

## MUTABILITY

### I



HE strong sweet south-wester, fresh and vigorous as a god, after its journey across the Channel which flashed blue and white to the horizon and broke in chalky waves at the foot of the down, flung the girl's hair, loose and wet from the sea, across her chin and throat, fluttering its straggling gold into her eyes. The man who lay at her feet watched her with admiration and desire as she stood sideways to the wind that threatened to blow the sailor-cap on her head, a hundred yards down the grassy slope into the discoloured breakers. They had been together a good deal since the day when Algernon Deepdale—a young man well known to exist only on his expectations and an aunt—came to the hotel at which the Grays had been staying, and had recognized her as the partner of a dance some weeks back. Her friendship had made the time go rapidly, and he had thrown up an invitation in order to stay longer in the seaside town which her presence alone made endurable. Hers was an exceptional beauty, but it was not her only charm. She was possessed of an intelligence not very common among women, nor was ever at a loss for ideas or words. She talked with her eyes and hands as well as her lips, as if the momentary thought that she expressed moved her body to the cadence of her words, her gestures giving strength to the phrase. She was a living being, thought Deepdale, contrasting her mentally with the lack of animation and ideas which is the portion of the majority. Moreover, she was fond of being well dressed, as even the French muslin blouse tied at throat and waist with an unobtainable vieux-rose-colour ribbon attested. His eyes followed her every movement, and a little tempest of desire went through him, as his gaze at last unconsciously attracted her and she turned with a smile.

"The wind is too strong," she said, as she sat down, throwing her hair from her face and pulling her skirts over her ankles.

"Helen, will you marry me?" he said, taking his cigarette out of his mouth, and looking up into her eyes.

"*Apropos* of what? How dreadfully abrupt you are!" she replied.

"*Apropos* of my thoughts and in logical sequence. May I have an answer?"

"Why do you ask me that?" she answered, somewhat awkwardly.

"For several reasons," he replied. "First, because I am going away this afternoon: then because I should like you to be my wife; and the third reason I think you have known for some time."

"I am so sorry," she said, gently. "It is quite impossible."

"I don't see why," he answered.

"It is quite impossible," she continued. "My people would be dead against it, and I am much too extravagant for you. Besides, I don't want to marry anyone."

"Do you not care for me at all, Helen?" he asked.

"I like you very well," she replied, "but how long have I known you? Three months? In another three you will have forgotten me."

"You mean you don't like me enough to marry me? Is that it?"

She was silent. Then suddenly she said:

"Why cannot you be patient? You have only known me for this little time and yet you want everything or nothing, at once."

"Oh no, not at once. I would wait for you, if there was any chance. Is there, Helen?"

She shook her head.

"How can I tell? There is none now," she said.

"But if there was?" he persisted.

"I can't say. Forget me. It will be much better. There can be no use in looking forward for a year."

"I think there would be—for me," he answered.

She laughed lightly.

"How long have you thought of me like this?" she asked.

"Since the first time I saw you," he said, "that afternoon, when it was so dark I could barely make out your face, but I fell in love with your mouth, the loveliest mouth in the world."

A smile came back to her face. The flag on the coastguard's cottage flapped in the wind, and, far below, the blue waves curled silently into innumerable points of foam. A steamer, infinitesimal though it seemed, left a track of pale smoke behind it, and the sun shone joyously over all.

"How sweet it is," he said, yielding himself up to the sensuous delight of summer centering in the beauty of the girl at his side. "Let me look at it all once more, since I must leave it all to-day. How you are to be envied, you

who remain. And I have to go back to that intolerable, dusty, sultry, horrible town!"

He turned to look at the downs behind, and turned back again.

"No, there is nothing like the sea," he continued. "Oh, Helen, if I could take back some hope of you!"

"You are so impatient!" she said. "You must wait and see if there is a chance. I don't suppose there will be. You had better forget me altogether. You can easily."

"Will you decide which I shall do?" he asked.

"No, it is for you to decide."

"I shall wait then," he answered. "You will not promise, Helen?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "We must go back," she added, abruptly. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," he said, springing up and stretching his hands to her. She took them and rose.

"We are good friends," he asked, still holding her hands. She smiled in his eyes with a "Yes."

"You are not angry?" she asked. "You won't be bitter against me, will you? I should be so sorry."

"Bitter?" he repeated. "No, certainly not. How could I be?"

"Don't be bitter about it," she continued, "I should hate to think that you could be angry with me."

"I can well promise you that," he said, bending his face towards hers. How beautiful she was, with her little round face, her exquisite mouth and her eyes! "And I shall not forget you. I shall wait."

She smiled, and then added more seriously:

"Don't wait for me. It would be foolish of you to give up anything for my sake. I can promise you nothing."

"You cannot prevent my hoping, can you?" he asked.

"I suppose not," she answered, as they turned down the hillside and rejoined their party without more delay.

## II

The chalky downs faded behind the train, and Deepdale found himself back again in the town which he imagined that he hated so much. In fact, it was desolate—with that lamentably seedy desolation which London wears for three months out of the twelve. Piccadilly without a well-dressed man or woman is

not a pleasant sight, and Deepdale reached his rooms near that thoroughfare in an exceedingly bad temper. His letters—including several bills and a note from Mrs. Westham to warn him that she was coming to see him immediately on his arrival—also displeased him.

Mrs. Westham was the only woman out of the innumerable women with whom he had had relations of some kind who was utterly devoted to him, and who therefore bored him beyond all others. Though their relationship was of long standing he hesitated to break it off, partly from the vanity of being so able to dominate her, and partly from the desire of causing her as little pain as possible. So long as he could keep her at a distance he was content, but when a meeting became inevitable it was for him an unpleasant experience. Fortunately she had her house to attend to, and he managed to arrange that his spare hours as a rule should not coincide with hers. Her husband was abroad for six months out of the year or her movements would have been even more restrained. But at last he found himself at the end of his patience. Let come what would, with the receipt of her note he determined to break off the affair altogether.

With his return to the everyday world of London, on the other hand, his attraction towards Helen Gray had speedily faded. He had almost forgotten the incident of the morning. At the bottom, he had been insincere in professing love for her. She was certainly beautiful, she would in all probability, as an only child, be fairly rich, and she was a woman he would be proud to have for his wife, for purposes of display at Ascot or the opera. Moreover, the gracious beauty of her form and face were a promise of deeper happiness to the man whom she could love. But he was not very deeply hurt, he thought, by her refusal, which, after all, was extremely sensible. His income of nine hundred a year would be mere poverty in marriage, and it was doubtful if he would have more for several years.

His man announcing Mrs. Westham disturbed his thoughts.

She came in hesitatingly. When the door had closed he kissed her, and drew a chair to the window. She turned up her veil.

“Good God!” he exclaimed, “how ill you look! What is the matter?”

Her face, which once had had a certain charm for him, was drawn and yellow. He would hardly have recognized her.

“I am ill,” she said, “but never mind that now. Are you glad to see me?” she asked, kissing his hands.

“Of course I am,” he answered.

“How changed you are, Algy,” she answered. “But you can’t help not

being as fond of me now as you were a year ago! I wonder why you have changed?"

It was the same scene he had been through before, over and over again. She always asked the same questions and he always made the same replies. She had very little tact, he thought! He was prepared for another unpleasant quarter of an hour, but he hoped that it would result in his being able to prevent its recurrence in the future.

"Who were the people you saw so much of while you were away?" she asked. "You never told me their names."

"The Grays," he answered, briefly.

"Oh!" she said. "It was that Gray girl who was talked about in connection with you. To think that I didn't know. I suppose you are engaged to her now?"

"I am not," he replied, coldly.

"Did you propose to her?"

"No."

"I don't believe you," she said. "Well, I am going, you don't want me. I will not bore you again." She choked a little. "You are not worth my love. I wonder if you will ever find a woman to love you as I have done. But I won't bore you again."

"Don't be a fool, Milly," he said. "Sit down."

"I told you that I would give you up when you found another woman," she continued, standing. "When I heard you talked about with that Gray girl I did not even feel jealous. I was so sure of you. But you are quite changed. Oh, God help me! Algy, how can I live without you?" she cried, as she sank back into the chair.

He leaned forward and stroked her hand.

"You don't even kiss me now!" she exclaimed, passionately, throwing back his caress. "And I had so much to tell you! Are you tired of me? Is that the truth?"

"No," he said, indifferently.

"It is," she retorted. "Yet even now I cannot see it. I love you too much to believe it. Tell me and let me know. Are you tired of me?"

At all events, it was his duty to hurt her as little as possible. "Of course, I am not," he answered. Then a thought struck him which made him look curiously at her. The same thought at that moment came uppermost in her mind, crushing out her misery for the time. She lay back in the chair and half closed her eyelids.

"There is one thing I wanted to tell you," she said, "I have a child!"

The announcement was not unforeseen, but it was a shock. To conceal the fact he flicked the end of his cigarette carefully into the grate before answering. Then he said:

"Are you quite sure now?"

She nodded. Her heart was beating a tattoo and she could barely speak.

"What an infernal complication!" he exclaimed, frowning, although a vague feeling of pride which appeared to him to be wholly stupid, but which he could not check, rose in him. "What are you going to do?"

"I shall have to kill myself," she replied. Why did he not throw himself at her feet, she thought, beseeching her not to do such a thing? He did not answer, but stared hard at the end of the cigarette, still frowning.

"I believe you would be glad if I did!" she exclaimed. Then as her excitement grew, she continued, "Algy, you are not so brutal as to wish that, are you?"

"Don't be absurd. I was thinking what on earth is to be done. When is he coming back?"

"Not for three months."

Abruptly and without tangible cause, the whole story of their relationship unfolded itself before him, bare of the imagined beauty with which his thought had once bedecked it, in its plain and squalid ugliness. He was filled in spite of himself with horror of the woman before him. It seemed—in this crisis of his nerves—as if he could not tolerate her presence for a moment longer. Though his face did not show his feeling, she seemed to grasp his thought. She felt that there was no mercy to be expected from him, no hope for her to cling to. She rose bravely.

"Good-bye, Algy," she said. "We shall not meet again. Don't speak to me. Let me go. Good-bye."

He took her hand for a moment and then opened the door. As she went out he called his servant to open the street door for her and returned to his room.

"Thank God that is finished," he muttered, as he moved about, nervously touching things on the tables or the mantelpiece. Then, after a time, he went out. At his club he found the only man he looked on as a friend, Lord Reggie Cork, a philosophical young man whose eternal tranquillity of temper was extremely pleasing to the nervous temperament of Deepdale.

"Hullo, Deepdale," he said, "come and dine with me. What are you doing in town at this time? Do you feel inclined to go to Norway?"

"Norway? Are you going?"

"To-morrow, ten-thirty. Come with me, there's a good chap!"

Deepdale thought for a moment. Then he answered:

"Right! I will come with you. I shall not come back here till next year. I am sick of town and of England too. I have been getting into trouble."

Deepdale proceeded to expound matters to his friend and to ask his advice.

Whatever Lord Reggie's opinion may have been, the two men left England on the morrow, Deepdale having arranged to let his chambers during his absence.

### III

He kept his word and did not return till the following year. When he did the season was well under weigh. It was an exceptionally beautiful spring, and London was—in Deepdale's eyes at least—its central and most perfect flower. To one who had been away from it so long, the city seemed to give a promise of new life, and, as his cab flashed down Piccadilly, the sight of the crush of carriages, the crowd at Hyde Park Corner, lifted his heart like a draught of wine. Lady Audley, on whom he called, was delighted to see him. She reproached him for his long disappearance and his tardy return.

"You haven't seen the new beauty," she said, laughing. In answer to his inquiry, she continued—

"She's an old friend of yours, I hear. In society? No; she used not to be, but Lady Rivers, people say, met her somewhere or other in the winter, and was so fascinated that she has had her under her wing for the last three weeks. We are all raving about her."

"You say I know her?" he asked.

"If that isn't like you men!" she laughed. "You have met this girl, fallen in love with her, I believe, and have forgotten all about it. Well, you will fall in love with her again. That is my prophecy."

"When am I likely to see her?" he asked.

"If you like to bore yourself by coming here to-night you are sure to see her. Come any time after eleven."

"Won't you tell me who she is?" he said.

"No. She will surprise you; and you will have to be grateful to me for giving you an emotion."

He took his leave presently, and made his way into the Park. The subject slipped out of his mind, and he did not mention it to any of the numberless acquaintances he met. Most of them seemed glad to see him, but a few appeared to his sensitive egoism to be somewhat strange in manner. He was wondering at this, a little annoyed, when he ran up against Lord Reggie, whom he had not seen for several months.

"Hullo, Deepdale!" he exclaimed. "Just back? I say, you've come at a bad time."

"How's that?" asked Deepdale.

"Haven't you heard, or are you trying to play deep?" he answered.

"I have heard nothing," was the answer.

"Good Lord! I'll have to tell you then. Come and sit down."

Deepdale obeyed.

"It's pretty serious, old chap," Cork continued. "It's all over the place, or it wouldn't matter so much. You remember a woman I saw at your place once or twice—Mrs. Westham—the woman you told me about?"

Deepdale nodded.

"Well, she poisoned herself a month ago," said the other, lowering his voice. "But that isn't all. These women are so confoundedly theatrical. She couldn't make her exit from this world without letting people know why. I dare say she didn't mean to harm you, but it looks as if she wanted a little revenge at the last moment. She wrote a letter to you and left it on her table before drinking the stuff. It came out at the inquest; I've a paper at my rooms, but I daresay you can guess what it was."

Deepdale, with his head bent, was gazing at the point of his stick in the gravel.

"Damn her," he said, in a low voice, choking with anger, yet stunned with the shock. He had nearly forgotten her, but the news of her death was like a violent blow. "How far has it gone?"

"Everywhere, naturally. You can't prevent people reading newspapers."

"I saw Lady Audley just now," he muttered. "She said nothing."

"Very likely she hadn't heard. But she won't be nice when she does."

"Let us go to your rooms," he said, standing up a little shakily. It cost him an effort not to break down altogether. His knees seemed to have lost all sensation: he could hardly steady himself, his hands shook, and his face had gone suddenly white.

Lord Reggie drew his arm through his own.

"Steady, old man," said he, as they crossed the Row. "It's no good showing 'em how you've been hit. Get into this cab," he added as they emerged from the archway.

"No, we'll walk!" exclaimed Deepdale, with an oath. "Damn the woman! I thought I was going to have a good time of it this season. You know my aunt is dead? No? she died a week ago and left me nearly everything. I've been scraping along all this time on a few beggarly hundreds a year, and now that it's thousands, this infernal woman steps in and spoils all my hand! Damn her!"

"You needn't swear," said Cork. "You were pretty well gone on her once, weren't you?"

Deepdale made no answer as his thoughts went back into the past. He walked with his head bent down. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"My God, what a thing to happen to a man!"

His first feeling of anger had passed. He was overwhelmed now with remorse. Why had he not stayed and helped her? He forgot how weary of her presence he had been, and reproached himself only for his leaving her to her trouble. What misery she must have endured! What a beast he was! Would he have to go through life with the consciousness of having committed the most callous of murders, of having caused the death of the one woman who had really loved him, wearisome though she was!

"What am I to do, Reggie?" he asked, to break the silence.

"Wait and see what happens," replied Cork philosophically. He was a believer in Fate.

"What an infernal scandal it will be," Deepdale murmured under his breath. He was too fond of society to be as unconventional as he wished, and he by no means wished to give up his season.

When they reached Lord Reggie's chambers, he sank into a chair.

"Give me the paper and get me a drink—brandy and soda," he said.

The lines were a misty blur, and he could not read at first. After a time some of the sentences became legible. He was reading her letter; the letter that was meant only for him, and yet was printed for everyone's eyes; trying to skip the details of her death, though they forced themselves under his notice and burnt themselves on his mind. It was a much saner and less effusive letter than he expected, and was both dignified and pathetic.

Lord Reggie sat opposite his friend, dreading an outburst of frantic grief. He was relieved when Deepdale lifted his head and merely remarked,

"I don't believe the thing has gone or will go as far as you try to make out. Haven't you exaggerated?"

A sudden revulsion of feeling had come upon him. The sober sentences had calmed him, and he had recovered his nerve. After all, what did it matter? He was not responsible for her death. He had tired of her and left her. That was nothing unusual. Her foolishness was no fault of his. So far he satisfied himself: and as to the scandal, he would have to live it down or go away if it became necessary.

Deepdale's temperament was one that is not rare. He could take things easily or badly, almost as he chose. Though the catastrophe might, if he had allowed it to do so, have broken him down, yet by an effort of will he managed to throw it on one side. The shock remained, like a wound that annoys when the first pain has gone by, but he had determined to let it gain no ascendancy over him. He was able to forget very easily, and he relied on this ability to preserve him from any future outbreaks of conscience.

Instead of answering, Lord Reggie, relieved to find that there was to be no scene, proceeded to discourse with some warmth to his friend on his callousness and brutality. Deepdale listened meekly, and when Lord Reggie had come to the end of his disquisition, they arranged to dine and pass the evening together. It was not far from midnight when they appeared at Lady Audley's party. Deepdale was relieved to find that there was no change towards him in any of the people to whom he spoke. A weight seemed lifted from his heart.

"Where is your new beauty?" he asked his hostess, when there was a momentary cessation of arrivals.

"She's here. That is all I know," she answered, glancing with pretended dismay into the hopelessly crowded room. "Oh, there she is," she exclaimed, as some movement opened a momentary space in the crush. His eyes followed the direction of hers, and lighted on a tall fair girl with blonde hair and enormous pale yellow sleeves.

"What? Miss Gray?" he asked.

"Go and talk to her," she replied. "I am a confirmed match-maker, you know," she added, good humouredly, as she turned to smile on some new guests.

Deepdale edged his way towards his old acquaintance. He made slow progress, but at last he succeeded in reaching her. Her welcome was more cordial than he could have hoped, and the man to whom she had been speaking moved away unwillingly.

"Where have you been all this time?" she said. "You ought to be punished. You look ever so much older, and you don't look well."

"No," he answered, "I'm rather seedy. But you are more beautiful than ever," he added, lowering his voice.

She laughed. "You have not forgotten your old sin of paying untrue compliments!"

"Untrue?" he replied. "Will you never believe me? Can't we get out of this crowd? Shall we go on the balcony?"

The balcony was large, and by good luck they found two chairs.

"Tell me all about yourself," she said as she sat down. He obeyed as far as he could, and did not omit to mention the death of his aunt and his consequent increase of fortune.

"How delightful for you," she said. "And now you are perfectly happy, I suppose."

"Do you think I am so inconstant?" he asked. "Or have you forgotten the downs?"

"No, I don't forget. It is you who forget, and go away for three-quarters of a year without a word."

"It was an unpardonable sin," he replied; "but will you forgive me? It was really very necessary, and perhaps, perhaps you remember why it was of no use for me to come back sooner?"

"I forgive you," she said softly.

"Are you any happier now that you have achieved success?" he asked. "You used to long for success."

"No, I think not," she answered. "It seems only natural. And then everything appears just as stupid as before. There is always something wanting to my life. I don't know what."

"It is the same with me," he said, "with a difference. I know what I want."

"I should have thought you had everything you wanted," she answered.

"No, there is always one thing," he said, touching her hand. She withdrew it gently, and stood up.

"Let us go in," she said; "I am cooler now, and I am afraid of catching cold."

"When may I come and see you?" he asked, as he rose. She thought for a moment.

"On Friday," she answered.

"And to-day is Monday!" he exclaimed.

"Friday is the only possible day this week. I am staying with Lady Rivers, you know, and I have to go out with her. But I can be in on Friday, about four, if you like."

"On Friday, then," he answered. "I want to ask you a question I asked you once before," he added, as they re-entered the room, and further talk became impossible.

She turned away with a smile.

"Who was that you were on the balcony with?" asked Lady Rivers an hour later, as they were driving home.

"A Mr. Deepdale," Helen answered, "an old friend. I have asked him to come on Friday to tea."

"My dear Helen!" exclaimed Lady Rivers, "he is quite impossible. You ought not to know such a man."

"Why not?" she queried.

"Haven't you heard about his wickedness? It is really too dreadful."

"No, I have heard nothing against him," she answered frigidly, while some strange fear made her tremble. "I believe he is going to ask me to marry him."

"Helen! You must not think of it," said Lady Rivers in an agonizing tone. "It would be very wrong of you. I don't know the whole tale, but my husband told me a good deal of it."

"I wish to hear nothing," she replied, coldly.

"Oh, yes, you must, and I shall tell you."

#### IV

The three following days were like nightmares to Helen. She had listened to the story without the least change of expression, but in her own room she had broken into a passion of tears. Until that moment she had scarcely realized that she loved the man at all. She knew it at last, conquered by jealousy of the woman he had killed. To her own despair, she was not overwhelmed with horror for his crime. It did not seem unnatural. She only hated the woman who had come between them. But her own state of mind seemed like dishonour, and she suffered all the tortures of remorse for what she could not help.

Before Friday, however, she had regained some tranquillity. She would refuse, if he proposed to her, and would forget him. When Deepdale called, she therefore welcomed him very frigidly. But she was alone, and he had determined not to let the opportunity slip.

"Why are you so changed, so cold?" he asked, after a time. The truth suddenly flashed upon him, and he swiftly decided on his course of action. "Have people been telling you tales about me?" he added.

"Tales that are true, I am afraid," she answered.

"I would have told you myself," he said, gently. "It is too dreadful for words, isn't it? You should pity me, rather than blame me; my life is quite ruined. I have nothing left me now on earth."

"Don't say that," she murmured. "You will forget, and so will others. But it is very sad."

"It is much more; it is my ruin. But you, at least, may pity me. My life is hard enough to bear, without losing you even as a friend—for you were my friend once, were you not?"

She did not answer, but her lips moved inaudibly.

"You know now why I went away. Can you not guess what I suffered all the time, knowing that I had lost you, you who were ever like a star in my dark heaven? Think now what my life will be, without the one hope that filled me for so long, the one thing that made me live. I have lost that—and I have lost everything. It is my own fault—and yet not so much my fault as perhaps you think. It was my sin, and I must pay for it. In these days there is no Elizabeth to forgive Tannhauser."

She listened immovably, but her eyes were moist, and her lips parted, as she breathed rapidly.

"I will go," he said, rising. "Shall I ever see you again, I wonder? Oh, Helen," he cried, taking her hands as she stood before him, "I could have loved you so well!"

She did not move away, and he bent his head to cover her hands with kisses.

"Helen," he said, looking into her eyes, "is it all over? Will not your forgiveness cover even me? Cannot the past be the past? I am broken-hearted for my crime. You and you only can give me new life. Will you forgive me? Will you not love me as I love you?"

He placed his arm round her neck, tentatively. She did not resist, and as he drew nearer, her head sank on his shoulder, and she uttered a little sigh of content.

He smiled to himself in triumph; then he bent his head and kissed her on the mouth.

THEODORE WRATISLAW.