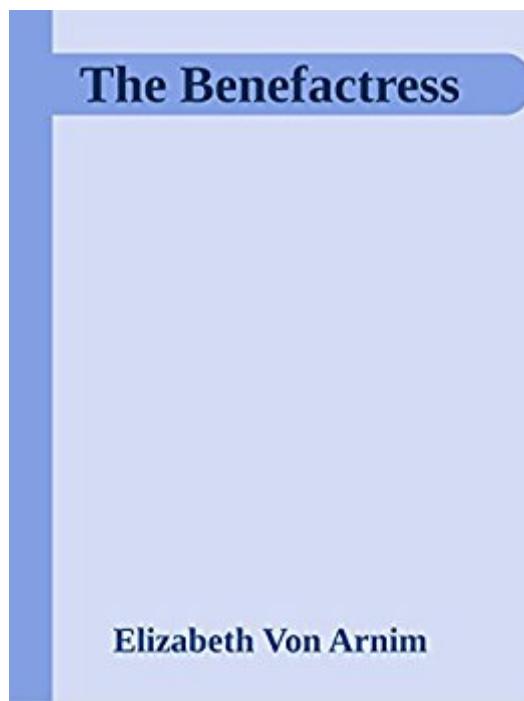


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# The Benefactress



## Synopsis

Australian-born novelist, born Mary Annette Beauchamp. By marriage she became Gräfin (Countess) von Arnim-Schlagenthin, and by a second marriage, Countess Russell. Although known in her early life as Mary, after the publication of her first book, she was known to her readers, eventually to her friends, and finally even to her family as Elizabeth, and she is now invariably referred to as Elizabeth von Arnim. She also wrote under the pen name Alice Cholmondeley. Arnim would later refer to her domineering first husband as the "Man of Wrath" and writing became her refuge from what turned out to be an incompatible marriage. Arnim's husband had increasing debts and was eventually sent to prison for fraud. This was when she created her pen name "Elizabeth" and launched her career as a writer by publishing her semi-autobiographical, brooding, yet satirical Elizabeth and her German Garden (1898). Detailing her struggles both to create a garden on the estate and her attempts to integrate into German high-class Junker society, it was such a success that it was reprinted twenty times in its first year. A bitter-sweet memoir and companion to it was The Solitary Summer (1899). Other works, such as the The Benefactress (1902), Vera (1921), and Love (1925), were also semi-autobiographical. Other titles dealing with feminist protest and witty observations of life in provincial Germany were to follow, including The Princess Priscilla's Fortnight (1905) and Fraulein Schmidt and Mr Anstruther (1907). Although she never wrote a traditional autobiography, All the Dogs of My Life, her 1936 account of her love for her pets, contains many glimpses of the glittering social circle of which she was part.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A young woman, who is dependent upon others for her living, suddenly inherits an estate and some money in a foreign country. She moves there determined to house 12 or so "unfortunates" to whom she will provide room and board. All is to be utopia. Her next door neighbor is, of course, rich, handsome and single. She begins by advertising for these unfortunates who are asked to submit letters telling of their problems in life. She initially selects 4 women. Well, needless to say, there are immediate "social" class issues, one who has outright lied about her background. Instead of Utopia she finds herself engulfed each day in torment trying to keep peace. Her neighbor has tried to warn her of these issues, but to no avail. He also tries to woe her as she is very beautiful. But she insists on being single managing her own affairs. I will not give away the ending, but can say it is interesting and amusing.

Author Elizabeth ("Enchanted April") von Arnim's 1901 novel is a cautionary tale to all of us who set out doing good for our fellow man without taking the time to get to know him first. Or her -- in this case. Anna Estcourt's stifled existence in late Victorian England takes a turn when an inheritance grants her a German estate. Determined to make it a house of happiness for 12 deserving ladies, her good intentions run afoul of schemers and inflexible cultural mores. And an unlooked-for romance threatens her plans in subtler ways. This is a comical story told with excellent insight into both English and German mindsets, but capable of taking turns toward surprising gravity, particularly with a harrowing ending that threatens Anna and kindly Herr Lohm with real disaster. For those interested in insider details, the author was writing almost autobiographically towards the end. She married a German count and throughout their difficult marriage, was frequently at odds with German social conventions. Her husband insulted some influential bankers and they in turn framed him for fraud and had him thrown into prison (as Herr Lohm suffers in the book). I won't reveal the outcome, because it would give a spoiler to the book, but this terrible experience was too grueling for Elizabeth von Arnim to get out of her mind, so she wrote it into the book.

I loved The Enchanted April and liked Elizabeth and her German Garden, but found this book

disappointing. Clearly satirical, this book put me in mind of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta as I read along. That would have been satisfactory enough and might possibly have been clever, but unlike G&S, this author gave me no clever punch line at the end. While the characters were silly and the plot was twisted, I soldiered on determined to discover the eventual fate of Anna and her Chosen. The ending was, to say the least, disappointingly thin. There is a short afterthought chapter that ties up the fates of the inspector and the vicar, but nothing is said about the women.

I love Elizabeth Von Arnim. I was on a kick where I read most of her work. This book was a delightful study of human character, naivety, and cynicism. It was so fun. She is sort of a Jane Austen transplanted to Germany.

This is a delightful work with well defined characters and a charming storyline involving the central character of Anna and her struggle to escape from the shackles of convention. Her evolution into a woman of her own own making is a concept beautifully presented and is von Arnim at her best.

Elizabeth Von Arnim is quite simply one of the best, if not the best writer of the last century. It is hard to have a least favorite among her works, but this is indeed my least favorite, but I've read it twice anyhow because I loved it for all the wit and wonderful use of language that she so excels at.

It is a nice story. It about a young lady who wishes she had money of her own and dreams of the things she would do with it. When her uncle dies and leaves her an estate in Germany she goes to live there and do what she dreamed of doing, and learns valuable lessons on the way.

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