



The Enchanted April

Elizabeth Von Armin

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The Enchanted April, written in 1922, is Elizabeth von Armin's most charming novel in every sense: it casts a spell. In narrative terms, it's fairly slight: a sun-washed fairytale, delicious in its contrivance. But it's also a paean to the transformative power of travel.

Four very different women respond to an advertisement in the Times appealing to "those who appreciate wisteria and sunshine" to rent a small medieval Italian castle for a month. Mrs Wilkins and Mrs Arbuthnot, the original two respondents, are joined in their act of escape by the youthful Lady Caroline, whose beauty and general melodiousness have become something of a burden to her, and the formidable Mrs Fisher, who insists that everyone think of her "just as an old lady with a stick" as she sets about imposing her will on the rest. Each one is vaguely unsatisfied with their lot and Mrs Wilkins and Mrs Arbuthnot both have marriages of quiet English unhappiness.

Von Arnim has an eye for small human failings, the little acts of pettiness and selfishness in which most people indulge. She is perceptive about the way people misread one another's good, and not so good intentions, and the early chapters read like a comedy of miscommunication. She also – perhaps not surprisingly, given her famed German garden – revels in the descriptions of the castle grounds and their beauty and colour.

The climate and the castle eventually start to have an effect on the four women. Their perceptions shift and they wake up to the love in their lives. The writing loses some of its wryness and bite in the later chapters, but the happy ending is no less magical for its predictability.

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