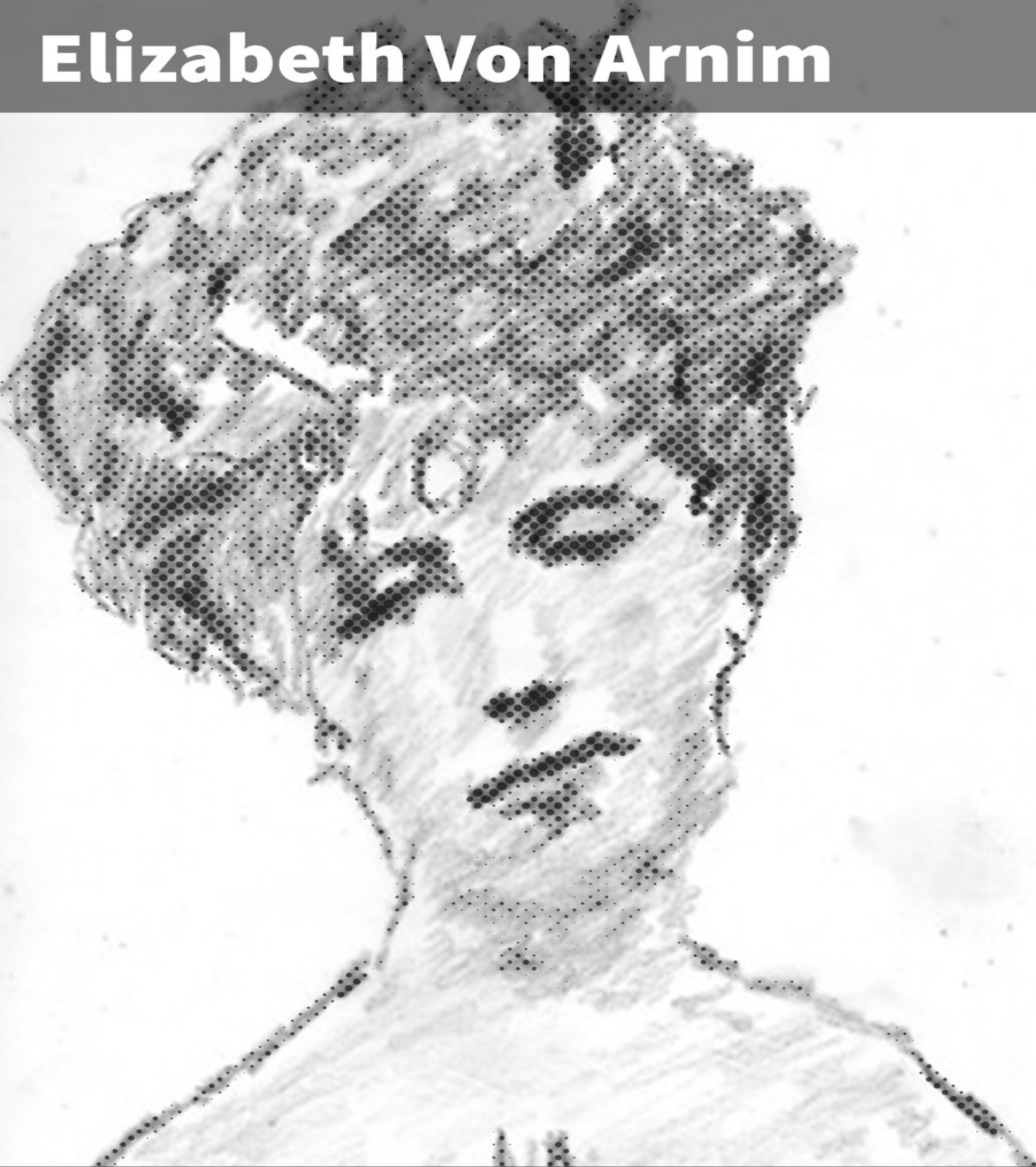
Elizabeth Von Arnim



Mr. Skeffington

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Fanny, who had married a Mr. Skeffington, and long ago, for reasons she considered compelling, divorced him, after not having given him a thought for years, began, to her surprise, to think of him a great deal. If she shut her eyes, she could see him behind the fish-dish at breakfast; and presently, even if she didn't shut her eyes, she could see him behind almost anything.

What particularly disturbed her was that there was no fish. Only during Mr. Skeffington's not very long reign as a husband had there been any at breakfast, he having been a man tenacious of tradition, and liking to see what he had seen in his youth still continuing on his table. With his disappearance, the fish-dish, of solid silver, kept hot by electricity, disappeared too—not that he took it with him, for he was much too miserable to think of dishes, but because Fanny's breakfast, from the date of his departure to the time she had got to now, was half a grapefruit.

Naturally she was a good deal worried by seeing him and the dish so distinctly, while knowing that neither he nor it were really there. She very nearly went to a doctor about it; but never having been much disposed to go to doctors she thought she would wait a little first. For after all, reasoned Fanny, who considered herself a very sensible woman, she was soon going to have a fiftieth birthday, and on reaching so conspicuous, so sobering a landmark in one's life, what more natural than to hark back and rummage, and what more inevitable, directly one rummaged, than to come

across Mr. Skeffington? He had played, for a time, a leading part in her life. He had been, she recognized, the keystone of her career. It was thanks to the settlements he had made on her, which were the settlements of an extremely rich and extremely loving man, that she was so well off, and it was thanks to his infidelities—but ought one to thank infidelities? Well, never mind—that she was free.

She had adored being free. Twenty-two years of enchanting freedom she had had, and adoring every minute of them—except the minutes at the end of a love affair, when things suddenly seemed unable to avoid being distressing, and except the minutes quite lately, when she was recovering from a terrible illness, and had nothing to do, but think, and began thinking about Mr. Skeffington. Perhaps it was the highly unpleasant birthday looming so close that set her off in these serious directions. Perhaps it was being so wretchedly weak after diphtheria. Perhaps it was the way her lovely hair had fallen out in handfuls. But set off she did, and he who had once been her husband appeared to respond to the treatment with an alacrity which startled her, and gradually became quite upsettingly vivid and real.

This, though, had only happened in the last few months, and she was sure would soon, when she was quite strong again, pass. Up to her illness, how unclouded her life had been! Really a quite radiant life, full of every sort of amusing and exciting things like would-be lovers—at one time the whole world appeared to want to be Fanny's lover—and all because Mr. Skeffington was never able to resist his younger typists.

How angry those typists had made her, till it dawned on her that what they really were were gates to freedom. When at last she saw them in their true light, as so many bolts shot back and doors flung open, she left off being angry, and began instead—strictly speaking, she didn't suppose she ought to have—to rejoice. No, she oughtn't to have rejoiced; but how difficult it was not to like being without Mr. Skeffington. At no time had she enjoyed her marriage. She was very sorry, but really she hadn't. Among other things, he was a Jew, and she wasn't. Not that that would have mattered, since she was without prejudices, if he hadn't happened to look so exactly like a Jew. It wasn't a bit necessary that he should. Lots of people she knew had married Jews, and none of them looked so exactly like one as Job (Mr. Skeffington's name was Job, a name, everybody agreed, impossible to regard as other than unfortunate). Still, he couldn't help that, and certainly he had been very kind. Being an upright girl, who believed in sticking to her vows and giving as good as she got, she too had been very kind. Her heart, however, hadn't been in it. A marriage, she found, with someone of a different breed is fruitful of small rubs; and she had had to change her religion too, which annoyed her, in spite of her not really having any. So that when he offered her those repeated chances of honourably getting rid of him, though she began by being outraged she ended by being pleased.

Fanny well knew that her reactions to Mr. Skeffington's infidelities weren't at all the proper ones, but she couldn't help that. She was perfectly aware she ought to have gone

on growing angrier and angrier, and more and more miserable; and instead, things happened this way: Obliged to forgive the first typist, such was his penitence and such his shame, the second one, though humiliating, didn't distress her quite so acutely. Over the third she was almost calm. The fourth made her merely wonder there should be so many young persons liking him enough for that sort of thing, but she supposed it must be his money. The fifth she called on, earnestly inquiring of the alarmed and shrinking creature what she saw in him. At the sixth, she went out and bought some new hats; and after the seventh, she left.

Left, and never came back. Left, and beheld him no more till they faced each other in the Divorce Court. Since then she hadn't set eyes on Mr. Skeffington, except once, not long after the final kicking free, when her car—his car, really, if you looked at it dispassionately—was held up in Pall Mall at the very moment when he, walking to his club, chanced to be passing. There she sat, such a lovely thing, delicately fair in the dark frame of the car, obviously someone everybody would long to be allowed to love, the enormous hat of the early summer of 1914 perched on hair whose soft abundance he had often, in happier days, luxuriously stroked, and was so completely already uninterested in him that she hardly bothered to turn her head. Wasn't this hard? Now, wasn't this terribly hard? Mr. Skeffington asked himself, his whole being one impassioned protest. Hadn't he worshipped her, lived for her, thought only of her—even, somehow, when he was thinking of the pretty little girl in the office as well? And what, in the long run, were the pretty little girls in the office to a man?

Nothing; nothing; less than nothing, compared to a darling, exquisite, and, as he had supposed, permanent wife.

But Fanny, sideways through her eyelashes, did see him, saw how he hesitated and half stopped, saw how red he grew, thought: Poor Job, I believe he's still in love with me, and idly mused, as she was driven on up St. James's Street in the direction of her attractive house—his attractive house really, if you looked at it dispassionately—on the evident capacity of men to be in love with several women at once. For she was sure there were several women in Job's background at the very moment he was hesitating on the pavement, and turning red for love of her. He couldn't do, she now thoroughly well knew, without several—one in his home, and one in his office, and one God knew where else; perhaps at Brighton, whither he was so fond of going for a breath, he used to explain, of sea air.

Yet here he was half stopping when he saw her, and gazing at her with those opaque dog's eyes of his as though she were the single love of his life. And she, who was a believer in one thing at a time, fell to considering her patience, her positively angelic patience, over his lapses. Seven lapses, before she did anything about them. Why, she might have divorced him, completely justified even in her mother's eyes, who was all for wives sticking to their husbands, after the second lapse, and started on her delicious career of independence at twenty-three instead of twenty-eight. Then she would have had five whole years more of it, with everybody bent on making up for his shameful treatment of her, and for what it was imagined she

must have suffered. Five years her patience had cost her; five years of happiness.

And she asked herself, as she went into her flower-filled library—the quantity of flowers that arrived for Fanny every day at this period had to be seen to be believed—and found Lord Conderley of Upswich, an elderly (she thought him old, but he was, in fact, under fifty) and impassioned admirer, waiting to take her out to lunch—she asked herself what other woman would have been such an angel of forbearance. Or was it, really, not so much forbearance as that she didn't care?

Yes, thought Fanny, who was an honest girl, and liked to see things straight, it wasn't being an angel; it was because, after the third lapse, she simply hadn't cared.

But that was a long while ago. It didn't seem long, but it was. Then she was twenty-eight. Now she would soon be fifty. A generation had passed, indeed had flashed by, since she saw Mr. Skeffington that morning on the pavement of Pall Mall, and the plovers' eggs with which, at the Berkeley, Conderley had afterwards ardently fed her—solid enough the hard-boiled things had seemed, as she cracked their shells—where were they now? Reappeared as flowers, perhaps, or grass and been eaten by sheep, and once more, in the form of mutton, eaten perhaps by her. Everything, looking back, had dispersed and vanished, to reappear as something else. Life was certainly a queer business—so brief, yet such a lot of it; so substantial, yet in a few years, which behaved like minutes, all scattered and anyhow. If she and Job had had children they too, by this time, would be all

scattered and anyhow. Grown up. Married. And of course making a grandmother of her. Incredible, the things one could be made by other people. Fancy being forced to be a grandmother, whether you liked it or not!

But—grandchildren. She turned the word over on her tongue cautiously, as if to see what it really tasted like. A woman might hide for years from people who didn't look her up in Debrett that she had had a fiftieth birthday, but she couldn't hide grandchildren, they would certainly insist on cropping up. Just as well, then, that there weren't any. Who wanted to be dated?

Yet—didn't they fill a gap? Didn't they come into one's life when it was beginning, like one's hair, to thin out? Since she had had that awful illness in the autumn, with her temperature up in the skies for days on end, her hair, she knew and deeply deplored, wasn't what it was. Nothing, since then, seemed quite what it was. She had stayed in the country for several months, slowly recovering, and when she got back London and the people in it might almost have been a different place and race—so apathetic; so dull. While as for the way one's friends had lately taken to dying....

Fanny was reflecting on these things in bed. It was an icy, foggy February morning outside, but inside, in her bedroom, all was rosy and warm. Wrapped in a rose-coloured bedgown—when she was younger her bed arrangements had been sea-green, but it is curious, she herself noticed, how regularly the beds of older women turn pink,—the shaded, rose-coloured lights doing their best for her, and a most

beautiful wood fire bathing the room in a rosy glow, she ate, or tried to eat, her breakfast of half a grapefruit.

Cold, sour stuff to begin a winter day on, she thought, giving up and pushing the tray aside. The idea was to keep slender; but suppose you did keep slender—and nobody, since her illness, could possibly be more slender—what was the good of it if you had no hair? One went to Antoine's, of course, and bought some, but to buy hair, to *buy* hair, when one had had such heaps of it till only a few months ago, did seem most dreadful. And it put a stop to so many things, too, once one had got something on one's head that didn't really belong. For instance, poor Dwight, the latest, and also the youngest of her adorers—for some time now they had kept on getting younger,—a Rhodes scholar fresh from Harvard, and worshipping her with transatlantic headlongness, wouldn't be able to touch it reverently any more, as she used sometimes to allow him when he had been extra sweet and patient. If he did, the most awful things might happen; the most awful things *must* happen, when a woman lets herself have adorers, while at the same time easily coining to bits.

The ghost of a giggle, the faintest little sound of rather wry mirth, rose to her lips at the pictures that flashed into her mind; though indeed all this was very serious for her. Adorers had played a highly important part in her life; the most important part by far, really, giving it colour, and warmth and poetry. How very arid it would be without them. True, they had also caused her a good deal of distress when, after a bit, they accused her of having led them on. Each time one of them said that, and each in his turn did say it,

she was freshly astonished. Led them on? It seemed to her that, far from having to be led, they came; and came impetuously, while she, for her part, simply sat still and did nothing.

Apparently snug and enviable in her rosy, cosy cave, she lay thinking about those adorers, so as not to think of Mr. Skeffington. Outside the fog was thick yellow, and it was bitter cold; inside was the warm Fanny, so apparently enviable. But in fact she wasn't enviable. She was warm, and as carefully lit up as an Old Master, but far from being enviable she was a mass of twinging nerves after a wakeful and peculiarly unpleasant night, which the grapefruit, sour and comfortless inside her, did nothing to soothe. Perhaps, she said to herself, eyeing its remains with distaste, in winter, and while she still hadn't quite picked up after her illness, she ought to have something hot for breakfast, something more nourishing, like a little fish....

And instantly, at the word, there he was again: Mr. Skeffington. She had been fending him off so carefully, and now, at a single word, there he was; and she seemed no longer to be in her bedroom, but with him downstairs in the dining-room, he behind the silver fish-dish, she opposite him behind the coffee-pot; just as they had sat through so many boring breakfasts during the precious years of her lovely, very first youth. And he was looking at her adoringly between his mouthfuls, and saying, with the brimming possessive pride she used to find so trying, "And how is my little Fanny-Wanny this fine morning?"—even if it wasn't a fine morning, but pouring cats and dogs; even if, a few

hours before, on his proposing to join her in her bedroom, she had vehemently assured him she would never, never be his little Fanny-Wanny again, because of those typists.

For he was of an undefeatably optimistic disposition when it came to women, and very affectionate.

Overcome, she lay back on her pillows, shut her eyes, and gave herself up to gloom. She had had a dreadful night; she had been doing her best to forget it; and this was the last straw.

Her maid slid silently into the room, observed her attitude, removed the tray without disturbing her, and slid silently out again. "So that's how we are this morning, is it," thought her maid, whose name was Manby.

"Not even," Fanny was saying to herself, her eyes tight shut, her head thrown back in the pillows, her face blindly upturned to the ceiling, "not even to be able to mention fish, in an entirely separate connection, without his at once thrusting himself forward!"

It did begin to look as if she would have to go to a doctor, who of course, the first thing, would ask her how old she was; and when she told him truthfully, for it was no use not being truthful with doctors, would start talking—odious phrase—of her time of life. Really, though, Job was getting past a joke. Its being February, the month she married him in, oughtn't to have stirred him up like this, for there had been many Februaries since she left him, and in none of them had he so much as crossed her mind. Tucked away he had lain, good and quiet, in what she had supposed was the finality of the past. Now, here he was at every turn.

He must, somehow, be put a stop to. She knew he was nothing but a figment of her brain, but it was precisely this that made his appearances so shattering. To go off one's head at fifty seemed a poor finish to a glorious career. And it wasn't as if she hadn't done what she could, and reasoned with herself, and tried to be sensible and detached. Everything she could think of she had done, even to ordering his chair in the dining-room to be removed, even to taking cold baths. She had soon found out, though, that these measures were no good. The cold baths made her shiver for the rest of the day, and as for the chair, being only a figment, not having one didn't stop Mr. Skeffington's sitting down. Figments were like that, she had to acknowledge. They could sit on anything, even if it wasn't there.

Well, something would have to be done about it. She couldn't go on much longer, without having a real breakdown. After the night she had just been through, which she was trying so hard to forget by thinking of Dwight, by thinking of the way her hair had practically all gone, by thinking of anything that came into her head that wasn't Mr. Skeffington, however much she disliked the idea of messing about with doctors she would certainly have to see one. For Mr. Skeffington, that night, had been quite unbearably lively. He might be nothing but a figment, but she must say he did her imagination great credit, so vivid he was, so actual, so much on the spot. Up to then, he had only molested her in the day-time, sat at meals with her, met her in the library, attended her in the drawing-room; but the evening before, the evening, that is, of the anniversary of the day thirty

years ago on which she had married him, when she came in late from a party—not in very good spirits because everybody had been so dull—he was waiting for her in the hall, and had taken her hand, or she felt as if he had taken it, and gone upstairs with her just as he had gone thirty years ago, and stayed in the room the whole time while she undressed, and insisted on kneeling down and putting her slippers on for her, and had actually kissed her feet. Dreadful to have a figment kissing one's feet, thought Fanny, opening her eyes with a shudder, and jerking herself upright in the bed.

She stared into the glowing, reassuring fire. Such a lovely fire. Everything so lovely round her. Nothing in the world, really, to worry about. She must hold on to herself. And if she did feel rather cold inside, it was only the grapefruit.

Manby, who seemed able to see through walls, knew she had opened her eyes, and slid in. She came in sideways, taking up as little space as possible in the doorway, so as not to cause draughts, and carrying the morning letters on a tray.

"Will you wear your gray or your brown this morning m'lady? Or should I put out your black?" she inquired.

Fanny didn't answer. She turned her head and looked at the tray, her hands clasped round her drawn-up knees. A lot of letters, but they all looked dull. Queer how uninteresting her letters and telephone messages had been since she came back. What had happened in everybody? Hardly ever did a nice man's voice come through on the telephone now. Relations rang up, and women friends, but the men, like her

hair, seemed to have dropped off. She oughtn't to have stayed away so long. One's tracks got very quickly covered up, if one did. In the general scramble, it appeared one easily was forgotten, though it was too fantastic to suppose that she of all people—

"Will you wear your grey or your brown, m'lady? Or should I—"

Odd, though, thought Fanny, putting out her hand and picking up the letters, what a lot of dull people there seemed to be about lately. Dull men. Uninterested men. Uninterested, and therefore uninteresting. When first she began going out again after being in the country, she was struck by it. London suddenly seemed full of them. She couldn't think where they all came from. Wherever she went, they were there too. In fact, there was no doubt London had quite changed. People, even her own particular men friends, weren't nearly so much alive as they used to be, and not half as interesting. They were very kind to her, and solicitous about draughts and all that, but beyond patting her hand affectionately, and remarking, "Poor little Fanny—you must pick up, you know. Beef tea and that, eh?" they hadn't much to say. They seemed to be getting old, and there were no young ones to take their place, because of the breathless rush people lived in now—except, of course, Dwight; but he was sitting, or standing, or whatever it was they did, for examinations, and had only been able to get away from Oxford once to see her. Serious, everybody had become; absorbed. Instead of being eager, they were absent-minded. Instead of seizing every opportunity to whisper amusing things in her ear about—oh well, very silly

things, really—they talked out loud of the European situation. Everyone might have heard what they said. It wasn't in the least her idea of a really interesting conversation, that everyone might hear what one said.

"Will you wear your grey or your—"

Certainly the European situation was enough to make anybody talk out loud, but ever since she could remember there had always been something the matter with it, and it hadn't in the slightest way interfered with amusing, silly things being whispered in one's ear. How long was it since someone had whispered in hers? Last night, at that boring dinner, there was a girl, a rather too healthy, red girl, the daughter of the house, just out; and the elderly man next to her had whispered something in her ear, and Fanny, chancing to look down the table, had seen him doing it, and it was this that had started her off wondering how long it was since her own had been whispered in. The girl wasn't even pretty, she was merely young and tight-skinned. Tight-skinned youth; all, apparently, that was needed these days, Fanny had said to herself, turning to her host again, and slightly and unpleasantly surprised by the acid edge to her thought. For never, yet, in her life had she been acid.

"Will you wear your—"

"Oh, *bother*," snapped Fanny, finally exasperated by the persistent current of interruption—adding instantly with quick penitence, "I'm sorry, Manby. I didn't mean to be cross."

"It's the weather," said Manby, placidly. "All these fogs."

"Do you think I'm crosser than I used to be?" Fanny asked, looking at her anxiously and dropping the letters she

was holding on to the bed.

Manby had been with her so many years that she had witnessed all her stages, from the Really Young and Exquisite one, through the Lovely as Ever one, to the one she was now in, which was called, by her friends, Wonderful. "Darling, you really are *wonderful*—" that's what they said now, whenever she appeared; and she didn't like it one little bit.

"I wouldn't go as far as to say *crosser*, m'lady," said Manby, cautiously.

Then it was true. She *was* crosser. Else Manby wouldn't be so cautious. Ah, but how lamentable to get crosser as one got older! A person going to have a fiftieth birthday should know better than that. Such a person ought at least by then have learned how to behave herself, and not snap at servants. Serenity, not crossness, was what the years should bring—ripeness, sweetness, flavour. Like an apricot in the sun, one should hang on the afternoon wall of life; like a ripe and perfect plum.

Old age, serene, and calm, and bright,
And lovely as a Lapland night....

—that was the sort of finish-up poor Jim Conderley, who was fond of quoting and knew an immense lot of things to quote, had prophesied hers would be, one day when she was saying how awful it must be to be old—he was the one who used to feed her with plovers' eggs when they were still worth their weight in gold.

Not that she had reached the Lapland night condition yet; it was only quite lately that she had got into the Wonderful class, and in it, she supposed, she would stay

some time. Unpleasant as it was to be called Wonderful, and dripping with horrid implications, it was better than being a Lapland night, which, however serene and calm and even lovely it might be, would be sure to be cold. Let her keep out of the cold as long as she could, she thought, shivering a little. On the whole, perhaps, she ought to be thankful that her friends would probably go on saying for some time yet, though a little more stoutly, of course, each year, "Darling, you're a perfect *marvel*."

A marvel. Imagine, thought Fanny, getting out of bed and putting her arms into the sleeves of the dressing-gown—also rose-coloured,—Manby was holding ready, imagine having reached the consolation prizes of life.

She crossed to the dressing-table, and stared at herself in the same glass which only such a little while ago, so it seemed, had shone with the triumphant reflection of her lovely youth. A marvel. Wonderful. What did such words mean except, *Considering your age*, my dear, or, *In spite of everything, you poor darling*?

Last week she had been to Windsor to see a godson of hers at Eton who had just got into Pop, and was secretly so proud of it that she knew he would burst if he couldn't let himself go to somebody who wasn't another boy; and when she got back to London, the afternoon being fine and dry, she walked most of the way, across the Park.

Well, why shouldn't she? It was far, but not impossibly far. Her feet ached, but most feet ached on pavements. There was nothing out of the way, she considered, in what she had done. Yet the various friends waiting for her in the drawing-room when she came in, with one accord

exclaimed, on hearing of it, "But darling, you really are *too* wonderful!"

Tiresome, people were becoming; so tiresome.

"Will you wear your—"

"Oh, for God's *sake* leave me alone!" cried Fanny, suddenly flinging round on her chair, whereupon Manby, after one cautious glance, withdrew, carefully and sideways, into the bathroom, where she busied herself with taps.

Then Fanny was ashamed of herself; thoroughly ashamed, this time. Staring into her own eyes in the glass, eyes hollow and—it couldn't be true?—pouched after the sleeplessness which was that miserable Job's fault, she wondered how she could be as cross as all that, and fly at the kind, devoted Manby. She didn't remember ever having done a thing like that before; and presently, after a brief interval during which she reflected with deep concern on these developments in her character, while regarding with even deeper concern her face in the glass, she once more, in a rather small voice, and half turning her head towards the open bathroom door, said she was sorry. "Do forgive me, Manby," she said. "I'm shamefully irritable this morning."

"It's quite all right, m'lady," answered Manby from among her taps. "Will you wear your—"

"I've slept so badly—hardly at all," explained Fanny. "That's probably what is making me so unbearable."

"Don't mention it, m'lady," said Manby, emerging from the bathroom, now that the atmosphere seemed clearer. "But I'm sorry to hear your ladyship hasn't slept. Should I prepare an aspirin? And will you wear your grey or—"

"It's Mr. Skeffington," said Fanny, twisting round on the chair again, and looking at her with lamentable, wide eyes.

"Mr. Skeffington, m'lady?" echoed Manby, stopping dead. She was immensely startled.

"He's growing so *real*," said Fanny, her eyes very wide.

"Real, m'lady?" was all Manby could falter—for this was a name that hadn't been mentioned in that house, except below stairs, for nearly a quarter of a century. "Is—is Mr. Skeffington not well, m'lady?" she asked, very tentatively, very nervously.

"I don't know, but I don't think *I* can be," said Fanny, "or I wouldn't keep on imagining—keep on imagining—"

And to the astonished dismay of them both, staring at Manby, and pushing her hair back from her forehead with a quick, distracted movement, she suddenly began to cry.

"Oh, oh," wept Fanny, not attempting to hide her face, still with it turned to Manby, still keeping on pushing her hair back from her forehead, "oh, oh, *oh*—"

Except at the end of a love affair, when everything was so bleak and miserable, and no light anywhere, she never cried. What was there to cry about, in her happy life? Happy herself, except on the above occasions, till her illness and Mr. Skeffington's reappearance she had made everybody round her happy too. So that tears were as good as unknown to her. But this, now—this thrusting up of Job out of the decent quiet of a buried past, this kind of horrible regurgitation, preventing her sleeping, making her repulsive to look at and unbearable to be with, was enough to make anybody cry. And what could one do about it? How could

one stop him? It was such a hopeless business, trying to stop somebody who wasn't there.

The sound of her own violent weeping appalled both herself and Manby. Neither of them had had an idea she had so much, noise in her. Manby, who had brought water, who had brought an aspirin, who had poked the fire, telephoned down for brandy, and done all that mortal maid could do, was now completely nonplussed. Should she ring up a doctor? she asked at last, at her wits' end.

"No, no—I'll go to one," sobbed Fanny. "Yes—I will, I will. This very morning. I want a specialist—it's only a specialist can help. I'll get dressed and go at once—"

"Will you wear your grey or your—"

"Oh, Manby, *please* don't say that any more!" Fanny implored, seizing a handkerchief and pressing it on each swollen eye in turn. "It's that that set me off being so—so cross, and so—so sorry—"

"Then should I put out your black, m'lady?"

Never, she told the secretary, Miss Cartwright, later in the morning, when her poor lady had at last quietened sufficiently to be dressed and put in the car and sent out into the fog to a doctor, never could she have believed she would give way as she did, as she kept on doing. Relapses. Every time she, Manby, said anything. And what was so alarming was that it all seemed really to have something to do with—she put her hand to her mouth, and looked round fearfully before saying it, under her breath—Mr. Skeffington.

"Not—?" Miss Cartwright asked also under her breath.

She stared. She had only been in the house six weeks, but a secretary can learn much in less time than that.

Manby nodded. "That's right," she said. "'Im. The 'usband." For even now, in moments of emotion, her h's were apt to fail her.

Fanny went first to Bond Street, to Madame Valèze, the famous restorer of women's looks. The car groped its way cautiously through the fog, while she held her furs over her nose and mouth to prevent herself, she said, from choking, but really to hide. She couldn't appear before anyone, not even a chance passer-by, not even a doctor, till her face was put right—indeed, least of all before a doctor, who would certainly, if she went all swollen up from crying, suppose her further gone in a breakdown than she was. And then that would depress her, and Job would have more of a look-in than ever.

But under the deft hands of Hélène, Madame's head assistant—even Madame, who was so conscientious, hadn't ventured out this terrible morning, and that *miladi* should do so was indeed a reproach to those who stayed at home, said the glib Hélène—she spent a calming hour, lying back in an extremely comfortable chair, her throbbing head bound round with iced bandages, and on each burning eye a little cold bag that felt like a blessing. Unguents were spread and re-spread over the loose places of her skin; creams were patted in; beneath her chin was specially attended to; and the last thing she heard before going to sleep—for she did go to sleep, and stayed asleep exhausted, till she was finished—was Hélène's suggestion that she should take a special chin course, which would enormously help it, and the

last thing she thought was, "Imagine having reached the stage when one's chin needs enormously helping."

Then she went off, soothed by the gentle movements, and, only woke up when Hélène, in a tone of triumph, asked her to look at herself in the glass.

Certainly she was more presentable, and the tear-stains, about which Hélène had been busily conjecturing, were gone. But she looked curiously like the other women who go to beauty parlours. Their faces all, after treatment, seemed to have on exactly the same mask.

Well, at least she wasn't a give-away any longer, she thought; and felt so much refreshed after the sleep that she wondered if it were really necessary to go to the nerve-man. Hadn't she better wait a little, for another day or two, and see how she got on? She did so deeply dislike beginning this doctor business; it was so difficult to shake off, once one had started it.

Hesitating even at his very door, she sat for a few minutes in the car before committing herself by getting out, her delicate eyebrows knitted in a frown of doubt—those eyebrows on whose behalf, in order adequately to praise them, Lord Conderley used to ransack literature from the Elizabethans to Mr. H.G. Wells.

The chauffeur stood patiently waiting for a sign.

"Oh well," she finally made up her mind, wrapping her furs closer round her and preparing to take the plunge: "I suppose, now that I'm here, I may as well see the old thing."

Sir Stilton Byles, however, the eminent nerve-and-women's-diseases specialist, wasn't an old thing at all, as

Fanny would have known if she had listened more attentively to the conversations of her friends, when they talked about their ailments. He may not have been exactly a young thing, but he certainly wasn't an old one. He was an outspoken man of thirty-eight, without a shred of bedside manner, nor any of such nonsense as sympathy. He didn't sympathize. Why should he waste time sympathizing with all these idle women, and the self-indulgent ways by which they had come by their diseases? And why should he pretend he did? His business was to cure them, or anyhow to get them to believe they were cured. And every day, when his work was over, he would fling the window open to purge his consulting-room of scent, and exclaim: "God, these women!"

Fanny's friends, who all had nerves, and all were of the kind the eighteenth century called fine ladies, found his manner most refreshing. After the sleek, soft ways of the doctors they used to go to, he was infinitely bracing. They loved going to see him. They came away feeling incredibly brisked up, and ready for anything. As hard and taut as prize-fighters they felt, after a twenty minutes' scrap with Sir Stilton. Divine, they agreed, not to be mewed over, but given a clean, straight sock—their very language, after being with him, was virile—on the jaw. And they suggested to each other that he probably would be a marvellous lover, and they wondered whether there were a Lady Byles, and, if there weren't, couldn't he perhaps be asked to dinner?

In their hundreds they flocked to Sir Stilton. His consulting-room was fragrant—he called it reeking,—with

them. "Oh, my God," he would mutter under his breath, when a specially scented one came in.

Because of the creatures, though, he was growing very rich, and it was worth putting up with their scents and their silliness to be well on the way to the top of his profession at thirty-eight. Lately, too, royalty had begun to find him refreshing; twice within a week had he been summoned to Princesses of the Blood; and Fanny, when she decided to go to a doctor, naturally went to the one everybody else went to. Without troubling to make an appointment she went, experience having taught her that she need never make appointments—and indeed it was true that, however long a waiting-list might be, she herself, arriving last, got in first.

Therefore the person dressed as a nurse, but not a nurse really, who opened the door, never having seen her before was surprised. So airy a non-recognition of barriers hadn't yet come her way. What? No appointment? What? When Sir Stilton was invariably booked up days, even weeks ahead? Impossible, she said loftily. Out of the question.

"Would you have me die?" asked Fanny, with the smile which for so many years had been an enchantment, and still was sweet.

"Oh well," said the apparent nurse, melting into something of the bedside manner her chief hadn't got, "we'll hope it isn't as bad as that."

"Give him this," said Fanny, walking past her into the hall, and scribbling on one of her cards.

"*I'm an urgent case*," she scribbled; and since she was the daughter of a duke, and the extremely well-provided-for ex-wife of an extravagantly rich man, Sir Stilton, who had

the peerage at his fingers' ends, besides such facts concerning famous financiers as might be useful, hardly kept her waiting five minutes.

"Well, there's nothing urgent about *you*," he said, when, catching hold of her wrist, he had counted her pulse, while he glanced a second time at what she had scribbled on her card.

"Oh, but isn't there!" exclaimed Fanny; and began to tell him about Mr. Skeffington.

Ten minutes later she was out in the hall again, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining, her head held high.

"Call my car, please, she commanded; as different a person as possible from the person who had smiled so charmingly at the nurse when she arrived.

"He's done it again," thought the nurse proudly, hurrying to open the door; and she couldn't help saying: "Wonderful, isn't he?"

"Oh, he's God's own wonder!" was the answer, flashed round at her; an answer which almost seemed—only this, of course, was impossible—angry.

It was, though, angry, and Fanny's eyes were shining, not with the fresh lease of life her friends acquired from Sir Stilton's bracing talk, but with rage. She hadn't been so angry since the discovery of Mr. Skeffington's first lapse. Odious doctor. Those friends of hers, who crowded to him, could be nothing but a lot of masochists.

"You should have stuck to him," had been the creature's comment—so useful after twenty-two years—when she had done describing Mr. Skeffington's conduct.

"Stuck to him? What, when he—?"

"How old are you?" was the abrupt interruption; and when she told him truthfully, it being merely foolish not to, he remarked: "You surprise me."

It was at this point that Fanny began feeling stung; for, from his expression, it seemed as if what surprised him wasn't, as for an instant she had naturally supposed, that she was as old as that, but that she was as young as that. So she was stung.

"It's because I haven't slept all night," she hastily explained, trying to hide that she minded.

"You see how important quiet nights are for women of your age," he said.

"And for everybody, I imagine," said Fanny haughtily.

"That is, if you don't want to be an eyesore."

An eyesore? Was he suggesting that she was an eyesore? She, Fanny Skeffington, for years almost the most beautiful person everywhere, and for about five glorious years quite the most beautiful person anywhere? She? When the faces of the very strangers she passed in the street lit up when they saw her coming? She, *Noble, lovely little Fanny*, as poor Jim Conderley used to say, gazing at her fondly—quoting, she supposed; and nobody quoted things like that to eyesores.

True, Jim had quoted a good while ago; and it was also true, now that she came to think of it—let her be honest—that people passing in the street had seemed to look at her lately with surprise rather than admiration. But anyhow, there was Dwight, and only last autumn, just before her illness, he was declaring he couldn't live away from her, that

he would chuck everything and come and be her lodge-keeper, or pantry-boy, if he might only sometimes see her, for she was the most beautiful thing on God's earth. Young men didn't say things like that to eyesores. True, since then she had hardly set eyes on him, for almost immediately she fell ill. He had, however, been to London since she came back, and dined with her—once only, though, now that she came to think of it. Examinations keeping him in Oxford, he said. Or—her thoughts, before Sir Stilton's fixed and coldly appraising eye, hesitated—wasn't it really examinations?

She sat staring at the cold face before her without seeing it. In so short a time as less than six months, she reassured herself, it wasn't possible to change from the most beautiful thing on God's earth into an eyesore. Or—again she hesitated—was it?

Sir Stilton, however—detestable man—was going on talking. "Now that your love-days are over—" he was saying.

It was she this time who interrupted abruptly, stung too badly to remember discretion. "And how, pray," she inquired, flushing and lifting her chin—a gesture which instantly fixed his cold eye on those parts which Hélène had said could be enormously helped, "how, pray, do you know they are over? How do you know I'm not having what you call love-days at this very moment?" For after all, Dwight would come flying to London any moment, exams or no exams, if she simply lifted a finger. Or—once more her thoughts faltered before that steady eye—wouldn't he?

"Oh, my poor lady," was all Sir Stilton said to that.

Then there was silence, while they stared at each other, he with his clean-shaven lips sardonic, and his finger-tips

neatly fitted together, she too badly stung to speak.

What men there were in the world, she was thinking, what *common* men. But also, thank God, what other men, who saw one quite differently, who adored one, and swore they couldn't live away from one. At least, that was what they swore last autumn, and last autumn was still only just round the corner; or wasn't it?

Outraged, she stared at this dreadful Byles who was daring to pity her, but even while she stared her doubts were beginning to grow more insistent, and crept, like the cold fog outside, into her heart. Suppose—now just let her for a moment *suppose*, she said to herself, trying to face things sensibly—that the man was right, and she was indeed simply a poor lady deluding herself. Suppose everything that had made life so warm and happy was soon going to be over for her, was perhaps already over; what then? What did a woman do then? What did she do with the second part of her time in this queer world, the elderly-to-old part, the part that came next, and started, say, on her fiftieth birthday? If the woman had no children, that is, and no special talents, and no particular interest beyond her friends and the beauty that had always unfailingly made everything so easy for her, and if, into the bargain, she had had, for the best of legitimate reasons, to get rid of her husband? People used to praise her for being so kind. They used to tell her she had a dear nature. But how easy to be kind and all that, how impossible not to be, when one had everything in the world. Kindness spilled over from her own happiness; and what she now wanted to know was whether, in the unfamiliar cold years that lay ahead of her, the years