Acting Edition

The Skin of Our Teeth

by Thornton Wilder

SAMUEL FRENCH

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THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH was first presented by Michael Myerberg at the Plymouth Theatre in New York, with set design by Albert Johnson and costumes by Mary Percy Schenck. The director was Elia Kazan. The cast was as follows:

ANNOUNCER . . . . . Morton DaCosta
SABINA . . . . . Tallulah Bankhead
MR. FITZPATRICK . . . . . E. G. Marshall
MRS. ANTROBUS . . . . . Florence Eldridge
DINOSAUR . . . . . Remo Buffano
MAMMOTH . . . . . Andrew Ratousheff
TELEGRAPH BOY . . . . . Dickie Van Patten
GLADYS . . . . . Frances Heflin
HENRY . . . . . Montgomery Clift
MR. ANTROBUS . . . . . Fredric March
DOCTOR . . . . . Blair Davies
PROFESSOR . . . . . Ralph Kellard
JUDGE . . . . . Joseph Smiley
HOMER . . . . . Ralph Cullinan
MISS E. MUSE . . . . . Edith Faversham
MISS T. MUSE . . . . . Emily Lorraine
MISS M. MUSE . . . . . Eva Mudge Nelson
USHER . . . . . Stanley Prager
USHER . . . . . Harry Clark
GIRL (DRUM MAJORETTE) . . . . . Elizabeth Scott
GIRL (DRUM MAJORETTE) . . . . . Patricia Riordan
FORTUNE TELLER . . . . . Florence Reed
CHAIR PUSHER . . . . . Earl Sydnor
CHAIR PUSHER . . . . . Carroll Clark
CONVEENER . . . . . Stanley Weede
CONVEENER . . . . . Seumas Flynn
CONVEENER . . . . . Aubrey Fassett
CONVEENER . . . . . Stanley Prager
CONVEENER . . . . . Harry Clark
BROADCAST OFFICIAL . . . . . Morton DaCosta
DEFEATED CANDIDATE . . . . . Joseph Smiley
MR. TREMAYNE . . . . . Ralph Kellard
HESTER . . . . . Eulabelle Moore
IVY . . . . . Viole Dean
FRED BAILEY . . . . . Stanley Prager

THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH opened at Phoenix Theatre in London on May 16, 1945 and at Piccadilly Theatre in London on September 11, 1946, directed by Laurence Olivier. The cast was as follows:

ANNOUNCER . . . . . Michael Lynd
SABINA . . . . . Vivien Leigh
MR. FITZPATRICK . . . . . Sidney Monckton
MRS. ANTROBUS . . . . . Joan Young
DINOSAUR . . . . . Michael Lynd
MAMMOTH . . . . . Roger Braban
TELEGRAPH BOY . . . . . John Grange
GLADYS . . . . . Pamela Conroy
HENRY . . . . . Terry Morgan
MR. ANTROBUS . . . . . Cecil Parker
DOCTOR . . . . . Peter Lord
PROFESSOR . . . . . Anthony Wallis
JUDGE . . . . . Maurice Bannister
HOMER . . . . . Norman Webb
MISS E. MUSE . . . . . Meg Maxwell-Lyte
MISS T. MUSE . . . . . Jessie Spencer
MISS M. MUSE . . . . . Daphne Newton
1ST USHER; CONVEENER . . . . . Geoffrey Barrie
2ND USHER; CONVEENER . . . . . Leonard Maguire
GIRL (DRUM MAJORETTE) . . . . . Eve Moore
GIRL (DRUM MAJORETTE) . . . . . Penelope Shaw
GIRL (DRUM MAJORETTE) . . . . . Jessie Spencer
FORTUNE TELLER . . . . . Ena Burrill
CHAIR PUSHER . . . . . William Gillespie
CHAIR PUSHER . . . . . John Grange
CHAIR PUSHER . . . . . Maurice Bannister
THEATRE COMMISSIONER; CONVEENER . . . . . Hugh Stewart
CONVEENER . . . . . Wallas Eaton
CONVEENER . . . . . John Murphy
CONVEENER . . . . . Norman Webb
CONVEENER . . . . . Anthony Wallis
MR. TREMAYNE . . . . . Charles Doran
HESTER . . . . . Daphne Newton
IVY . . . . . Ann Wilton

THE STORY OF THE PLAY

Here is a comedy about George Antrobus, his wife and two children, and their general utility maid, Lily Sabina, all of Excelsior, New Jersey. George Antrobus is John Doe or George Spelvin or you – the average American at grips with a destiny, sometimes sour, sometimes sweet. The Antrobuses have survived fire, flood, pestilence, the seven-year locusts, the ice age, the black pox and the double feature, a dozen wars and as many depressions. They run many a gamut, are as durable as radiators, and look upon the future with a disarming optimism. Alternately bewitched, befuddled and becalmed, they are the stuff of which heroes are made – heroes and buffoons. They are true offspring of Adam and Eve, victims of all the ills that flesh is heir to. They have survived a thousand calamities by the skin of their teeth. Here is a tribute to their indestructibility.

– Richard Maney

SETTING

ACT I – Home, Excelsior, New Jersey

ACT II – Atlantic City Boardwalk

ACT III – Home, Excelsior, New Jersey

FOREWORD

It is a great pleasure for Samuel French and the Wilder family to introduce the definitive acting edition of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning homage to human endurance, *The Skin of Our Teeth*. This 2015 edition incorporates Wilder's final choices for the play's dialogue and stage directions, and clarifies the differences between the playwright's own staging concept and the stage directions added for the world premiere Broadway production, directed by Elia Kazan, which opened on November 18, 1942.

THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH IN PRINT

Harper & Bros (now HarperCollins) published the first reading edition of *The Skin of Our Teeth* on December 18, 1942, precisely a month after the play's successful New York premiere. This handsome hardback edition represented the playwright's pre-rehearsal version of the drama.

The Samuel French acting edition, the second version of *Skin* to appear in print, was published in 1944, when the play became available for stock and amateur licensing. In keeping with acting editions in this period, the Samuel French edition, with its richly detailed stage directions, and lighting and costume plots, was a facsimile of the stage manager's prompt copy. In other words, this version of the play captured in print with precision what audiences experienced at the Plymouth Theatre (now the Gerald Schoenfeld) on West 46th Street.

Wilder was on active duty with Army Air Force Intelligence throughout the work's premiere run. As a result, despite many an anguished phone call and letter, he was able to see it performed only twice before departing in May 21, 1943 for service in North Africa and Italy. While it is on the record that Wilder approved the 1944 Samuel French acting edition, this approval, no doubt took the form of an *ex post facto* blessing given after his return to United States in the spring of 1945. What is clear is that when Thornton Wilder

prepared his definitive edition of *The Skin of Our Teeth* for Harpers' *Three Plays** trade edition in 1957, he chose his 1942 pre-rehearsal version of the script.

Even allowing for the different purposes served by acting and trade editions, the decision Wilder made in 1957 tells us that many of the original stage directions did not reflect Wilder's vision for his drama. That said, we recognize that the script which resulted from the collaboration of celebrated director Elia Kazan and other notable figures in the history of 20th century American drama is a significant and useful blue print for mounting *The Skin of Our Teeth.* For this reason, we have chosen to bracket all stage directions not included in Wilder's definitive text – and we [*(cordially)*] invite directors to employ them or make different choices. In addition to bracketing all stage directions from the original Broadway premiere, we have also re-inserted a short piece of pre-rehearsal text, two Act I speeches by Homer and The Judge, that were cut during this production and consequently did not appear in the first acting edition. (These are the speeches written in Hebrew and ancient Greek for which we have also included transcriptions and translations.)

THE SKIN TODAY

Although written in the lengthening shadow of WWII, Wilder intended *The Skin of Our Teeth* to be a timeless play about human endurance in the face of perpetual threats to civilization. And the state of civilization being what it is, artists performing this play will find opportunities to creatively personalize and update his text – just as Wilder would have wished it. For example, the opening monologue by the Announcer includes reports on the theatre in which the play is being performed and the names of thee theatre staff members. Obviously, they can be replaced with production specific details and names of current theatre staff. In the same spirit, Wilder included references to 1940s popular culture, including the actress who plays Sabina's appearance in well-known plays of the time. These titles may likewise be changed to include names of productions and characters familiar to modern audiences.

**Three Plays* (HarperCollins) contains the definitive versions of Wilder's three major dramas, *Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth,* and *The Matchmaker.* It also includes a well-known and widely quoted Preface by the playwright in which he discusses the background and sources of the works.

With a happy bow to what occurred memorably on Broadway once-upon-a time, we have, with the exception of antiquated cue sheets for properties and sound, retained all original supporting materials, including the Wardrobe, Property, and Scenic Plots, and Richard Maney's "Story of the Play." (Maney, the play's publicist, wrote this piece during the *Skin*'s pre-Broadway try-out at the Shubert Theater in New Haven.)

It is a pleasure to conclude this note by thanking Rosey Strub on the Wilder family side and the able team at Samuel French for their help in making this *definitive* acting edition possible. Long may it play.

– Tappan Wilder
March 2015

ACT ONE

[Music – Overture, "William Tell Overture"]

(A projection screen in the middle of the curtain. Slide #1: The name of the theatre, and the words: NEWS AND EVENTS OF THE WORLD. An **ANNOUNCER***'s voice is heard.)*

ANNOUNCER. The management takes pleasure in bringing to you – The News and Events of the World:

(Slide #2: The sun appearing above the horizon.)

Freeport, Long Island. The sun rose this morning at 6:32 a.m. This gratifying event was first reported by

[(Slide #3)]

Mrs. Dorothy Stetson of Freeport, Long Island, who promptly telephoned the Mayor. The Society for Affirming

[(Slide #4)]

the End of the World at once went into a special session and postponed the arrival of that event for *twenty-four hours.*

[(Slide #5)]

All honor to Mrs. Stetson for her public spirit.

New York City:

(Slide #6: of the front doors of the theatre in which this play is playing.)

The X Theatre. During the daily cleaning of this theatre a number of lost objects were collected, as usual

(Slide #7: Three cleaning **WOMEN** *with mops and pails.)*

by Mesdames Simpson, Pateslewski, and Moriarity. Among these objects found today was

[(Slide #8)]

a wedding ring, inscribed: To Eva from Adam. Genesis II:18. The ring will be restored to the owner or owners, if their credentials are satisfactory.

Tippehatchee, Vermont:

(Slide #9: Slide representing a glacier.)

The unprecedented cold weather of this summer has produced a condition that has not yet been satisfactorily explained. There is a report that a wall of ice is moving southward across these counties. The disruption of communications by the cold wave now crossing the country has rendered exact information difficult, but little credence is given to the rumor that the ice

[(Slide #10)]

had pushed the Cathedral of Montreal as far as St. Albans, Vermont. For further information see your daily papers.

Excelsior, New Jersey:

(Slide #11: A modest suburban home.)

The home of Mr. George Antrobus, the inventor of the wheel. The discovery of the wheel, following so closely on the discovery of the lever, has centered the attention of the country on Mr. Antrobus of this attractive suburban residence district. This is his home, a commodious seven-room house, conveniently situated near a public school, a Methodist church, and a firehouse; and it is right handy to an A. and P.

(Slide #12: Of **MR. ANTROBUS** *on his front steps, smiling and lifting his straw hat. He holds a wheel.)*

Mr. Antrobus, himself. He comes of very old stock and has made his way up from next to nothing. It is reported that he was once a gardener, but left that situation under circumstances that have been variously

reported. Mr. Antrobus is a veteran of foreign wars, and bears a number of scars, front and back.

(Slide #13: of **MRS. ANTROBUS**, *holding some roses.)*

This is Mrs. Antrobus, the charming and gracious president of the Excelsior Mothers' Club. Mrs. Antrobus is an excellent needlewoman; it is she who invented the apron on which so many interesting changes have been wrung since.

(Slide #14: of the **FAMILY** *and* **SABINA.***)*

Here we see the Antrobuses with their two children, Henry and Gladys, and friend. The friend, in the rear, is Lily Sabina, the maid. I know we all want to congratulate this typical American family on its enterprise.

(Projection out)

We all wish Mr. Antrobus a successful future. Now the management takes you to the interior of this home for a brief visit.

(Curtain rises on the living room of a commuter's home. [There is enough open space between the lower ends of set, right and left, and the proscenium to show the fence that surrounds the house. Down right is a door to the kitchen and backyard; up right is a pagoda with steps leading through and upstairs; up center is a window; down left is the front door. A walnut Hamlet chair is below door right; a backless bench up right below pagoda; a sofa up center below window; a lightweight round mahogany table center; rocking chair right of this table with hassock below the chair; armchair left of table; two side tables above and below door left, a clothes tree up left corner; a pair of fire dogs down center before an imaginary fireplace.])

*(***SABINA** *– straw-blonde, over-rouged – [enters from right, crosses to the window up center, on sixth chime, a feather duster under her elbow – looks off left, eyes shaded.])*

SABINA. Oh, oh, oh! Six o'clock and the master not home yet. Pray God nothing serious has happened to him crossing the Hudson River. *[(to audience:)]* If anything happened to him, we would certainly be inconsolable and have to move into a less desirable residence district. *[(crossing to door left)]* The fact is I don't know what'll become of us. Here it is the middle of August and the coldest day of the year. *[(looking through door window)]* It's simply freezing; the dogs are sticking to the sidewalks; *[(to audience:)]* can anybody explain that? No. *[(crossing to table down left, dusting it)]* But I'm not surprised. The whole world's at sixes and sevens, and why the house hasn't fallen down about our ears long ago is a miracle to me.

(A fragment of the left wall, [flat "A,"] leans precariously over the stage. **SABINA** *looks at it nervously, [backs away from it] and it slowly rights itself.)*

Every night this same anxiety as to whether the master will get home safely: whether he'll bring home anything to eat. In the midst of life we are in the midst of death, *[(crosses to flat "A" to dust motto on wall)]* a truer word was never said.

(The fragment of scenery, [flat "B,"] flies up into the lofts. **SABINA** *is struck dumb with surprise, shrugs shoulders and [crosses to left-center table and] starts dusting* **MR. ANTROBUS***'s chair, including the underside.)*

Of course, Mr. Antrobus is a very fine man, an excellent husband and father, a pillar of the church, and has all the best interests of the community at heart. Of course, every muscle goes tight every time he passes a policeman; but what I think is that there are certain charges that ought not to be made, and I think I may add, ought not to be allowed to be made; we're all human; who isn't?

(She [crosses to chair right of table,] dusts **MRS. ANTROBUS***'s rocking chair, [then stops dusting.])*

SABINA. *(cont.)* Mrs. Antrobus is as fine a woman as you could hope to see. She lives only for her children; and if it would be any benefit to her children she'd see the rest of us stretched out dead at her feet without turning a hair that's the truth. *[(dusts back of chair slightly)]* If you want to know anything more about Mrs. Antrobus, just go and look at a tigress, and look hard. As to the children – *[(crosses to above table, center – picks up slingshot from table)]* Well, Henry Antrobus is a real, clean-cut American boy. He'll graduate from High School one of these days, if they make the alphabet any easier. – *[(aims the slingshot)]* Henry, when he has a stone in his hand, has a perfect aim; he can hit anything from a bird to an older brother – *[(slingshot down on table)]* Oh! I didn't mean to say that! – but it certainly was an unfortunate accident, and it was very hard getting the police out of the house. *[(crosses down right-center toward hassock – dusts it)]* Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus' daughter is named Gladys. She'll make some good man a good wife some day, *[(to audience:)]* if he'll just come down off the movie screen and ask her.

So here we are! *[(crosses to fireplace down center – dusts right fire dog)]* We've managed to survive for some time now, catch as catch can, the fat and the lean, and if the dinosaurs don't trample us to death, and if the grasshoppers don't eat up our garden, we'll all live to see better days, knock on wood. *[(knocks on wood, crosses to left fire dog – dusts it)]* Each new child that's born to the Antrobuses seems to them to be sufficient reason for the whole universe's being set in motion; and each new child that dies seems to them to have been spared a whole world of sorrow, and what the end of it will be is still very much an open question. *[(crosses right to dust picture on flat "B" above door, right)]*

We've rattled along, hot and cold, for some time now – *(A portion of the wall above the door, right, flies up into the air and disappears.) [(to audience:)]* – and my advice to you is not to inquire into why or whither, but just

enjoy your ice cream while it's on your plate, – that's my philosophy. *[(crosses down right to chair – dusts it)]* Don't forget that a few years ago we came through the depression by the skin of our teeth! *[(crosses to window)]* One more tight squeeze like that and where will we be?

(This is a cue line. **SABINA** *looks angrily at the right door and repeats:)* … we came through the depression by the skin of our teeth; one more tight squeeze like that and where will we be?

(Flustered, she looks through the opening in the left wall; then she goes to the window and reopens the Act.) Oh, oh, oh! Six o'clock and the master not home yet. *[(a quick look at door right)]* Pray God nothing has happened to him crossing the Hudson. Here it is the middle of August and the coldest day of the year. It's simply freezing; the dogs are sticking – One more tight squeeze like that and where will we be?

FITZPATRICK. *(off stage [down left])* Make up something! Invent something!

SABINA. *[(crossing down left center – polishing her nails with duster)]* Well…uh…this certainly is a fine American home and – uh…everybody's very happy…and – uh…

(Suddenly she flings pretense to the winds and, coming downstage, says with indignation:) I can't invent any words for this play, and I'm glad I can't. I hate this play and every word in it. As for me, I don't understand a single word of it, anyway, – all about the troubles the human race has gone through, there's a subject for you. Besides the author hasn't made up his silly mind as to whether we're all living back in caves or in New Jersey, and that's the way it is all the way through. Oh – why can't we have plays like we used to have – *Peg O' My Heart*, and *Smilin' Thru*, and *The Bat**, good entertainment with a message you can take home with you? *[(a quick look off left)]* I took this hateful job because I had to. For two years I've sat up in my room living on a sandwich and a

*The Director should have **SABINA** name modern plays.

cup of tea a day, waiting for better times in the theatre. *[(crosses to chair left of table center)]* And look at me now: I – I who've played Rain and *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* and *First Lady** – God in Heaven!

(The **STAGE MANAGER (MR. FITZPATRICK)** *puts his head out from the hole in the scenery – [points to door, right.])*

MR. FITZPATRICK. Miss Somerset! Miss Somerset!

SABINA. *[(sits chair left of table)]* Oh! Anyway – nothing matters! It'll all be the same in a hundred years. *(loudly)* We came through the depression by the skin of our teeth, that's true! – one more tight squeeze like that and where will we be?

(Enter **MRS. ANTROBUS,** *a mother, [from right, carrying a small watering can. She crosses to bulrushes on table down left to water them.])*

MRS. ANTROBUS. Sabina, you've let the fire go out.

SABINA. *(in a lather [puts duster on table – rises])* One-thing-and-another; don't-know-whether-my-wits-are-upside-or-down; might-as-well-be-dead-as-alive-in-a-house-all-sixes-and-sevens…

MRS. ANTROBUS. *[(turning to* **SABINA***)]* You've let the fire go out. Here it is the coldest day of the year right in the middle of August, and you've let the fire go out. *[(turns back to flowers)]*

SABINA. Mrs. Antrobus, I'd like to give my two weeks' notice, Mrs. Antrobus. A girl like I can get a situation in a home where they're rich enough to have a fire in every room, Mrs. Antrobus, and a girl don't have to carry the responsibility of the whole house on her two shoulders. *[(to right of* **MRS. ANTROBUS***)]* And a home without children, Mrs. Antrobus, because children are a thing only a parent can stand, and a truer word was never said; and a home,

*[(***MRS. ANTROBUS** *puts can under table.)]*

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*The Director should have **SABINA** name modern plays.

SABINA. *(cont.)* Mrs. Antrobus, where the master of the house doesn't pinch decent, self-respecting girls when he meets them in a dark corridor.

*[(***MRS. ANTROBUS** *turns to* **SABINA**.*)]*

I mention no names and make no charges. So you have my notice, Mrs. Antrobus. I hope that's perfectly clear.

MRS. ANTROBUS. *[(crossing to table center)]* You've let the fire go out! – *[(turns to* **SABINA***)]* Have you milked the mammoth?

SABINA. *[(to audience:)]* I don't understand a word of this play. *(to* **MRS. ANTROBUS:***)* Yes, I've milked the mammoth.

MRS. ANTROBUS. *[(dusting paper scraps from table onto plate, moving to right of table)]* Until Mr. Antrobus comes home we have no food, and we have no fire. You'd better go over to the neighbors and borrow some fire.

SABINA. *[(crossing to* **MRS. ANTROBUS***)]* Mrs. Antrobus! I can't! I'd die on the way, you know I would. It's worse than January. The dogs are sticking to the sidewalks. I'd die.

MRS. ANTROBUS. Very well, I'll go.

SABINA. *(even more distraught, coming forward and sinking on her knees)* You'd never come back alive; we'd all perish; if you weren't here, we'd just perish. How do we know Mr. Antrobus'll be back? We don't know. If you go out, I'll just kill myself.

MRS. ANTROBUS. Get up, Sabina.

SABINA. *[(straightens up)]* Every night it's the same thing. Will he come back safe, or won't he? Will we starve to death, or freeze to death, or boil to death, or will we be killed by burglars? *[(sits in chair left of table)]* I don't know why we go on living. I don't know why we go on living at all. It's easier being dead.

(She [bursts into sobs,] flings her arms [on the arm of chair] and buries her head in them. In each of the succeeding speeches she flings her head up – and sometimes her hands – then quickly buries her head again.)

MRS. ANTROBUS. *[(crossing to above chair right of table)]* The same thing! Always throwing up the sponge, Sabina. Always announcing your own death. But give you a new hat – or a plate of ice cream – or a ticket to the movies, and you want to live forever.

SABINA. *[(Her head comes up.)]* You don't care whether we live or die; all you care about is those children. If it would be any benefit to them you'd be glad to see us all stretched out dead.

MRS. ANTROBUS. Well, maybe I would.

[(She exits right with plate of scraps and **SABINA***'s duster.)]*

SABINA. *[(rising)]* And what do they care about? Themselves – that's all they care about. *(shrilly)* They make fun of you behind your back. Don't tell me: they're ashamed of you. Half the time, they pretend they're someone else's children. Little thanks you get from them.

*[(***MRS. ANTROBUS** *enters from right carrying candlewick bedspread; crosses to center.)]*

MRS. ANTROBUS. I'm not asking for any thanks.

SABINA. And Mr. Antrobus – you don't understand *him.* All that work he does – trying to discover the alphabet and the multiplication table. Whenever he tries to learn anything you fight against it.

MRS. ANTROBUS. Oh, Sabina, I know you. When Mr. Antrobus raped you home from your Sabine hills, he did it to insult me. He did it for your pretty face and to insult me. You were the new wife, weren't you? For a year or two you lay on your bed all day and polished the nails on your hands and feet: You made puff-balls of the combings of your hair and you blew them up to the ceiling. And I washed your underclothes and I made you chicken broths. I bore children and between my very groans I stirred the cream that you'd put on your face. But I knew you wouldn't last. You didn't last.

[(hands **SABINA** *one end of spread)*

(They fold spread lengthwise.)]

SABINA. But it was I who encouraged Mr. Antrobus to make the alphabet. I'm sorry to say it, Mrs. Antrobus, but you're not a beautiful woman,

[(They meet face to face – fold spread in half.)]

and you can never know what a man could do if he tried.

[(They fold in quarters.)]

It's girls like I who inspire that multiplication table. I'm sorry to say it, but you're not a beautiful woman,

[(They meet face to face – cover folded.)]

Mrs. Antrobus, and that's the God's truth.

MRS. ANTROBUS. And you didn't last – you sank to the kitchen. And what do you do there? *You let the fire go out!*

[(takes cover – pushes **SABINA** *into chair left of table, crossing up center to sofa)]*

No wonder to you it seems easier being dead. Reading and writing and counting on your fingers is all very well in their way, but I keep the home going. *[(puts cover on sofa – looks through window off right)]* – There's that dinosaur on the front lawn again – Shoo! Go away. Go away.

(The baby **DINOSAUR** *puts his head in the window.)*

MRS. ANTROBUS. You go around to the back of the house where you belong.

DINOSAUR. It's cold.

([She crosses right, turns to window, watches the **DINOSAUR** *and* **MAMMOTH** *move across stage left to right, then turns to audience. She joins their laughter, then speaks to them and exits calmly right. The central portion of the back wall rises, pauses, and disappears into the loft.]* **SABINA** *slowly raises her head.)*