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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 undoubted 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 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.

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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: Obligated 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...

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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 head longness, 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.

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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. It's 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.

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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 anymore!" 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. "'I'm. The 'usband." For even now, in moments of emotion, her h's were apt to fail her.

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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 Héléne, 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 Héléne--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 Héléne'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 Héléne, 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 Héléne 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 H el ene 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 dean-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 on the other side of fifty, bound, each one, to be colder than the last because each one stripped her more bare, she would be quite so kind, and generous, and uncritical and all the rest. She remembered her comment on the girl at the party last night--tight-skinned youth. Distinctly critical that was. And how long would she go on being what they called a dear, when there was nobody to care whether she was a dear or not? And wouldn't it be a most miserable thing if she couldn't get out of the habit of smilingly lifting that finger which used to bring everybody rushing to her feet, and, when she lifted it, no one moved?

Her eyes grew dark with something disagreeably like fear. She no longer saw anything at all of Sir Stilton. Staring at him, what she saw for some frightening moments was an old woman left more and more alone, gradually eating more and more, till at last she ate a great deal, and, then, being upset inside, taking it out on her maid.

"But that," came the voice out of the darkness which for the last few moments had hidden Sir Stilton, as though answering her thoughts, "is just where husbands come in, and why it is such a mistake not to stick to them. Lovers, as no doubt you are aware, for you evidently must have been a pretty woman once, and probably had several--"

Once. He was saying once. The word brought her back to complete awareness of him again. Once. When, whatever might lie in front of her, it did remain true that less than six months ago Dwight--"Why," she interrupted herself, struck by a sudden painful thought, "how I'm clinging to Dwight! That boy. As if he were my only hope. That poor little boy--"

"Lovers," went on Sir Stilton, finishing his sentence, "as of course you must remember, invariably end by turning sour on the stomach."

Acutely aware of him now, she gazed at him icily. What an expression. What a way of describing those windings-up, sad, but with a charm of their own, and always ennobled by a real distress, which were so vivid in her memory. Poor Adrian Stacy, Dwight's predecessor, had been wound up less than a year ago; and she could repeat every word of the occasion, and not a word but did credit to them both. The winding-up of the one before that, Perry Lanks--or wasn't he the one before that? She couldn't quite remember--since become such a celebrity, hadn't been quite so good, because he was a lawyer, and wanted facts.

"Oh, Perry, there are no facts in love," she had told him, naturally not liking to be pinned down. Whereupon he had suggested, exactly as if he were cross-examining her, that she was being foolish.

"My dear, there are always facts," he had said, looking tired and patient.

Still, even so, there was nothing that actually could be called sour about their parting, in spite of her conviction--she hoped she didn't show it--that when a lover begins to look tired and patient it is time he was wound up; and as for the others, they were thought of to that day with nothing but affection and tenderness.

Yet here was this man, this Byles man, whose every word was like a slap in the face, connecting them, her dear, kind lovers, with sour stomachs.

"I can't imagine--" she began.

"--why your friends come to me," he promptly finished for her.

"Exactly. How much do I--?" she added, stretching out for her gloves and bag.

"I haven't earned my fee yet," he said. Adding, "Sit down," for she had got up and was towering over him.

"Thank you, no," she said, opening her bag. "How much do I--"

"Well, don't sit down then, but listen."

"There's nothing I wish to hear. How much do I--"

"Listen, please, instead of wasting time," he said, sharply. "The only person in the long run, who is of any use to a woman whose run has also been long--"

"Is this right?" she cut him short, determined to hear no more, and laying pound-notes on the table.

"The only person in the world, I tell you, who will stick to such a woman, who will bother about her," he persisted, pushing the notes aside, "is her husband. He has got to, you see, poor devil, as a rule. And the sensible thing for you to do is to get into touch with Skeffington again as quickly as possible. Sound advice," he said, rapping the table with a paper-knife. "You'll live to be grateful for it, I assure you."

He threw down the paper-knife, and got up too. He was shorter than she was--a short-legged, thick man, and she continued to tower. Skeffington, indeed, she thought, looking down her still lovely nose at him; without any "Mr."; just Skeffington; as though they were friends.

"Why not call him Job, and have done with it?" she freezingly suggested--at least, she hoped she was freezing.

Nothing, however, froze Sir Stilton. "Certainly," he said. "Delighted. I like Jews. Get into touch with Job, then. Real touch, I mean, not just fancying he's there when he isn't. Lay him, in fact. If he haunts you, he must be laid. The only way--you had better listen," he broke off, for she had turned her back and was walking to the door--"the only way, I tell you, to rid the mind of dreams and illusions is bodily contacts. How do you suppose love affairs would ever come to an end, if it weren't for the bodily contacts? Make friends with Job. See him often. Ask him to dinner. Lay him, in fact."

She turned and looked at him, her hand on the door-knob. "I came to you," she said, "for help, and all I've got--"

"Is insults. That's what you were going to say. Well, I dare say, I dare say, from your point of view. You can't stand plain truth. None of you women can. But for all that you've got help from me all right, if you choose to accept it. I've given you the soundest possible advice. Act on it, and you'll be cured. Just one moment, please--" he went on, raising his hand. "Ask that unfortunate husband of yours to dinner, and you'll find that the minute he's with you in the flesh he'll leave off being with you in the spirit. And by the way," he said quickly, for she was opening the door, "if any of the others start bothering you, the ones who weren't your husbands, and you begin seeing them when they aren't there--quite a possible development, mind you,--ask them to dinner too. Ask the lot," he finished, grinning a little. "Ask the whole lot, and size them up. They would size you up too, and then you'd all see--"

But she was gone. Pulling the door open with such violence that the woman dressed as a nurse came hurrying into the hall, her face scarlet, her eyes shining, she demanded her car.

"He's wonderful, isn't he?" said the nurse proudly.

"Oh, he's God's own wonder!" exclaimed Fanny, proceeding with such haste across the hall that the nurse had difficulty in keeping up with her.

And Sir Stilton, waiting in his consulting-room for the next patient, walked to the window and flung it open.

II

Outside London, beyond the belt of fog that lay thick and black over Harley Street where Fanny had just been, and Charles Street whence she had started, and Paddington whither she was going, it was a beautiful day--dear, frosty, with the bare branches of the wintry trees standing out, each a separate miracle of intricate grace, against a most delicate, blue sky. Larks quivered and trilled. In the little lanes, whose matted grass edges were ribbons of hoar-frost, carters, loading their horses, whistled cheerfully. Housewives sang as they banged mats against the door posts. And the world was so sparkling and so fairylike a place that nobody that morning, in the country, was cross.

Fanny, choking in London, scented what must be going on a few miles away, and felt that if she could get into the sun she might, in spite of everything, manage to calm down. So she had herself driven, on leaving Harley Street, to Paddington, deciding she would there take the first train to anywhere where she could breathe. Breathe, and think. Better, breathe and not think. But, anyhow, breathe.

Certainly she couldn't go home till she had recovered a little. She was much too angry at present to see anybody, or to be able to endure Miss Cartwright's carefully unnoticing face, or the anxious inquiries of Manby. She would send a message to Miss Cartwright to telephone cancelling her engagements for the day, and she would withdraw into solitude, and there sit quiet, and smooth out her ruffled feathers.

They were immensely ruffled. For the first time in her life she had been in the company of a common man, who said straight in her face things she had till then never imagined could be so much as thought about her, and she felt she deserved a little relaxation. Relaxation. Furious as she was, she couldn't help smiling at the word. Even in moments of distress and anger, she was often able to laugh at herself--an endearing trait, said her men friends; and her women friends, while admitting it was endearing and that Fanny was sweet, thought that though she might laugh at one crumpled rose-leaf in her bed, they doubted whether she would laugh much if the whole bed were full of crumpled rose-leaves. It was among the things that had been worrying her lately, the way this faculty of standing aside and watching herself, and being amused by what she saw, seemed to be deserting her. Surely she was taking everything that

happened very heavily now? Without much pluck? And didn't this point to a serious deterioration in her character? This, and flying at servants; this, and being so quick with acid adjectives to describe youth.

Job's fault, of course; really all Job's fault. But him she was going to leave behind in London. This one day she was determined to be free of him; and she would spend it in the country, not speaking to a soul, not being spoken to, rid of everybody and everything. Vague longings for pure, cold, solitary things like primroses, and moss, and little leafless coppices, came into her mind, and she wished it weren't still only the seventh of February, and that she could have sat in some earthy, damp-smelling wood, and tied cool primroses into bunches, quite still and quiet.

The trains were late because of the fog, and the first one, leaving forty minutes after it ought to have left, was for Oxford. Oxford would do very well, she thought, taking a ticket. No lonely copses there, but in its ancient gardens she would find silence. Also, she had nothing but pleasant associations connected with Oxford; it was, for instance, entirely free from Job. He wouldn't be there, because he never had been there or anywhere like it, his education--you could read about it in *\_Who's Who\_*--having been private. The man Byles wouldn't be there either, because the last thing that would remind her of him would be evidences of civilization. Dwight--yes, Dwight would be there, but he hadn't yet left off being a pleasant association, and perhaps, after a long day by herself, when it began to get dark she might go to his rooms, and ask to be given muffins--that is, if by that time she were feeling better.

However, she wasn't sure about going to Dwight. Remembering the way Byles had said: "Oh, my poor lady," she thought perhaps she would wait before seeing him, or rather before letting him see her. He had, she knew, the most romantic, poetic notions of her perfections, and possibly, beholding her at this unfavourable moment, might think she was always now going to look like that, and then--

Here Fanny gave herself a little shake, for she was ashamed. That boy. As though it mattered what he might think. No, she wouldn't see him. Let him come to Charles Street and see her. Was she then so really elderly that even an undergraduate at Oxford was of value to her? The next phase, if she didn't take care, would be going to Eton for her adorers; and there slid into her mind, apparently from nowhere, the words, *\_In sickness and in health\_*....

\* \* \* \* \*

How comfortable, how restful, how safe, she thought, considering them wistfully.

Yes, but what they were talking about was husbands. It was husbands who had to stick to one in sickness as well as in health, in one's wrinkled stages as well as in the tight-skinned ones. Lovers hadn't got to, and wouldn't dream of doing it either, especially not young lovers. They set so high a standard for one when first they fell in love that the exertion of keeping up to it wore one out, and brought on the very condition that frightened them off. Not that she ever had to exert herself yet--oh, well, just a little, perhaps, on Dwight's last visit, when he saw her again for the first time after her illness, and looked at her with such lamentable eyes. She had supposed it was deep, loving sympathy in his eyes. Now she wasn't quite so sure. It might, just as easily, have been another Oh, my poor lady.

\* \* \* \* \*

Walking along the platform at Paddington, that place of so many happy departures, because Conderley, in the days she now thought of as the Conderley Era, much as geologists speak of the Reptilian Age, had been a Lord-in-Waiting, and when his waits were at Windsor she would sometimes go down and spend an afternoon with him, coming back in time for dinner with her arms full of flowers and her eyes all lit up (for say what you will, there's nothing like a lover for making a woman be all lit up)--walking, then, along this platform of memories that dark and foggy morning, she looked, among the other waiting passengers, as a bird of paradise might look who should have strayed into a flock of sparrows. Conspicuous, that is. Very. Her black, as Manby described the soberest of her suits, didn't seem sober at all set beside the clothes of the poor. Inevitably, seeing the House it came from, there was an air about it, and an air, too, about her small black hat, pulled at the precise right angle over one eye. This hat, a most rakish and provocative affair in the eyes of the humble women on the platform, was perfectly plain except for a single scarlet quill sticking out, gaily and brightly, in the gloom, and her eyes, though the reverse of gay, were bright, too, from her recent scrap with Sir Stilton, and her cheeks were still flushed with fury. So that altogether she was a conspicuous figure; and a knot of harassed women, drooping beneath bundles and babies, watched her, half envious and half shocked.

"One of them kept ones," they decided, the most harassed among them remarking to her grim-mouthed neighbour that there seemed a lot to be said for this being kept business.

"Shut up, Mrs. Tombs," rebuked the neighbour.

"Hullo, Fanny," said a man's pleasant voice behind her as the train drew in. "Where on earth are you off to in this beastly fog?" And as she turned, surprised and vexed, for she had no wish to meet anyone she knew, he added, his eyes twinkling all over her, "You're looking very fit this morning. Getting back into your stride, what?"

Instantly she began to revive. There it was at last, after weeks and weeks, the familiar note of admiration. It warmed her like wine; it braced her like a tonic; better than any medicine or advice doctors might give her, was this simple assurance in her cousin's voice and eyes that she was lovely. Bother birthdays, bother Byles, bother Job, thought Fanny, smiling up into the smiling eyes which were so flatteringly and openly taking in every detail of her appearance.

"I'm fresh from a beauty parlour and a doctor," she said, "so if I can't look fit now, when shall I?"

"A doctor, Fanny? My dear girl," said Pontyfridd, taking her arm and walking her across the platform to a suitable carriage--he was her first cousin, as well as her first love when she was still in the schoolroom, and they had always been the greatest friends,--"don't, for God's sake, get into the doctor habit. You've been dosed enough, all those months in the country. Just forget it now, and enjoy yourself. Niggs--" she was his wife,--"is never out of that fellow's house. That fellow in Harley Street. Styles, or some such name."

"Byles," said Fanny.

"Yes, Byles. My heaven, what a name. Do you know him?"

"Do I not?" said Fanny gaily, for suddenly Byles and his hateful talk seemed entirely negligible. Here she was, with her own sort, her own set, her own blood, and oh, it was cosy--so cosy and safe, after the desolation of Byles's presence. "That's why," she laughed up at Pontyfridd, bigger than ever in his fur-lined coat, "I'm off for a day in the country, to try and get over him."

"Splendid, darling. You'll come with me, and we'll get over him together. Wait till his bills begin coming in, though. He needs a lot of getting over then. You'd think my poor small Niggs had more the matter with her than her tiny body possibly had room for. I'm going to Windsor. I've got to see the Office of Works about something at the Castle. We'll lunch together, and you shall tell me what you've got into your little head that has started you off being doctored again. Yes, darling, you're lunching with me to-day," he said as she opened her mouth to speak. "Why it's simply years since we've had a jaunt together."

He helped her into the carriage. "There they go," grumbled Mrs. Tombs, nudging her neighbour. "Getting into a first-class carriage while you and me, just because we're respectable, 'as to go third like 'errings."

"Shut up, Mrs. Tombs," rebuked the neighbour.

Mrs. Tombs, however, dedined to shut up. On the contrary, she loudly commented on the rug the gentleman was carefully tucking round the lady's knees. "See that there rug?" she inquired of her embarrassed neighbour. "Solid fur, that is. Do you and me get tucked up in solid fur? Not 'alf, and it's because we're respectable. I tell you, Mrs. W., there's no \_money\_ in being respectable."

"Now just you 'ush," said the neighbour, shocked.

"Well, I ain't going to. I've 'ushed a lot too much, first and last. 'Ushing don't get you far, no more than being respectable. An' if we could look inside two stomachs in there, I don't mind betting they're both as full as they'll 'old of good fried bacon. You and me ain't got no bacon inside us, 'ave we, an' d'you know why?"

"No, and don't want to," snapped her friend, trying to pull her away.

"Want to or not, you're goin' to 'ear," persisted Mrs. Tombs. "It's because we're respectable. I tell you there's no money in it, and I'm fed up, and I'd chuck it to-morrow and go off with 'im in there or anybody you like to name, if 'e'd give me a good 'ot breakfast first."

"You're a sinful woman, an' I shall 'ave to pray for you," was all her scandalized neighbour could say, making another attempt to pull her away.

"George darling," said Fanny, carefully not looking through the window, and though she couldn't quite hear what the two were saying, unable not to conjecture it was something about herself and her cousin that wasn't quite nice, "do you think that poor thing is--? Do you think she has been--?"

"I hope so," said Pontyfridd, who, being as quick at hearing as he was at seeing, hadn't missed a word. "Poor devil," he added. "This frightful morning is enough to make anyone want to. But I must say it seems a bit early." And on a sudden impulse--he was famous in the family for his sudden impulses,--he opened the door, jumped out, went up to the two women, who looked completely scared, and patted Mrs. Tombs reassuringly on the shoulder.

"You'll miss the train, now," he said pleasantly, "if you stand here gossiping. Both of you go and have a good hot meal in the restaurant car. My guests, you know. I'll tell the attendant. Hurry along--and have lots of bacon with the chicken," he finished, winking at Mrs. W., who, as she said afterwards, could have sunk, and gently pushing Mrs. Tombs, while Mrs. W. pulled, towards the rear of the train.

"Take your seats, please," shouted the guard, coming along with his green flag.

"Hold on a minute," caned out Pontyfridd. "Let these ladies get to the restaurant car--" and going back into his compartment he slammed the door, re-arranged the rug round Fanny, and asked if she had heard what they said.

"No," said Fanny. "But I think it was rude. What was it?"

"I'll tell you at luncheon," laughed Pontyfridd, settling himself in his corner.

But presently he didn't laugh, and said, for the second time, "Poor devil." And, again presently, he leaned across to her, and asked, "Fanny, do you ever hate yourself?" and when she, smiling at such an odd question, and still being very much the adorable, desirable woman, answered, "No. Ought I to?" he looked at her a moment a little thoughtfully, and offering her his cigarette case said, "Well, well--what a time we take to grow up, don't we."

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She hadn't an idea what he meant; but, as it didn't sound very promising, decided not to ask. Besides, there was an expression on his face as if for two pins he might start talking about the European situation--a serious, slightly abstracted expression.

She was a sensible woman--Fanny long had prided herself on being sensible,--and she knew that men sometimes must be serious; but let them, she held, be serious in their offices, or their Cabinet meetings, or their cathedrals, or the House, and not waste precious moments when they are alone with a pretty woman. Everything had its appointed moment. Even the Bible said there was a time for this, and a time for that; while as for the phrase pretty woman, she very well knew it was an under-statement. Always she had been most exquisite. She was simply unable to remember a time when, if she came into a room, there hadn't seemed to be a quick silence, a holding of the breath.

So that naturally she was, till lately, very sure of herself, and just now on the platform, when Pontyfridd's eyes examined her with such obvious pleasure and appreciation, she had been as sure of herself as ever, at once forgetting every one of her recent worries and doubts, while as for Sir Stilton, with his ridiculous, Oh, my poor lady, he might never have existed. Therefore it seemed a pity that George, so generally cheerful and on the spot on occasions like this, should choose suddenly to go grave. It was those two drunks. They had upset him. Which poet was it poor Jim Conderley used to quote, who said he never could really let himself go to being happy because of his dying day, and because women had cancer? Something like that he had said; she couldn't remember the exact words. But as though it helped, not being happy! George was rather like that. The minute he saw anybody poor or cold, he left off being cheerful. If she hadn't been there, he probably would have presented the two women with his fur-lined coat. As it was, he had presented them with a meal, she discovered, on the attendant's appearing and wanting to know if the order was correct.

"You're terribly sweet, George," she said, when the man had gone, laying her hand affectionately for a moment on his knee. "I wish I had thought of that. But I seem to think of things too late always--that sort of thing, I mean."

"My lamb, you'd have created a terrific sensation if you had tried to do anything, and those women would have run like hares. Cold?" he added suddenly, looking at her more attentively.

Now what did he see? wondered Fanny, at once getting deeper into her collar.

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By this time the train was well out of the black London fog, and had got into a white mist. An extremely unbecoming hard glare was filling the carriage, from which there seemed no escape except deep in the collar of her coat. Also, the wrath Byles had stirred in her had now died down and with it the brightness of her eyes. Then there had been those women, and George thinking about them instead of about her, and turning serious, which naturally had reacted on her. So that though she managed to go on smiling gaily for a little, her smiles grew fainter as the light grew stronger and he remained thoughtful, and after West Drayton they vanished altogether, because it was there that his eyes suddenly began searching her face, with the result that he asked her if she were cold.

That meant she must be looking pinched. Most unbecoming to look pinched. Flattened nostrils, and things like that.

"Oh no--not a bit," she said quickly, wriggling deeper into her collar.

"Don't you catch cold now, Fanny," he said, leaning across and taking the collar in both hands and drawing it closer round her throat.

So that was it. Those terribly observant eyes had caught sight of what H el ene had declared could be helped enormously; and immediately she made up her mind that nothing would induce her to lunch with him. What? Sit opposite him, probably facing a horrid big plate-glass window, and be obliged to unfasten her coat?

He, having fixed her up, as he imagined, all snug and warm, gave the fur an almost motherly final pat, and said, "You oughtn't to be out a day like this. It's much too freezing for a wispy thing like you. I know what," he went on quickly, "I've got some brandy. I'll give you some. Warm you up," he assured her, pulling out a small flask, and beginning to pour a little into a tiny glass.

"Do I look--so funny?" faltered Fanny.

"Not funny, darling. Never could you look anything but adorable--" well, that was better--"but a bit tired," he said, intent on not spilling the brandy.

Tired. Most unbecoming. Hollow eyes, and things like that. How much she disliked being told that she looked tired; how much she dreaded it. Only too well did she know what it meant when people, full of sympathy, exclaimed, "Fanny darling, \_how\_ tired you're looking! Don't you think you ought to be in bed?"

"You told me at Paddington I was--" she began; and stopped.

"So you were, at Paddington," he agreed. "Pitch dark there, though, and anybody"--he smiled, as he offered her the little glass,--"can look fit if it's dark enough."

The brandy spilled. Either the train gave a lurch, or she took the glass clumsily, or both; but it was spilled.

"That's not kind," she said, pushing the glass away and leaning back in her corner. It was she herself now who pulled her collar as close as possible round her throat. "No, don't pour out any more. Besides, you've got to get out soon. George, that's the first unkind thing you've said to me in your life."

"Darling, I'd die sooner than hurt a single one of your extremely precious hairs--" had he noticed them too, then, and how thinned out they were?--"but we all know, don't we, that you've been very ill, and aren't nearly as strong yet as you're soon going to be--oh Lord, here's Slough. Come along. The other train's waiting."

But Fanny wouldn't come along. No, she was going to Oxford. No, she had never agreed to lunch. No, she had arranged to go to Oxford, and must stick to it. "You'll miss your train," she said, as he still stood outside the door, trying to persuade her.

"My sweet Fanny, don't be tiresome. Look how the sun's shining. And why on earth you should go to Oxford and waste your time on undergraduates--"

Waste her time? Could he mean that even undergraduates wouldn't now--?

Startled, she looked at him. Nothing after that would make her budge. So he had to go, and as his train moved out of the station and curved away round the Windsor bend, and hers presently went on its different way, she was for a while dejected again, and frightened.

Then she pulled herself together. "You're growing altogether too suspicious and touchy to live," she said aloud; and decided that what she probably needed was a good meal, and that the first thing she did in Oxford would be to go and have one.

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Avoiding the bigger hotels, she went to a small one she came across in an obscure street, where she lunched alone, except for one old lady in a dark corner, attended by an ancient waiter. There was a big bright fire, and a sideboard loaded with shining electro-plated empty soup-tureens, and enormous dish-covers which covered nothing, and she thought the food much better than any she got at home.

"Why doesn't Mrs. Denton ever give me this?" she wondered, eating something she didn't know, and liking it very much.

It turned out, on inquiry of the waiter, who seemed slightly surprised at the question, to be part of a beef-steak pudding, and the vegetable, he informed her, again with slight surprise on her praising it too, was cabbage. "Savoy," said the waiter. "Savoy," repeated Fanny, making a mental note, so as not to forget to ask Mrs. Denton whether she knew about it.

After the pudding, there was apple-pie and custard, but that wasn't so good; one would have to be really very hungry, she thought, to like this kind of crust. The coffee, however, was hot and not bad, and she drew her chair up to the fire to drink it, and lit a cigarette, and, being satisfactorily fed, was inclined to smile at herself, after the varied emotions of the night, and of the day, too, as far as it had got, for being able to sit warming her knees at a strange fire in Oxford, in a condition hardly distinguishable from placid.

"It's the pudding," she decided presently. "I'm what Edward would have called slabbed down, or plugged, or some frightful word like that--" Edward having been the one next after Lord Conderley in her life, and as great a contrast to him as the Cainozoic Period was to the Reptilian Age preceding it. Her feelings, she recognized, couldn't have free play while they were entombed in pudding, hence their quiescence. How useful. She mustn't forget to ask Mrs. Denton if she knew how to make it. She might try it when Job began bothering. And gazing into the fire, her thoughts wandered to Edward in his heyday.

Dear Edward. What fun he had been. So completely disrespectful of everything and everybody Conderley had taught her to venerate. He never opened a book; he said poetry gave him a stomach-ache. And once, in the early days, when the Conderley atmosphere still hung about her and she said something about the poet Wordsworth, he called him old Fish

Face. This, dearly reprehensibly, had greatly refreshed her. Strange what virtue there is in just change. Darling Edward. He used to look so particularly charming in his grey top-hat at Ascot. Yet that, too, had ended in tears--not the top-hat, though she did briefly wonder how grey top-hats ended, but their happy days together. His tears, too, if you please, this time; Edward, of all people, actually crying. But by then she had got involved with Perry--he was the one who finished by looking patient--and the only decent thing was to say good-bye to Edward. She hoped he had kept well. She didn't mean kept well, though of course she hoped that too, but kept well. He had been so very good-looking. She would really grieve if she thought he had, perhaps, grown fat, and on those hot islands, where he was Governor or something, letting himself go to too much whisky.

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Immersed in the past, she sat quietly smoking while the old lady, from her table in the dark corner, watched her with a hostile eye. Old ladies of the class which is regarded as the backbone of England, and all clergymen who didn't know who she was, viewed Fanny at this time with suspicion. She was so very striking, and also ravaged. No good woman is ever, held the clergymen and the old ladies, either striking or ravaged, but especially not ravaged. The truly good woman merely gradually fades, they held. She grows dimmer and dimmer, and more and more like what one's mother used to be.

Fanny, however, at fifty wasn't in the least like anybody's mother, but had become, to look at, the sort of woman from whom clergymen instinctively shrink, and seeing her in a train they would get into another carriage, or meeting her in the street they would gaze, carefully absorbed, at the nearest equivalent to a view. If, though, on the other hand, at a public meeting she was sitting on the platform among archbishops, and her name was on the list of supporters so that they could read and know who she was, their confidence and admiration at once knew no bounds.

"That very beautiful Lady Frances Skeffington was there--you know, the daughter of the Duke of St. Bildads, the unlucky duke whose estate was ruined by having to pay death duties three times within five years," they would tell their wives afterwards. "The Archbishop seemed to take great pleasure in having her sit next to him."

"Wasn't she divorced, or something?"

"My dear, we mustn't judge."

This, though, wasn't a public meeting; there was no list of names to guide anybody, and the old lady had to go by appearances. In that place and room they were against Fanny, who presently heard an extremely distinct voice coming out of the corner behind her saying, "I mind smoking."

She was startled, and turned round quickly. She had forgotten the old lady. "I'm so sorry," she said, throwing her cigarette into the fire.

"If you had asked me if I minded I would have told you I did," said the old lady, folding up her table napkin and putting it through a bone ring. "But as you didn't ask me, I must tell you, without being asked, that I do mind. I mind very much."

"I'm so sorry," said Fanny again.

Then there was silence, during which the old lady, from the cover of her corner, studied the sideways view of the small black hat, for Fanny, now aware of her, and feeling it rude to sit with her back turned, had pushed her chair round a little, the curve of the scarlet quill, the tip, if she had known it, of a celebrated nose, and an ear-ring made of a single jewel, which she judged sham.

"One excuses," she was thinking, "a pretty girl for being a pretty girl, because it is not her fault, but an elderly woman can only lay the blame on herself if she manages, by artifices of which she should be ashamed, to seem more or less good-looking. Having had her turn, she should blush to try to go on out of it. Probably this one is here, all painted and dolled up, to see if she can pick up innocent boys."

And she thanked heaven that she herself had no innocent boys liable to be picked up, nor that which must, or should, precede innocent boys, a husband; for husbands too, she understood, were liable to become entangled in predatory female activities.

"Perhaps she'll go now," thought Fanny, who had seen the napkin being put through a ring, and therefore deduced the old lady must be staying in the hotel and liked having the same napkin over again.

She had a great longing for a cigarette, and also a great longing, having had the cigarette, to get out into the sun before the really lovely winter day folded itself away into evening; but as the old lady didn't move, she herself got up, smiled vaguely over her shoulder at her, received no faintest movement of a muscle in return, and went into the passage.

Opposite, there was a door which had Smoking written on it. It opened into a small sitting-room, with another bright fire burning, and going in and drawing up a comfortable chair to the fire, she sat down and again lit a cigarette. But she hadn't been there more than five minutes before the old lady came in, and stood looking at her.



"Am I keeping the fire off you?" asked Fanny after a moment, during which nothing was said, and moving her chair to one side. "Oh, and--" she added with a smile, holding it up, "do you mind my cigarette in here?"

"Certainly I mind it," said the old lady concisely.

"But," Fanny justified herself, "it is written on the door."

"You asked me if I minded, and I have told you."

"Oh, then, of course--"

And this one, too, was thrown into the fire.

The old lady stood in the middle of the room, leaning on her stick. "If I've said it once to the management, I've said it a hundred times," she said irritably, "that the notice on the door ought to be covered up, and 'Private' put instead. This is my sitting-room."

"I'm so sorry," said Fanny, hastily getting out of the chair. "You do see, though, don't you, that it was impossible for me to know?"

"Perhaps I should explain that the room is for my exclusive use so long as no one else is staying in the hotel. Passers-by are not eligible. I imagine you are a passer-by?"

"Yes, but I might take a room for the night and not stay in it, and then become eligible for the sitting-room, couldn't I?" asked Fanny.

"Certainly, if you care to fling money about," said the old lady, looking her up and down as much as to say she wondered whose money. "It seems a great deal to pay, though, for the questionable pleasure of smoking one cigarette."

"I'd have to have several, to make up for it," smiled Fanny.

"Then I should be driven into my bedroom. Not that I am not used to that. So many queer people come to Oxford in term time, and all of them want to smoke in here. The management is most disobliging, and does nothing to stop them. Sometimes it is so disobliging that it almost seems as if it wanted me to go. Yet, as I live here most of the year, I presume I am of value to them. Then there's the repertory theatre, and the whole of that unpleasant gang. They come here too, and make a noise, and still the management does nothing. Much as I dislike cinemas, I must say there's something to be said for them in university cities. At least the absurd creatures, those so-called stars, are fixed to their screens, and can't get off them when the performance is over, and walk about the town obstructing and inciting."

Fanny, during this, was gradually making for the door. She suspected that she was going to be buttonholed. The poor old thing evidently had no one to talk to, and was bursting with things she wanted to say. If she, Fanny, were a really nice, kind woman, she would stay and listen, but she didn't think she could really be nice and kind, so urgent was her wish to get away. Always she had dreaded buttonholers. There was an arch one in a poem Jim used to read aloud, and it was like a nightmare the way he went on and on, not letting the unhappy man he had got hold of, and who was very busy, if she remembered, and in a great hurry, go till he had said his say. This old lady showed signs of being his near relation. She was quite unlike a Lapland night. There was nothing serene and calm about her, and certainly nothing lovely. Something was wrong with that description of old age. The poet who wrote it must have been very young, and couldn't have seen many old ladies. The one before her, she felt uncomfortably, was much more the real thing. Was it possible that she herself would someday be like that? So old, that everybody who was fond of her was dead, and she dragging round hotels because her servants were dead too, and she didn't like new ones? Or, even worse, perhaps be in the clutches of a companion, and the companion, when she was bored and cross, bullying her? \_Noble, lovely little Fanny\_, whose life had ringed her round like a wreath of flowers, and all her flanks--odd how Conderley's quotations stuck,--with silken garlands drest; could it really be that to this complexion--his phrase again,--she would come at last?

The old lady, who now had assumed for Fanny the shape of things to come, was arranging herself in what was evidently her special chair, which was also the one Fanny, decidedly unlucky that day, had sat in, and was welling up in it formlessly. "Why doesn't she go?" she was thinking. "I want my nap."

But Fanny, in spite of the fear of being buttonholed, hesitated, because of the picture in her mind of what, if she went away, she would be leaving behind the shut door--the silence of the dingy hotel-room, empty except for that lonely figure by the fire, and for weeks, for months, for several more years perhaps, there the figure would be sitting in that same silence, except during occasional brief incursions of the repertory gang, and except from time to time for an argument, evidently embittered, with the management. And she thought, "Someday I shall be sitting too like that, when I've quarrelled with the companion--" adding, her better nature getting the upper hand, "I expect I ought to stay with the poor old thing really, and let her talk. George would. Look how kind he was to those women at Paddington. Why, he even patted them."

But her better nature, being as yet undeveloped--"What a time we take to grow up," George had said in the train, struck by something he missed in her,--didn't keep the upper hand long. The sun out in the street was shining too brightly, the

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