

The Enchanted April

E. von Arnim

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Elizabeth von Arnim was once married to German aristocracy, hence her name. She lived in style in Northern Germany and after becoming a widow she moved to Switzerland. There she met the elder brother of Bertrand Russell and married him. The marriage was a disaster and if not formally severed right away, physically she moved out quickly.

Thus here we have a lady who is privy to the life of the privileged, moving in exalted circles, always with a train of servants and a variety of different abodes. A charmed existence indeed, as long as you were on the receiving end of devoted service. Thus we expect her to be able to report engagingly on the type of life she was familiar with, and to which for the majority was just an escapist dream. And indeed some success she must have had as her novels were best-sellers, but to a late reader coming on the scene ninety-years later it is a disappointment. There is after all a reason for the Classics. They endure beyond their immediate setting. The same theme treated by a Henry James, a Virginia Woolf, or even an E.M. Forster or an Aldous Huxley, would have been superior, even if we would have found them a bit bland. But blandness is not the same as insipidity, and insipidity is the one characterization that comes to mind. What is wrong with it?

The plot is simple. Two young everyday ladies trapped in emotionally arid marriages meet a rainy day in a Club in Hampstead in connection with an advertisement in the Times, relating to an old palace for rent for a month in Portofino Italy. What a perfect escape? They decide to share costs and advertise for fellow lodgers to cut down on expenses, because none of them is well-off. They find an older spinster type and a young socialite to join them. The place turn out to be heavenly enough and it brings with it a transformation of everybody. Especially of the young women. There is fragrance everywhere, excellent food, striking views, peace and quiet. Everything you dream of. And one of the husbands come down, and by mistake also the other, and there is love and reconciliation. Very satisfying and touching.

Now a plot has little to do with the greatness of a piece of fiction. The plot can be clever and the novel rotten, or perhaps more surprisingly the plot can be totally inane and the piece marvelous. So what goes wrong? First the assemblage of the four ladies strains the credulity of the reader. The two commonplace ladies with their simple passions is one thing, but one of the other ladies, the old spinster grew up in a household dominated by visitors such as the likes of Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold and other Victorian worthies. A little bit too neat. And the other lady, the socialite, is an excessively beautiful and rich society daughter. What is she really doing there? She could easily have the whole place to herself. There is not much of inner lives depicted, the characters being caricatured cardboard cut-outs as the saying goes. The socialite is one character, her basically superficial and churlish nature never comes through her striking exterior. She is cursed not only with beauty but a melodious voice that translates every one of her snubs into a delightful exclamation. Everyone adores her, especially men who go crazy about her, and hence, to her horror

wants to grab her. (This is the reason for her escape to the castle, to be with people who possibly cannot know her.) The first husband, a solicitor, is summoned after a week. He is gratified by the unsuspected connections of his wife, and smells career possibilities, and comes down immediately. Those hidden qualities of his wife and her radiance revives his tender feelings, although never losing sight of his main mission. Some sarcastic social comment here. The other husband, a successful writer of indecent biographies, much to the consternation of his churchy wife, shows up to pay his respect to the socialite, and the one surprise moment of the novel, being the revelation of his true identity, which is smoothed over beautifully. In short the novel has the potential of a farce to be put on stage (in fact an adaptation for Broadway was made already in 1925). It all ends by everybody being very happy, or at least content. And what is the source of all of this enchantment? The enchantment of Italy (the bestselling novel seems to have spurred on a tourist trade going south) in terms of spring, flowers, devoted servants, medieval castles, old cities. How could one fail to be happy in such surroundings?(Nowadays people go on charter trips to escape the rain and the cold). But the depiction of paradise is never as interesting or as convincing as those of hell.

As a novel it fails, but as a film maybe? It was hot in 1935, a few years before the death of the author, and then so again in 1992. A kind of middle-bro film with a critical and popular success. No wonder, it has the ingredients. A costume drama of the early 1920's. Intelligent dialogues, beautiful scenery, striking sunsets over the Mediterranean, and some amorous encounter, (such things can easily be worked into the script making explicit what was merely hinted at in the original novel as a more or less remote possibility). No wonder that it can be made into a success. It is far easier to make a passable movie than a readable novel. As to the former you get so much for free. Take some beautiful photography and the need to word-paint is conveniently removed. Personalities that need to be evoked on the page come readymade on the screen, especially if played by people with a palpable charisma, and to select such actors is part of the professionalism of the movie industry. Nothing is better for a good film than a mediocre novel.

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