshot fired in the middle of the night and comes to investigate. Nina is actually an employee of the Leonards who own the villa, and Mary believes the girl to be a bit overly-familiar, considering her position as a servant.

Princess San Ferdinando

The elderly, widowed princess who hosts the party at which Mary meets Karl Richter. The princess is a bit of a meddler but is tolerated because of her position in society. She frightens Mary by saying that she's going to find Karl and help him with his current financial situation.

Ciro

Another of the servants at the villa, he is told by Edgar to be certain that Mary takes a gun with her when she leaves the villa that night.

The Drunks in the Truck on the Mountain Road

Though unnamed, the men play an important role in the story because they interrupt the efforts by Mary and Rowley to dispose of Karl's body. The appearance of the drunks prompts a kiss between Mary and Rowley that Rowley later cites as a reason Mary should agree to marry him.



Colonel Trail

An Englishman who is in attendance at the party given by the princess at the Florence restaurant. The colonel is familiar with Edgar and is pleased to learn that Edgar is apparently on the verge of being appointed as governor of Bengal.

Matthew Panton

Mary's deceased husband, Matthew, had squandered the family's money prior to his death and leaves Mary to deal with the attorneys, a process that wears her out and prompts her trip to Tuscany to recover.



Objects/Places

Tuscany

Where Mary Panton borrows a villa after the death of her husband.

The Villa

The house in Tuscany, this is the scene of most of the action of the story.

Cannes

Where Edgar Swift is called on a business trip.

Bengal

Where Edgar Swift is offered a governorship.

The Arno

A river near the villa.

Florence

A metropolitan area near the villa where Mary is staying.

Peppitos

Where Mary attends a party hosted by the princess.

The Villa Bolognese

Where Mary is supposed to have lunch the day after Karl commits suicide in her bedroom.

The Bedroom of the Villa

Where Karl kills himself after making love to Mary.



The Garden of the Villa

Where Mary tells Edgar about Karl and comes to the conclusion that she can't marry him.



Themes

Longing

A longing for something one does not possess is an overriding theme of this book and the theme is seen repeated in several of the characters. In Mary's case, the longing is for youth and love. Mary tells Karl that he has the advantage of youth and the longing in her voice seems clear. Mary spends a great deal of time talking about the possibility of marrying Edgar, and in most of those conversations she talks about the advantages of the relationship. What she seems to long for is an abiding love, though she can't seem to give up on the idea of a loving relationship. In Karl's case, the longing is more obscure. Karl is poor, a refugee without family. He might be longing for any of these but it seems more likely that he's searching for something less tangible than wealth or even family. Considering Karl's background and the fact that he'd been an art history major in college, Karl's longing may be for something beautiful, which is what he'd initially thought he received from Mary. Edgar's longing is intangible. He wants people to think well of him and this longing prompts most of his actions. Finally, Rowley longs for fun and excitement. He says that life should be spent seeking as much fun as possible and taking risks if those are worthwhile.

Appearance

Mary's first instinct to cover up Karl's suicide is fear, but her later decision to keep the suicide hidden becomes an act designed to protect her reputation. After she's talked to Rowley, she says that there's nothing to do but call the police and take the scandal that's bound to follow. Rowley's decision to help her out of the situation could be credited largely to Rowley's desire to have some excitement in his life, but it's also believable that he's trying to help Mary because of his budding love for her. While Mary worries about her appearance, it's Edgar who epitomizes this theme. Edgar stands on ceremony at every turn and he will certainly expect that from his wife as well. When he returns from his trip, he tells Mary about the glowing compliments he's been paid and Mary knows that he loves this. When Mary tells Edgar about Karl's death, Edgar stops for a moment to think about it before he speaks, but then says that he still wants to marry her. Mary believes that at that moment he really wants out of the situation but would not renege on his proposal. Edgar then says that he won't accept the governor's office that had just been offered in order to avoid any scandal on that office if Karl's death and Mary's participation in it is discovered.

Coming of Age

Several of the characters exemplify the coming of age theme. Among those is Mary. Mary admits that she'd been giddily in love with her husband from the early days of their meeting. She says that she'd believed in their love so fully that she could overcome



anything. Mary, looking back on her life with Matthew Panton from the vantage of her life after his death, says that she knew the pain of constant humiliation at Matthew's hands. She emerges from that marriage with the idea that she wants nothing else to do with a relationship based on love and passion. Mary's lawyer tells her that she should avoid another passionate love affair, urging that she marry again but that she do so with an eye toward companionship and stability. Mary seems to really believe this to be good advice and it takes her some time to realize that she is yet young and needs love in her life. Mary is actually about to go through with her plan to marry a man she doesn't love but changes her mind at the last moment. Rowley is, to some degree, the exact opposite of this theme and it's Rowley who tells Mary that life should be enjoyed.

Style

Point of View

The story is written in third person from the limited perspective of Mary Panton. In an interesting deviation from the typical journalistic style, the author changes the perspective in a couple of instances so that the book is written as if addressing the reader. For example, there is a lengthy description of the villa, presented very generally from Mary's point of view. However, when Mary gives Karl the tour of the villa, there's a description of the stairs by which a person would reach Mary's bedroom. The story reads that Mary's room is on the "second floor to which you ascended by a fine flight of steps." The use of the word "you" is repeated in another place in the book and it's not clear why the author chose this method. It seems possible that the author is trying to place some emphasis on the description but it may also have been the author's way of trying to engage the reader. The perspective is limited only to what Mary knows and sees. For example, when Rowley comes to take the handgun to put near Karl's body, Mary is left to wait at home and wonder what's happening. She knows nothing about the trip and Rowley doesn't tell her. Because Mary doesn't know, the reader also doesn't know. Other actions and events that occur outside Mary's vision are not necessarily presented to the reader at all. For example, Mary learns that the landlord who'd rented a room to Karl is in dire need of the rent money he'd owed her and promises to help by paying them the money owed, but does not learn what happens to the family; therefore, the reader doesn't know either.

Setting

The story is set in Tuscany sometime in recent times. The general setting is real which makes the more specific settings more believable. These specific settings are presented in great detail. There is historical information included in the description, indicating that the villa had been constructed in the sixteenth century and was the work of a noble Florentine, though the builder's descendants had later fallen upon hard times and had been forced to sell it outside the family. The villa has only a little furniture but the gardens and veranda are excellent, and that's where Mary spends a great deal of her time. It's into this setting that Mary brings her lover, the young refugee named Karl. The villa and the gardens are described during the meeting between Karl and Mary and the setting is undoubtedly romantic in and of itself. The time setting is less detailed, though it can be generally accepted that the story is set in a reasonably modern timeframe. The book's first copyright is 1941 and it could be reasonably argued that this is the time setting for the story. Mary sometimes drives a Fiat around the area and there is a mention that the villa does not have central heat, indicating that having central heat would have been normal. The setting is appropriate to the story and the details are sufficient to make the story's setting believable.



Language and Meaning

The story is written in English and is presented in a direct, straight-forward manner that should capture the interest of most readers. The story is an appropriate mixture of emotions. As the story opens, Mary is recovering from the trauma of losing her husband and dealing with the financial mess he left behind. Her mood and the tone of the story is already on an upswing, but it should be noted that the overall tone of the book remains one of somewhat hopeless resignation as Mary contemplates the rest of her life if she accepts the proposal before her. The overriding tone turns to one of passion as she has a sexual encounter with a young lover, then to terror as she fears first for her life and then for the scandal that's bound to erupt over the young man's death. Through it all, including her attraction to Rowley Flint, Mary's thoughts are turned to her future, in which it seems she is destined to be trapped in a loveless marriage.

Structure

The book is divided into nine chapters. None are titled except with a Roman numeral. Chapter five is noticeably longer with some fifty pages. The rest of the chapters range from about fifteen to about twenty-five pages. It should be noted that the pages are very short with only about nineteen to twenty lines per page. This makes the book much shorter in words than a typical book of the two hundred pages of this book. The fact that the book is so short means that an adequate reader can be through with it in a matter of hours. The title of the book refers to the villa and this is an important part of the setting of the story. The story is presented in chronological order and covers only a four-day period. The first day is when Edgar leaves on his trip. The second day is the party and the day Mary meets Karl, ending with Karl's death. The third day is the day Rowley and Mary attend an event and Mary decides to tell Edgar the truth. The fourth day is the day Edgar returns and Mary agrees to marry Rowley.



Quotes

"You're a young woman and a pretty one, and I have no doubt you'll marry again. But don't marry for love next time; it's a mistake - marry for position and companionship."

Chap. 1, p. 5

"The Princess gave him another of those quiet smiling looks of hers in which there was the indulgence of an old rip who has neither forgotten nor repented of her naughty past and at the same time the shrewdness of a woman who knows the world like the palm of her hand and come to the conclusion that no one is any better than he should be."

Chap. 2, p. 29

"People have been telling me I was beautiful since I was sixteen and it's ceased to excite me very much. It's an asset and I should be a fool not to know its value." Chap. 2, p. 41

"Give a plain woman a hat and a pretty one a book. Isn't that the idea?" Chap. 2, p. 42

"But I've sometimes thought that if I ever ran across someone who was poor, alone and unhappy, who'd never had any pleasure in life, who'd never known any of the good things money can buy - and if I could give him a unique experience, an hour of absolute happiness, something that he'd never dreamt of and that would never be repeated, then I'd give him gladly of anything I had to give." Chap. 3, p. 65

"I should like to die this night. Nothing so wonderful will ever happen to me again."

Chap. 4, p. 82

"You fool, if money had meant so much to me don't you think I could have made terms with the Nazis? I didn't need to be an outcast." Chap. 5, p. 95

"It was impossible to believe that anywhere in the world there could be people who hadn't enough to eat. On such a day it was very good to be alive." Chap. 6, p. 142

"She was a woman of her word and would seek him out; and she was an obstinate woman; if she could not find him she would move heaven and earth to discover what had become of him." Chap. 7, p. 154

"Don't be afraid. The Devil's a sportsman and he looks after his own." Chap. 7, p. 161

"But if you want to make a good job of it, take my advice and - emulate the clam." Chap. 7, p. 170

"You're a romantic, silly little thing and I can quite believe that what you did after that man killed himself seemed the only thing to do in the circumstances." Chap. 10, p. 180



Topics for Discussion

Why is Mary staying in Tuscany? What are the circumstances that bring her there? Why does she choose to stay in the villa?

How does Mary know Edgar? What is the basis for their relationship? How does this basis impact their relationship during the days covered by the story in Tuscany?

Who is Karl Richter? How does Mary come to know him? What impact does Karl have on her life?

Who is Rowley Flint? How does he know Mary? What is Mary's impression of Rowley? What do others think of Rowley? Is this reputation founded?

Compare the characters of the three men in Mary's life - Edgar, Karl and Rowley. How are they similar? Different? What is it about each that draws Mary? What is it about each that pushes her away?

Who is the Princess San Ferdinando? Ciro? Nina? Agata? Mr. and Mrs. Atkinson? How do each of these characters impact Mary's life?

Describe Mary's conversation with Rowley about her insistence that she would give someone a "unique gift." How does that come to pass later that evening? What is the outcome?