

THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

BY EDITH WHARTON

XV

IN the Dagonet drawing-room the lamps had long been lit, and Mrs. Fairford, after a last impatient turn, had put aside the curtains of worn damask to strain her eyes once more into the darkening square. She came back to the hearth, where Charles Bowen, cigarette in hand, stood leaning between the prim caryatides of the white marble chimney-piece.

"No sign of her. She's simply forgotten."

Bowen looked at his watch, and then turned to compare it with the high-waisted Empire clock.

"Six o'clock. Why not telephone again? There must be some mistake. Perhaps she knew Ralph would be late."

Laura's laugh had a shade of irony. "I haven't noticed that she follows Ralph's movements so closely. When I telephoned just now the servant said she'd been out since two. The nurse waited till half-past four, not liking to come without orders; and now it's too late for Paul to go out."

She wandered away toward the farther end of the room, where, through half-open doors, a shining surface of mahogany reflected a flower-wreathed cake in which two candles dwindled.

"Put them out, please," she said to the servant in the background; then she shut the doors and turned back to Bowen.

"It's all so unlucky—my grandfather giving up his drive, and mother backing out of her hospital meeting, and having all the committee down on her. And Henley: I'd even coaxed Henley away from his bridge! He escaped again just before you came. Undine promised she'd have the boy here at four. It's not as if it had never happened before. She's always breaking her engagements."

Bowen smiled. "She has so many that it's inevitable some should get broken."

"Ah, if she'd only choose! Now that

Ralph has had to go into business, and is kept in his office so late, it's sheer cruelty to drag him out every night. He told us the other day they hadn't dined at home for a month. Undine doesn't seem to notice how hard he works."

Bowen gazed meditatively at the crumbling fire. "No—why should she?" he said.

"Why *should* she? Really, Charles—!" Mrs. Fairford flashed out at him.

He took the flash without blinking. "Why should she, when she knows nothing about it?"

"She may know nothing about his business; but she must know it's her extravagance that's forced him into it." Mrs. Fairford looked at Bowen reproachfully. "You talk as if you were on her side!"

"Are there sides already? If so, I want to look down on them impartially from the heights of pure speculation. I want to get a general view of the whole problem of American marriages."

Mrs. Fairford dropped into her arm-chair with a sigh. "If that's what you want you must make haste! Most of them don't last long enough to be classified."

"I grant you it takes an active mind. But the weak point is so frequently the same that after a time one knows where to look for it."

"What do you call the weak point?"

Bowen paused. "The fact that the average American looks down on his wife."

Mrs. Fairford was up with a spring. "Really, Charles—if that's where paradox lands you!"

Bowen mildly stood his ground. "Well—doesn't he prove it? How much does he let her share in the real business of life? How much does he rely on her judgment and help in the conduct of serious affairs? Take Ralph, for instance—you say his wife's extravagance forces him to work too hard; but that's not what's wrong. It's normal for a man to work hard for a woman—what's abnormal is his not caring to tell her anything about it."

"To tell Undine? She'd be bored to death if he did!"

"Just so; she'd even feel aggrieved. But why? Because it's against the custom of the country. And whose fault is that? The man's, again—I don't mean Ralph, I mean the genus he belongs to: homo sapiens, Americanus. Why haven't we taught our women to take an interest in our work? Simply because we don't take enough interest in *them*."

Mrs. Fairford, sinking back into her chair, sat gazing at the vertiginous depths above which his thought seemed to dangle her.

"*You* don't? I mean the American man doesn't—the most slaving, self-effacing, self-sacrificing——?"

"Yes; and the most indifferent: there's the point. The 'slaving's' no argument against the indifference. To slave for women is part of the old American tradition; lots of people give their lives for dogmas they've ceased to believe in. Then again, in this country the passion for making money has preceded the knowing how to spend it, and the American man lavishes his fortune on his wife because he doesn't know what else to do with it."

"Then you call it a mere want of imagination for a man to lavish his money on his wife?"

"Not necessarily—but it's a want of imagination to fancy it's all he owes her. Look about you and you'll see what I mean. Why does the European woman interest herself so much more in what the men are doing? Because she's so important to them that they make it worth her while! She's not a parenthesis, as she is here—they simply don't picture life without her. I'm not implying that Ralph isn't interested in his wife—he's a passionate, a pathetic exception. But even he has to conform to an environment where all the romantic values are reversed. Where does the real life of most American men lie? In some woman's drawing-room or in their offices? The answer's obvious, isn't it? The emotional centre of gravity's not the same in the two hemispheres. In the effete societies it's love, in our new one it's business. In America the real *crime passionnel* is a 'big steal'—there's more excitement in wrecking railways than homes."

Bowen paused to light another cigarette, and then took up his theme. "Isn't that the key to our easy divorces? If we cared for women in the old barbarous possessive instinctive way do you suppose we'd give them up as readily as we do? The real paradox is the fact that the men who make, materially, the biggest sacrifices for their women, should do least for them ideally and romantically. And what's the result—how do the women avenge themselves for counting so little? All my sympathy's with them, poor deluded dears, when I see their fallacious little attempts to trick out the leavings tossed them by the preoccupied male—the money and the motors and the clothes—and pretend to themselves and each other that that's what really constitutes life! Oh, I know what you're going to say—it's less and less of a pretense with them, I grant you; they're more and more succumbing to the force of the suggestion; but here and there I fancy there's one who still sees through the humbug, and knows that money and motors and clothes are simply the big bribe she's paid for keeping out of some man's way!"

Mrs. Fairford presented an amazed silence to the rush of this tirade; but when she rallied it was to avenge herself by the murmured query: "And is Undine one of the exceptions?"

Her companion took the shot with a smile. "No—she's a monstrously perfect result of the system: the completest proof of its triumph. It's Ralph who's the victim and the exception."

"Ah, poor Ralph!" Mrs. Fairford raised her head with a quick glance. "Here he is now! But I suppose," she added in an undertone, "we can't give him your explanation for his wife's having forgotten to come?"

Bowen echoed her sigh, and then seemed to toss it from him with his cigarette-end; but he stood in silence while the door opened and Ralph Marvell entered.

"Well, Laura! Hallo, Charles—have you been celebrating too?" Ralph turned to his sister. "I know—I know; it's inexcusable of me, and I daren't look my son in the face! But I stayed down town to make provision for his future birthdays." He returned Mrs. Fairford's kiss.

"Don't tell me the party's over, and the guest of honour gone home to bed?"

As he stood before them, laughing and a little flushed, with the strain of long fatigue sounding through his gaiety and looking out of his anxious eyes, Mrs. Fairford threw a rapid glance at Bowen and then turned away to ring the bell.

"Sit down, Ralph—you look tired. I'll give you some tea in a minute."

He dropped into an armchair. "I did have rather a rush to get here—but hadn't I better join the revellers? Where are they?"

He walked to the end of the room and threw open the dining-room doors. "Hallo—where have they all gone to? What a jolly cake!" He went up to it. "Why, it's never even been cut!"

Mrs. Fairford, after giving an order to the servant who had answered her ring, turned toward the dining-room door.

"Come and have your tea first, Ralph."

"No, no—tea afterward, thanks. Are they all upstairs with my grandfather? I must make my peace with Undine——"

His sister put her arm through his, and drew him back to the fire.

"Undine didn't come," she said.

"Didn't come?" He stared. "Who brought the boy, then?"

"He didn't come either. That's why the cake isn't cut."

Ralph still looked at her, frowning a little. "What's the mystery? Is he ill, or what's happened?"

"Nothing's happened—Paul's all right. Apparently Undine forgot. She never went home for him, and the nurse waited till it was too late to come."

The flush had faded from Ralph's face, and she saw his eyes darken; but after a moment he gave a slight laugh and drew out his cigarette case. "Poor little Paul—poor chap!" He moved toward the fire. "Yes, please—some tea."

He dropped back into his chair with a look of lassitude, as if some strong stimulant had suddenly ceased to take effect on him; but before the tea-table was brought he had glanced at his watch and was on his feet again.

"But this won't do. I must rush home and see the poor boy before dinner. And my mother—and my grandfather? I want to say a word to them first—I must make Paul's excuses!"

"Grandfather's taking his nap. And mother had to rush out for a postponed committee meeting—she left as soon as the nurse telephoned that little Paul wasn't coming."

"Ah, I see." He sat down again. "Yes, make the tea strong, please. I've had a beastly fogging sort of day."

He leaned back with half-closed eyes, holding his untouched cup in his hand. Bowen took leave, and Laura sat silent, watching Ralph between lowered lids while she feigned to be busy with the kettle. Ralph presently emptied his cup and put it aside; then, sinking back into his former attitude, he clasped his hands behind his head and stared apathetically into the fire. But suddenly he came to life and started up. A motor-horn sounded outside the square, and there was a noise of wheels at the door.

"There's Undine! I wonder what could have kept her." He jumped up and walked over to the door; but it was Clare Van Degen who came in.

At sight of him she gave a little murmur of pleasure. "What luck to find you! No, not luck—I came because I knew you'd be here. He never comes near me, Laura: I have to hunt him down like this to get a glimpse of him!"

She moved forward, slender and shadowy in her long furs, and after kissing Mrs. Fairford turned back with a smile to Ralph. "Yes, I knew I'd catch you here. I knew it was the boy's birthday, and I've brought him a present: a vulgar expensive Van Degen offering. I've not enough imagination left to find the right thing, the thing it takes feeling and not money to buy. When I get a present nowadays I never say to the shopman: 'I want this or that'—I simply say: 'Give me something that costs so much.'" She drew a parcel from her muff. "Where's the victim of my vulgarity? Let me crush him under the weight of my gold."

Mrs. Fairford sighed out "Clare—Clare!" and Ralph looked at his cousin with a smile.

"I'm sorry; but you'll have to depute me to present it. The birthday's over; you're too late."

"Too late?" She looked surprised. "Why, I've just left Mamie Driscoll, and she told me Undine was still at Popple's

studio a few minutes ago: Popple's giving a tea to show the picture."

"Popple's giving a tea?" Ralph had a gesture of mock consternation. "Ah, in that case! In Popple's society who wouldn't forget the flight of time?"

He had recovered his usual easy tone, and Laura saw that Mrs. Van Degen's statement had brought him distinct relief. He turned to his cousin. "Will you trust me with your present for the boy?"

Clare put the parcel in his hand. "I'm sorry not to give it to him myself. I said what I did because I knew it was what you and Laura were thinking—but it's really a battered old Dagonet bowl that came down to me from our revered great-grandmother."

"What—the heirloom you used to eat your porridge out of?" Ralph detained her hand to put a kiss on it. "That's dear of you, Clare!"

She threw him one of her strange glances. "Why not say: 'That's like you, Clare'? But you don't remember what I'm like." She turned away to glance at the clock. "It's late, and I must be off. I'm going to a big dinner-dance at the Chauncey Ellings—but you must be going there too, Ralph? You'd better let me drive you home."

In the motor Ralph leaned back in silence, while the rug was drawn over their knees, and Clare nervously fingered the row of gold-topped objects in the morocco rack at her elbow. It was restful to be swept through the crowded streets in this smooth swift fashion, and Clare's presence at his side gave him a vague sense of ease.

For a long time now, feminine nearness had come to mean to him, not this relief from tension, but the ever-renewed dread of small daily deceptions, evasions, subterfuges. The change had come gradually, marked by one disillusionment after another; yet there had been one moment that formed for him the point beyond which there was no returning. It was the moment, a month or two before his boy's birth, when, glancing over a batch of belated Paris bills, he had come on one from the jeweller he had once found in private conference with Undine. The bill was not large, but two of its items stood

out sharply. "Resetting pearl and diamond pendant. Resetting sapphire and diamond ring." The pearl and diamond pendant was his mother's wedding present; the ring was the one he had given Undine on their engagement. That they were both family relics, kept unchanged through several generations, scarcely mattered to him at the time: he felt only the stab of his wife's deception. She had assured him in Paris that she had not had her jewels re-set. He had noticed, soon after their return to New York, that she had left off her engagement-ring; but the others were soon discarded also, and in answer to his question she had told him that, in her ailing state, rings "worried" her. Now he saw she had deceived him, and, forgetting everything else, he went to her, bill in hand. Her tears and distress filled him with immediate contrition. Was this a time to torment her about trifles? His anger seemed to cause her actual physical fear, and at the sight he abased himself in entreaties for forgiveness. When the scene ended she had pardoned him, and the re-set ring was on her finger.

Soon afterward, the birth of the boy seemed to wipe out these humiliating memories; yet Marvell found in time that they were not effaced, but only momentarily crowded out of sight. In reality, the incident had a meaning out of proportion to its apparent seriousness: it put in his hand a clue to several sides of his wife's character. He no longer minded her having lied about the jeweller; what pained him was that she had been unconscious of the wound she inflicted in destroying the identity of the jewels. He saw that, even after their explanation, she still supposed he was angry only because she had deceived him; and the discovery that she could not project herself into states of feeling on which so much of his inner life depended marked a new stage in their relation.

He was not thinking of all this as he sat beside Clare Van Degen; but it was part of the chronic disquietude which made him more alive to his cousin's sympathy, her shy unspoken understanding. After all, he and she were of the same blood and had the same traditions. She was light, frivolous, without strength of will or

depth of purpose; but she had the frankness of her foibles, and she would never have lied to him, or traded on his tenderness.

Clare's agitation gradually subsided, and she lapsed into a low-voiced mood which seemed like an answer to his secret thoughts. But she did not again sound the personal note, and they chatted quietly of commonplace things: of the dinner-dance at which they were presently to meet, of the costume she had chosen for the Driscoll fancy-ball, the recurring rumours of old Driscoll's financial embarrassment, and the mysterious personality of Elmer Moffatt, on whose movements Wall Street was beginning to fix a fascinated eye. When Ralph, the year after his marriage, had renounced his profession to go into partnership with a firm of real-estate agents, he had come in contact for the first time with the drama of "business," and when he could turn his attention from his own tasks he found a certain interest in watching the fierce interplay of its forces. In the down-town world he had heard things of Moffatt that seemed to single him out from the common herd of money-makers: anecdotes of his coolness, his lazy good-temper, the humorous detachment he preserved in the heat of conflicting interests; and his figure was enlarged by the mystery that hung about it—the fact that no one seemed to know whence he came, or how he had acquired the information which, for the moment, was making him so formidable.

"I should like to see him," Ralph said; "he must be a good specimen of the one of the few picturesque types we've got."

"Yes—it might be amusing to fish him out; but the most picturesque in Wall Street are generally the tamest in a drawing-room." Clare hesitated. "But doesn't Undine know him? I seem to remember seeing them somewhere together."

"Undine and Moffatt? Then *you* know him—you've met him?"

"Not actually met him—but he's been pointed out to me. It must have been some years ago—before he was talked about. Yes—it was one night at the theatre, just after you announced your engagement." He fancied her voice trembled slightly, as though she thought he might

notice her way of dating her memories. "You came into our box," she went on, "and I asked you the name of the red-faced man who was sitting next to Undine. You didn't know, but some one told us it was Moffatt."

Marvell was more struck by her tone than by what she was saying. "If Undine knows him it's odd she's never mentioned it," he answered indifferently.

The motor stopped at his door and Clare, as she held out her hand, turned a first full look on him.

"Why do you never come to see me? I miss you more than ever," she said, suddenly lowering her voice.

He pressed her hand without answering, but after the motor had rolled away he stood for a while on the pavement, looking after her.

When he entered the house he found the hall still dark and the small overfurnished drawing-room empty. The parlour-maid informed him that Mrs. Marvell had not yet come in, and he went upstairs to the nursery. But on the threshold the nurse met him with the whispered request not to make a noise, as it had been hard to quiet the boy after the afternoon's disappointment, and she had just succeeded in putting him to sleep.

Ralph stole down again to his own room and threw himself in the old college arm-chair in which, four years previously, he had sat the night out, dreaming of Undine. There was no room in the house for a study, and he had crowded into his narrow bed-room his prints and bookshelves, and the other relics of his early days. As he sat among them now the memory of that other night swept over him—the night when he had heard the "call"! Fool as he had been not to recognize its meaning then, he knew himself triply mocked in being, even now, at its mercy. It is the bitterest moment in the history of a sentimental relation when the empty cup still burns the lip that clings to it; and to that pass he had come. The flame of love that had played about his passion for his wife had died down to its embers; all the transfiguring hopes and illusions were gone, but they had left an unquenchable ache for her nearness, her smile, her touch. His life had come to be nothing but a long effort to win these

mercies by one concession after another: the sacrifice of his literary projects, the exchange of his profession for an uncongenial business, and the incessant struggle to earn the means to satisfy her increasing exactions. That was where the "call" had led him. . .

The clock struck eight, but it was useless to begin to dress till Undine came in, since her toilet always lasted more than an hour. He stretched himself out in his chair, reached for a pipe and took up the evening paper. His passing annoyance had died out; he was usually too tired after his day's work for such feelings to keep their edge long. But he was curious—disinterestedly curious—to know what explanation Undine would give him for being so late, and what excuse she would have invented for forgetting the little boy's birthday.

He read on till the clock struck half-past eight; then he stood up and sauntered to the window. The wide avenue below it was deserted; not a carriage or motor turned the corner around which he expected Undine to appear, and he looked idly in the opposite direction. There too the perspective was nearly empty, so empty that he singled out, a dozen blocks away, the blazing lamps of a large touring-car that was bearing furiously down the avenue from Morningside. As it drew nearer its speed gradually slackened, and he saw it hug the pavement and stop at his door. There was a lamp on the street corner, and by its light he recognized his wife as she sprang out of the car, and detected a familiar silhouette in her companion's fur-coated figure. The doorbell rang and the motor flew on while Undine ran up the steps.

Ralph went out on the landing. He saw her coming up softly and quickly, as if to reach her room unperceived; but when she caught sight of him she stopped, her head thrown back and the light in the staircase falling on her blown hair and glowing face.

As her cloak slipped back Ralph's first impression was that she was already dressed for the evening; then he remembered that she had been sitting for her portrait, and that the dress she wore was the one in which the artist was painting her.

"Well?" she said, smiling up at him.

"They waited for you all the afternoon in Washington Square—the boy never had his birthday," he answered.

Her colour deepened, but she instantly rejoined: "Why, what happened? Why didn't the nurse take him?"

"You said you were coming to fetch him, so she waited."

"But I telephoned——"

He said to himself: "Is *that* the lie?" and answered: "Where from?"

"Why, the studio, of course——" She flung her cloak open, as if to attest her veracity. "The sitting lasted longer than usual—there was something about the dress that he couldn't get right—and he begged me to stay——"

"But I thought he was giving a tea."

"A tea? He had tea afterward; he always does. And he asked some people in to see my portrait. That detained me too. I didn't know they were coming, and when they turned up I couldn't rush away at once. It would have looked as if I didn't like the picture." She paused and they gave each other a searching simultaneous glance. "Who told you it was a tea?" she asked.

"Clare Van Degen. I saw her at my mother's."

"So you weren't unconsolated after all——!"

He frowned. "The nurse didn't get any message from you. My people were awfully disappointed; and the poor boy has cried his eyes out."

"Dear me! What a fuss! But, I couldn't tell, could I, that my message wouldn't be delivered? Everything always happens to put me in the wrong with your family."

With a little air of injured pride she started to go to her room; but he put out a hand to detain her.

"You've just come from the studio?"

"Yes. Is it very late? I must go and dress. We're dining with the Ellings, you know."

"Yes, I know. . . How did you come home? In a cab?" he continued, reddening.

She faced him limpidly. "No; I couldn't find one that would bring me—the usual story!—so Peter gave me a lift, like an angel. I'm blown to bits. He had his open car."

Her colour still burned high, and Ralph noticed that her lower lip twitched a little. He had led her to the point they had reached solely in order to be able to say: "If you're straight from the studio, how was it that I saw you coming down from Morningside?"

Unless he asked her that there would be no object in his cross-examination, and he would have sacrificed his pride without purpose. But suddenly he felt that he could not go on. As they stood there face to face, almost touching, she became something immeasurably alien and far off, and the question died on his lips.

"Well—is that all?" she asked, recovering her self-possession.

"Yes; you'd better go and dress," he answered, turning back to his room.

XVI

THE turnings of life seldom show a sign-post; or rather, though the sign is always there, it is usually placed some distance back, like the notices that give warning of a bad hill or a level railway-crossing.

Ralph Marvell, pondering upon this, reflected that for him the sign had been set, more than three years earlier, in an Italian ilex-grove. That day his life had brimmed over—so he had put it at the time. He saw now that it had brimmed over indeed: brimmed to the extent of leaving the cup empty, or rather of uncovering the dregs beneath the nectar. Why it was he could not yet say; but he knew he should never hereafter look at his wife's hand without remembering something he had read in it that day. Its surface-language had been sweet enough, sweet to his heart as to his lips; but under the rosy lines he had seen the warning letters.

Since then he had been walking with a ghost: the miserable ghost of his illusion. Only he had somehow vivified, coloured, substantiated it, by the force of his own great need—as a man might breathe a semblance of life into a dear drowned body that he cannot give up for dead. All this came to him with aching distinctness the morning after his talk with his wife on the stairs. He had accused himself, in midnight retrospect, of having failed to press home his conclusion because he dared not face the truth. But he knew this was not

the case. It was not the truth he feared, it was another lie. If he had foreseen a chance of her saying: "Yes, I was with Peter Van Degen, and for the reason you think," he would have put it to the touch, stood up to the blow like a man; but he knew she would never say that. She would go on eluding and doubling, watching him as he watched her; and at that game she was certain to beat him in the end.

Once, on their way home from the Elling dinner, this certainty had become so insufferable that it nearly escaped him in the cry: "You needn't watch me—I shall never watch you!" But he had held his peace, foreseeing that she would not understand. How little, indeed, she ever understood, had been made clear to him when, the same night on their return home, he had followed her upstairs through the sleeping house. She had gone on ahead of him while he stayed below to lock the door and put out the lights, and he had supposed her to be already in her room when he reached the upper landing; but she stood there waiting for him, in the precise spot where he had waited for her a few hours earlier. She had shone her vividest at dinner, with the revolving brilliancy that collective approval always struck from her; and the glow of it still hung on her as she stood there in the dimness, her shining cloak dropped from her white shoulders.

"Ralphie—" she began as he passed her, with a touch that fell softly on his arm.

He stopped, and she pulled him about so that their faces were close, and he saw her lips shaped for a kiss. Every curve of her face sought him, from the sweep of the narrowed eyelids to the dimpling lines that played away from her smile. His eye received the picture with precision; but for the first time it did not pass into his veins. He was not conscious of resentment or revolt, but only of a kind of blank absence of feeling. It was as if he had been struck with a subtle blindness that permitted images to give their colour values to the eye but communicated nothing to the mind.

"Good-night," he said, as he passed on to his room.

When a man felt—or ceased to feel—in that way about a woman, he was surely

in a position to deal with his case objectively. This came to Ralph as the joyless solace of the morning. At last the bandage was off and he should see clear. And what did he see? Only the uselessness of driving his wife to subterfuges which his own state of mind made no longer necessary. Was Van Degen her lover? Probably not—the suspicion died as it rose. She would not take more risks than she could help, and it was admiration, not passion, that she wanted. She wanted to enjoy herself, and her conception of enjoyment was publicity, promiscuity—the band, the banners, the crowd, the close contact of covetous impulses, and the sense of walking among them in cool security. Any personal entanglement might mean “bother,” and bother was the thing she most abhorred. Probably, as the queer formula went, his “honour” was safe: he could count on the letter of her fidelity. At the moment the conviction meant no more to him than if he had been assured of the honesty of the first stranger he met in the street. A stranger—that was what she had always been to him. So malleable outwardly, she had remained insensible to the touch of the heart.

These thoughts accompanied Ralph on his way to his office the next morning. Then, at the first contact with the material routine of life, the feeling of strangeness lessened. He was back at his daily task—nothing tangible was altered. He was there for the same purpose as yesterday: to make money for his wife and child. The woman he had turned from on the stairs a few hours earlier was still his wife and the mother of little Paul Marvell. She was an inherent part of his life: the inner disruption had not resulted in any outward upheaval. And with the sense of inevitableness there came a sudden wave of pity. Poor Undine! She was what the gods had made her—a creature of skin-deep reactions, a mote in the beam of pleasure. He had no desire to “preach down” such heart as she had—he only felt a stronger wish to reach it, teach it, move it to something of the pity that filled his own. They were fellow-victims in the *noyade* of marriage, but if they ceased to struggle against each other perhaps the drowning would be easier for both. . . . Meanwhile the first of the month

was at hand, with its usual formidable batch of bills; and there was no time to think of any struggle less pressing than that connected with paying them. . . .

Undine had been surprised, and a little disconcerted, at her husband’s quiet acceptance of the birthday incident. Since the resetting of her bridal ornaments—the small precious Dagonet heirlooms—the relations between Washington Square and West End Avenue had been more and more strained; and the silent disapproval of the Marvell ladies was more irritating to her than open recrimination. Undine knew how keenly Ralph must feel her last slight to his family, and she had been frightened when she guessed that he had seen her returning with Van Degen. He must have been watching from the window, since, credulous as he always was, he evidently had a reason for not believing her when she told him she had come from the studio. There was therefore something both puzzling and ominous in his silence; and she made up her mind that it must be explained or else cajoled away.

These thoughts disturbed her on her way to the Elling dinner; but once there they fled like ghosts before light and laughter. She had never been more open to the suggestions of immediate enjoyment. At last she had reached the envied triumphant situation of the pretty woman with whom society must reckon, and if she had only had the means to live up to her position she would have been quite content with life, with herself and her husband. She still thought Ralph “sweet” when she was not bored by his good advice or exasperated by his inability to pay her bills. The question of money was what really stood between them; and now that this was momentarily disposed of by Van Degen’s offer she looked at Ralph more kindly—she even felt a return of her first vague affection for him. Everybody could see that Clare Van Degen was “gone” on him, and Undine always liked to know that what belonged to her was coveted by others.

Her reassurance had been completed by the news she had heard at the Elling dinner—the published fact of Harmon B. Driscoll’s unexpected victory. The Ararat investigation had been mysteriously

stopped—quashed, in the language of the law—and Elmer Moffatt was “turned down,” as Van Degen (who sat next to her) expressed it.

“I don’t believe we’ll ever hear of that gentleman again,” he said contemptuously; and their eyes crossed in a flash of intelligence as she exclaimed: “Then they’ll give the fancy-ball after all?”

“I should have given you one anyhow—shouldn’t you have liked that as well?”

“Oh, you can give me one too!” she returned with a laugh; and he bent closer to say: “By Jove, I will—and anything else you want.”

But on the way home her fears revived. There was certainly something unnatural about Ralph’s indifference. He had not returned to the subject of Paul’s disappointment, had not even asked her to write a word of excuse to his mother. Van Degen’s way of looking at her at dinner—he was incapable of fine gradations of glance—had made it plain that the favour she had accepted would in future involve her being more conspicuously in his company (though she was still resolved that it should be on just such terms as she chose); and it would be inconceivably awkward if, at this juncture, Ralph should suddenly turn suspicious and secretive.

Undine, hitherto, had found more benefits than drawbacks in her marriage; but now the tie began to gall. It was hard to be criticized for every grasp at opportunity by a man so avowedly unable to do the reaching for her! Ralph had gone into business in order to make more money; but it was clear that the “more” would never be much, and that it was not in him to achieve the quick rise to affluence which was man’s natural tribute to woman’s merits. Undine felt herself trapped, deceived; and it was intolerable that, at such a crisis, the agent of her disillusionment should constitute himself the critic of her conduct.

Her annoyance, however, died out with her apprehension. Ralph, the morning after the Elling dinner, went his way as usual, and after nerving herself for the explosion which did not come she set down his indifference to the dulling effect of “business.” No wonder poor women whose husbands were always “down-

town” had to look elsewhere for sympathy and distraction! Van Degen’s cheque helped to calm her fears, and the weeks whirled on toward the Driscoll ball.

The ball was as brilliant as she had hoped, and her own part in it as thrilling as a page from one of the “society novels” with which she had been used to cheat the monotony of Apex days. She had little time for reading now: every hour was packed with what she would have called life, and the intensity of her sensations culminated on that triumphant evening. What could be more delightful than to feel that, while all the women envied her dress, the men did not so much as look at it? Their admiration was all for herself, and her beauty deepened under it as flowers take a warmer colour in the rays of sunset. Only Van Degen’s glance weighed on her a little too heavily. Was it possible that he might become a “bother” less negligible than those he had relieved her of? Undine was not greatly alarmed—she still had full faith in her powers of self-defense; but she disliked to feel the least crease in the smooth surface of existence. She had always been what her parents described as “sensitive.”

As the winter passed, material anxieties began once more to assail her. In the first thrill of liberation produced by Van Degen’s gift she had been imprudent—had launched into fresh expenses. Not that she accused herself of extravagance: she had done nothing that was not really necessary. The drawing-room, for instance, cried out to be “done over,” and Popple, who had a genius for decoration, had shown her, with a few strokes of his pencil, how easily it might be transformed into a French “period” room, all wavy lines and Cupids: just the setting for a pretty woman and his own portrait of her. But Undine, still hopeful of leaving West End Avenue, had heroically resisted the suggestion and contented herself with the renewal of the curtains and carpet, and the purchase of some fragile gilt chairs which, as she told Ralph, would be “so much to the good” when they moved—the explanation, as she made it, seemed an additional proof of her thrift and foresight.

Partly as a result of these exertions she had a “nervous breakdown” toward the

middle of the winter, and her physician having ordered massage and a daily drive, it became necessary to secure Mrs. Heeny's daily attendance and to engage a motor by the month. Other unforeseen expenses—the bills, that, at such crises, seem to “run up” without visible impulsion—were suddenly augmented by a severe illness of little Paul's: a long costly illness, with three nurses and frequent consultations. During these days Ralph's anguish drove him to what seemed to Undine foolish excesses of expenditure. When the boy began to get better, the doctors advised a few weeks of country air, and Ralph at once hired a small house at Tuxedo. Undine of course accompanied her son to the country; but she spent only the Sundays with him, running up to town during the week to be with poor Ralph, as she explained. This arrangement necessitated the keeping up of two households, and even for so short a time the strain on Ralph's purse was severe. So it came about that the bill for the fancy-dress was still unpaid, and Undine left to wonder distractedly where Van Degen's money had gone. That Van Degen seemed also to wonder was becoming unpleasantly apparent: as an investment his cheque had evidently not brought in the return he expected, and he put the fact to her rather roundly one day when he motored down to lunch at Tuxedo.

They were sitting, after luncheon, in the low-ceilinged cottage drawing-room to which Undine had adapted her usual background of cushions, bric-a-brac and hot-house flowers—since one must make one's setting “home-like,” however little one's personal habits happened to correspond with that particular effect. Undine, conscious of the intimate charm of her *mise-en-scène*, and of the recovered freshness and bloom which put her in harmony with it, had never been more sure of her power to keep her friend in the desired state of adoring submission. But Peter, as he grew more adoring, became less submissive; and there came a moment when she needed all her wits to save the situation from disaster. It was easy enough to rebuff him, the easier as his physical proximity always roused in her a vague instinct of resistance; but it was

hard so to temper the rebuff with promise that the game of suspense should still delude him. He put it to her at last, standing squarely before her, his batrachian sallowness unpleasantly flushed, and primitive man looking out of the eyes from which a frock-coated gentleman usually pined at her.

“Look here—the installment plan's all right; but ain't you a bit behind even on that?” (She had rather brusquely eluded a nearer approach.) “Anyhow, I think I'd rather let the interest accumulate for a while. This is good-bye till I get back from Europe.”

The announcement took her by surprise. “Europe? Why, when are you sailing?”

“On the first of April: good day for a fool to acknowledge his folly. I'm beaten, and I'm running away.”

She sat looking down, her hand absently occupied with the twist of pearls about her neck. She saw in a flash the peril of this abrupt departure. Once off on the *Sorceress*, Van Degen was lost to her—the power of old associations would prevail. Yet if she were as “nice” to him as he asked—“nice” enough to keep him at her side—the end might not be much more to her advantage. Hitherto she had let herself drift on the current of their adventure, but she now saw what port she had half-unconsciously been trying to make. If she had striven so hard to hold him, had “played” him with such patience and skill, it was for something more than her passing amusement and convenience: for a purpose the more tenaciously cherished that she had not yet dared name it to herself. In the light which this discovery threw along her path she instantly saw the need of feigning complete indifference.

“Ah, you happy man! It's good-bye indeed, then,” she threw back at him, lifting a smile to his frown.

“Oh, you'll turn up in Paris later, I suppose—to get your things for Newport,” he suggested.

“Paris? Newport? They're not on my map! When Ralph can get away we shall probably go to the Adirondacks for the boy. I hope I shan't need Paris clothes there? It doesn't matter, at any rate,” she ended, laughing, “because nobody I care about will see me.”

Van Degen echoed her laugh. "Oh, come—*tête à tête* with Ralph?"

She looked down with a slight increase of colour. "I oughtn't to have said that, ought I? But the fact is I'm unhappy—and a little hurt——"

"Unhappy? Hurt?" He was at her side again at once. "Tell me what's wrong," he entreated.

She lifted her eyes with a grave look. "I thought you'd be sorrier to leave me."

"Oh, it won't be for long—it needn't be, you know." He softened perceptibly as he gave back her gaze. "It's damnable, the way you're tied down, imprisoned. Fancy rotting all summer in the Adirondacks! Why should a woman like you stand it? You oughtn't to be bound for life by a girl's mistake."

She was looking down again, and the lashes trembled slightly on her cheek. "Aren't we all bound by our mistakes—we women? Don't let us talk of such things! Ralph would never let me go abroad without him." She paused, and then, with a quick upward sweep of her lids: "After all, it's better it should be good-bye—since I'm paying for another mistake in being so unhappy at your going."

"Another mistake? Why do you call it a mistake?"

"Because I've misunderstood you—or you me." She continued to smile at him a little wistfully. "And some things are best mended by a break."

He met her smile with a loud sigh—she could feel him in the meshes again. "Is it to be a break between us?"

"Haven't you just said so? Anyhow, it might as well be, since we shan't be in the same place again for months and months."

The frock-coated gentleman once more languished from his eyes: she thought she trembled on the edge of victory. "Hang it," he broke out, "you ought to have a change—you look awfully pulled down, you know. Can't you coax your mother to run over to Paris with you? Ralph couldn't be brute enough to object to that."

She shook her head doubtfully. "I don't believe she could afford it, even if I could persuade her to leave father. You know father hasn't done very well

lately: I shouldn't like to ask him for the money."

"You're so confoundedly proud!" He was edging nearer. "It would all be so easy if you'd only be a little fond of me. . ."

She froze to her sofa-end at once. "We women can't repair our mistakes. Don't make me unhappier by reminding me of mine."

"Oh, nonsense! There's nothing cash won't do. Why won't you trust me to straighten things out for you?"

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 business-man had suddenly replaced the pining gentleman at the window.

"Hang it—so am I!" he returned with a laugh; and Undine understood that in the last issue he was still the stronger of the two.

XVII

NOTHING was bitterer to her than to confess to herself the failure of her personal power; but her last talk with Van Degen had taught her a lesson almost worth the price of that abasement. She saw the mistake she had made in taking money from him, and understood that if she drifted into repeating the mistake her future would be irretrievably wrecked. What she wanted was not a hand-to-mouth existence of precarious intrigue, of nervous plotting and contriving: she told herself that to a woman with her gifts the privileges of life should come openly. Already in her short experience she had seen enough of the women who sacrifice future security for immediate gratification, and she meant to lay solid foundations before she began to build the light superstructure of enjoyment.

Nevertheless it was galling to see Van Degen leave, and to know that for the time he had broken away from her. On a

nature as insensible as his to the spells of memory, the visible and tangible would always be the influences to prevail. If she could have been with him again in Paris, where, in the shining spring days, every sight and sound ministered to such influences, she was sure she could have regained her hold. And the sense of frustration was intensified by the fact that every one she knew was to be there: her potential rivals were already crowding the east-bound steamers. New York was a desert, and Ralph's seeming unconsciousness of the fact increased her resentment. She had had but one chance at Europe since her marriage, and that had been wasted through her husband's unaccountable perversity. It was maddening to know in what packed hours of Paris and London they had paid for their empty weeks in Italy.

Meanwhile the months of the New York spring stretched out before her in all their social vacancy to the measureless blank of a summer in the Adirondacks. In her girlhood she had plumbed the dim depths of such summers; but then at least she had been sustained by the hope of bringing some capture to the surface. Now she knew better: there were no "finds" for her in that direction. The people she wanted would be at Newport or in Europe, and she was too resolutely bent on a definite object, too sternly animated by her father's business instinct, to turn aside in quest of casual distractions.

The chief difficulty in the way of her attaining any distant end had always been her reluctance to plod through the intervening stretches of dulness and privation. She had begun to see this, but she could not always master the weakness: never had she stood in greater need of Mrs. Heeny's "Go slow, Undine!" Her imagination was incapable of long flights. She could not cheat her impatience with the mirage of far-off satisfactions and for the moment present and future seemed equally void. But her desire to go to Europe and to rejoin the little New York world that was rapidly re-forming itself in London and Paris was fortified by reasons which seemed forcible enough to justify an appeal to her father.

She went to his office to plead her case, fearing Mrs. Spragg's intervention if she

were present. Mr. Spragg had of late been overworked, and the strain was beginning to tell on his health. Undine knew he had never quite regained, in New York, the financial security of his Apex days. Since he had changed his base of operations his affairs had followed an uncertain course, and rumours had reached her that his breach with his old political ally, the Representative Rolliver who had seen him through the muddiest reaches of the Pure Water move, was not unconnected with his failure to get a solid footing in Wall Street. But all this was vague and unintelligible to her. Even had "business" been less of a mystery, she was too much absorbed in her own affairs to project herself into her father's case; and she thought she was sacrificing enough to delicacy of feeling in sparing him the "bother" of Mrs. Spragg's opposition.

He always listened to her with the same mild patience; but the long habit of "managing" him had made her, in his own language, "discount" this tolerance, and when she had ceased to speak her heart throbbed with suspense as he leaned back, twirling an invisible tooth-pick under his discoloured moustache. Presently he raised a hand to stroke the limp beard into which the moustache merged its sallow edges; then he absently groped for the Masonic emblem that had lost itself in one of the hollows of his depleted waistcoat.

He seemed to fish his answer from the same rusty depths, for as his fingers closed about the trinket he said: "Yes, the heated term is trying in New York. That's why the Fresh Air Fund pulled my last dollar out of me last week."

Undine stirred impatiently: there was nothing more irritating, in these encounters with her father, than his inveterate habit of opening the discussion with a joke.

"I wish you'd understand that I'm serious, father. I've never been strong since the baby was born, and I need a change. But it's not only that: there are other reasons—more important reasons—for my wanting to go."

He held to his mild tone of banter. "I never knew you short on reasons, Undie. Trouble is you don't always know other people's when you see 'em."

Undine's lips tightened. "I know your reasons when I see them, father: I've heard them often enough. The difference is that in this case you can't know mine because I haven't told you—not the real ones."

"Jehoshaphat! I thought they were all real as long as you had a use for them."

Experience had taught her that under such protracted trifling he usually concealed an exceptional vigour of resistance, and the suspicion urged her to strong measures.

"My reasons are all real enough," she said gravely; "but there's one more serious than the others."

Mr. Spragg's brows began to lower. "More bills?"

"No." She stretched out a gloved hand and began to finger the dusty objects on his desk. "I mean I'm unhappy at home."

"Unhappy—!" His quick movement overturned the gorged waste-paper basket and shot a shower of paper across the grimy rug to her feet. He stooped to restore the basket to its place; then he turned his slow fagged eyes on his daughter. "Why, he worships the ground you walk on, Undie."

She coloured a little. "That's not always a reason, for a woman—" It was the answer she would have given to Pople or Van Degen, but she understood in an instant the mistake of thinking it would make an impression on her father. In the atmosphere of sentimental casuistry to which she had become accustomed, she had forgotten that Mr. Spragg's private rule of conduct was as simple as his business morality was complicated.

Heglar glared at her under thrust-out brows. "It isn't a reason, isn't it? I can seem to remember the time when you used to think it was a whole carload of white-wash."

Her blush turned to a bright red, and her own brows were levelled at his above her stormy steel-grey eyes. The sense of her blunder made her angrier with him, and more ruthless.

"I can't expect you to understand—you never *have*, you or mother, when it came to my feelings. I suppose some people are born sensitive—I can't imagine anybody'd *choose* to be so. Because I've

been too proud to complain you've taken it for granted that I was perfectly happy. But my marriage was a mistake from the beginning; and Ralph feels just as I do about it. His people hate me, they've always hated me; and he always looks at everything as they do. They've never forgiven me for his having had to go into business—with their aristocratic ideas they look down on a man who works for his living as you do. Of course it's all right for *you* to do it, because you're not a Marvell or a Dagonet; but they think Ralph ought to just lie back and let you support the baby and me."

This time she had found the right note: she knew it by the tightening of her father's slack facial muscles and the sudden straightening of his back.

"By George, he pretty near does!" he exclaimed, bringing down his fist on the desk. "They haven't been taking it out of you about that, have they?"

"They don't fight fair enough to say so. They just egg him on to turn against me. They only consented to his marrying me because they thought you were so crazy about the match you'd give us everything, and he'd have nothing to do but sit at home and write books."

Mr. Spragg emitted a derisive groan. "From what I hear of the amount of business he's doing I guess he could keep the Poet's Corner going right along. I suppose the old man was right—he hasn't got it in him to make money."

"Of course not; he wasn't brought up to it, and in his heart of hearts he's ashamed of having to do it. He told me it was killing a little more of him every day."

Mr. Spragg groaned again. "Do they back him up in that kind of talk?"

"They back him up in everything. Their ideas are all different from ours. They look down on us—can't you see that? Can't you guess how they treat me from the way they've acted to you and mother?"

Her father met this last appeal with a puzzled stare. "The way they've acted to me and mother? Why, we never so much as set eyes on them."

"That's it, that's it," Undine insisted. "I don't believe they've even called on mother this year, have they? Last year

they just left their cards without asking. And why do you suppose they never invite you to dine? In their set lots of people older than you and mother dine out every night—society's full of them. They're ashamed to have you meet their friends: that's the reason. They're ashamed to have it known that Ralph married an Apex girl, and that you and mother haven't always had your own servants and carriages; and Ralph's ashamed of it too, now he's got over being crazy about me. If he was free I believe he'd turn round to-morrow and marry that Ray girl his mother's saving up for him."

Mr. Spragg listened with a heavy brow and pushed-out lip. His daughter's outburst seemed at last to have roused in him a momentary faint resentment. After she had ceased he remained silent, twisting an inky pen-handle between his fingers; then he said: "I guess mother and I can worry along without having Ralph's relatives drop in; but I'd like to make it clear to them that if you came from Apex your income came from there too. I presume they'd be sorry if Ralph was left to support you on *his*."

She brightened at the perception that she had scored in the first part of the argument, though every watchful nerve reminded her that the most difficult stage was still ahead.

"Oh, they're willing enough he should take your money—that's only natural, they think."

A chuckle sounded deep down under Mr. Spragg's loose collar. "There seems to be practical unanimity on that point," he observed. "But I don't see," he continued, jerking round his bushy brows on her, "how going to Europe is going to help you out of all this."

Undine leaned closer so that her lowered voice should reach him. "Can't you understand that, knowing how they all feel about me—and how Ralph feels—I'd give almost anything to get away?"

Her father looked at her compassionately. "I guess most of us feel that once in a way when we're young, Undine. Later on you'll see going away ain't much use when you've got to turn round and come back."

But she nodded at him with drawn-up mysterious lips, like a child in possession of some portentous secret.

"That's just it—that's the reason I'm so crazy to go; just because it *might* mean I wouldn't ever have to come back," she whispered, laying a persuasive caress on his hand.

He drew away with a jerk of amazement. "Not come back? What on earth are you talking about?"

"It might mean that I could get free—begin over again . . . have another chance."

He had pushed his seat back violently as she bent to him, and he interrupted her by striking his outspread palm on the arm of the chair.

"For the Lord's sake, Undine—do you know what you're saying?"

"Oh, yes, I know." She met his look with a confident smile. "If I can get away soon—go straight over to Paris . . . there's some one there who'd do anything . . . who *could* do anything . . . if I was free . . ."

Mr. Spragg's hands continued to grasp his chair-arms. "Good God, Undine Marvell—are you sitting there in your sane senses and talking to me of what you could do if you were *free*?"

Their glances met with a shock which held them fast in a minute of speechless communion. Undine did not shrink from her father's eyes and when she lowered hers it seemed to be only because there was nothing more left for them to say.

"I know just what I could do if I were free. I could marry the right man," she answered boldly.

He met her with a sound of helpless derision. "The right man? The right man? Haven't you had enough of trying for him yet?"

As he spoke the door-handle turned and he broke off abruptly.

The stenographer appeared on the threshold, and above her shoulder Undine perceived the ingratiating grin of Elmer Moffatt.

"A little farther lend thy guiding hand"—but I guess I can go the rest of the way alone," he said, insinuating himself across the threshold with an airy gesture of dismissal; then he turned to Mr. Spragg and Undine.

"I agree entirely with Mrs. Marvell—and I'm happy to have the opportunity of

telling her so," he proclaimed, holding his hand out gallantly.

Undine rose with a laugh. "It sounded like old times, I suppose—you thought father and I were quarrelling? But we never quarrel any more: he always agrees with me." She smiled at Mr. Spragg, and then turned her shining eyes on Moffatt.

"I wish that treaty had been signed a few years sooner!" the latter rejoined with his air of jocose familiarity.

Undine had not met him since her marriage, and of late the adverse turn of his fortunes had carried him quite beyond her thoughts. But his actual presence was always vaguely stimulating, and even through her self-absorption she was struck by his air of almost defiant well-being. He did not look like a man who has been beaten; or rather he looked like a man who does not know when he is beaten; and his eye had the same gleam of mocking confidence that had carried him unabashed through his lowest hours at Apex.

"I presume you're here to see me on business?" Mr. Spragg enquired, rising from his chair with a glance that seemed to ask his daughter's silence.

"Why, yes, Senator," rejoined Moffatt, who was given, in jocular moments, to bestowing sounding titles on his interlocutors. "At least I'm here to ask you a little question that may lead to some business."

Mr. Spragg crossed the office and held open the door. "Step this way, please," he said, guiding Moffatt out before him, though the latter hung back to exclaim: "No family secrets, Mrs. Marvell—anyone can turn the fierce white light on *me*!"

The closing of the door on the two men carried Undine back to her own preoccupations. It had not struck her as incongruous that Moffatt should have business relations with her father, and she was even a little surprised that the latter should still treat him with such coldness. But she had no time to give to such reflections. Her own situation was too throbbingly present to her. She moved restlessly about the office, listening to the rise and fall of the two voices on the other side of the partition without once wondering what they were discussing.

What should she say to her father when he came back—what argument was most likely to prevail with him? Was it possible that he really had no money to give her? If that were the case, she was imprisoned fast—Van Degen was lost to her, and the old life must go on interminably. . . In her nervous paces she paused before the small blotched looking-glass that hung in a corner of the office, under a steel engraving of Daniel Webster. Even that defective surface could not disfigure her, and she drew fresh hope from the sight of her beauty. Her few weeks of ill-health had given her features subtler surfaces and a finer pencilling, and she was handsomer than before her marriage. No, Van Degen was not lost to her yet! From narrowed lids to parted lips her whole face was rippled over by a smile that was like refracted sunlight. He was not lost to her while she could smile like that! Besides, even if her father had no money, there were always mysterious ways of "raising" it—in the old Apex days he had often boasted of such feats. At the thought her face changed again. The lids widened trustfully over dancing eyes and this time the smile that flowed up to them was as crystalline as a child's. That was the way her father liked her to look at him. . .

The door opened, and she heard Mr. Spragg saying behind her: "No, sir, I won't—that's final."

He came forward with a brooding face and lowered himself heavily into his chair. It was plain that the talk between the two men had had an abrupt ending. Undine looked at her father and a vague flicker of curiosity woke in her. Certainly it was an odd coincidence that Moffatt should have called while she was there. . .

"What did he want, father?" she asked, dropping her voice, and glancing back toward the door.

Mr. Spragg mumbled his invisible toothpick. "Oh, just another of his wild-cat schemes—some real-estate deal he's in."

"Why did he come to *you* about it?"

He looked away from her, fumbling among the letters on the desk. "Guess he'd tried everybody else first. He'd go and ring the devil's front-door bell if he thought he could get anything out of him."

"I suppose he did himself a lot of harm by testifying in the Ararat investigation?"

"Yes, *sir*—he's down and out this time."

He uttered the words with a certain satisfaction. His daughter did not answer, and they sat silent, facing each other across the littered desk. Under their brief talk about Elmer Moffatt currents

of rapid intelligence seemed to vibrate between them. Suddenly Undine leaned over the desk, her arms stretched out, her eyes widening trustfully, and the crystalline smile flowing up to them.

"Father," she broke out, "I did what you wanted that one time, anyhow—won't you listen to me and help me out now?"

(To be continued.)

"TO LIE IN THE LEW"

By Margaret Vandegrift

"To lie in the lew," that is, to leeward of a hedge, is the South Country ideal of peace, of lassitude; and a peculiar stillness inhabits in the lew, such as no other resting-place can give you. . . . The great winds fall back baffled from that concrete quietude; only the minute voices of bees and grasshoppers and field-mice are to hear, and the unruffled melody of birds.

—From "*The Hedge*."

TIME was when I marched bravely on the dusty highway
With those who carried banners and had great things to do;
And time was I travelled steadily along the quiet by-way.
Now—I lie in the lew.

I fell out of line long before they took the city
To which we all were marching, for too well I knew
That the lame and the lazy evoke contempt, not pity—
But—to lie in the lew!

Not lame enough, good Lord, for that—I still can travel;
Let me find a quiet path that in time will lead me through;
Grass-path, or clay-path, or even path of gravel—
But—to lie in the lew!

So I found the quiet path, and, not wholly discontented,
I kept along in hope, for the end I thought I knew.
But who shall dare to think he his fate has circumvented?
It led to the lew!

Cool the grass, and soft, and the great hedge throws a shadow;
And the road is out of sight, almost out of hearing, too;
And the sounds are the voices of a peaceful summer meadow,
As I lie in the lew.

And should a thankful heart be singing lauds and praises
That the chance to fight is gone, that there's nothing left to do?
Tell me, oh million hearts that this dreadful life amazes,
With all its unfulfilments, its doubts and fears and crazes—
For my heart is very cold, and it is not singing praises
As I lie in the lew.