Benevolent and Amiable

by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

Mr Darcy remarries shortly after his wife's death.

The Darcys are but one great family among hundreds, and Helen is seventeen before she has any idea who they are.

It is the first ball of her first season. Helen can hardly keep from staring – everybody seems bright and sparkling and vibrantly alive. Behind her fan, she constantly turns to her sister, five years older and infinitely wiser. Bella seems to know everybody and everything that matters.

Therefore, when a handsome young couple catches her eye, Helen does not hesitate to whisper, “Do you know who they are?”

“Mr Darcy of Pemberley, and his wife.” Bella's smile is a little superior, but because she knows and cares about these things, she scrupulously adds, “he comes of quite a good family, I believe. Very influential. She, however – well, you would never suppose it from the airs she and that sister of hers put on, but he could have done far better for himself.”

“How romantic,” says Helen.

Bella sniffs. “It must have been.”
Helen is nineteen when Bella marries Charles Villiers. It is a great match in terms of affection as well as fortune, so she tries to be happy about it.

Within a month, the sisters are reunited and holding court at Bella's ball. The house is full of people, eager to see how Mr Villiers' new wife conducts herself, and to be seen themselves, and the Darcys are naturally among them.

It is not the first time she hears Mr Darcy speak, but it is the first that she remembers.

“Lady Isabella,” Mr Darcy says, his eyes warm and mild, “I wish you and Villiers all the joy in the world.”

Bella smiles brilliantly. “You are very kind, sir.”

His wife bestirs herself to say, “Lady Isabella, Lady Helen” in her lazy drawl, and Bella's smile turns cold and artificial.

“Lady Anne.”

It is at another party, at another mansion, that Helen sees him for the third time. She is twenty-two, beginning to think seriously of marriage; he is thirty-seven, and several months a widower.

At his temples, silver mingles with rich brown. Otherwise he seems unchanged – every bit as gentle, as charming, as universally agreeable as she remembers. Helen has always admired the mildness, the sameness, of his manners; but this seems almost too much.

They are both among the guests at Allingham, her brother Villiers' estate, so she sees him every day. She sees many people every day; but Helen finds herself studying him, constantly trying to understand, to at least perceive, the man behind the gentleman. Helen is careful to treat him with exactly the same quiet cordiality that she accords everyone, but he – inexplicably – seems to reciprocate her interest. He certainly asks a great many odd, unconnected questions.

“You are a simpleton, darling,” Bella says. Helen is more bewildered than ever.

He never speaks of his wife and nobody dares mention her to him. Yet Helen finds it difficult to separate them in her mind, Mr Darcy-and-Lady Anne. Delicate, languid, colourless though she had been, Anne Darcy had somehow made herself felt. And Helen does not want to believe him the sort of man who, within a few months, could forget the wife of fifteen years, whatever her
After a time, even she can no longer ignore his marked attentions. He is never uncivil to the others, but he gravitates to her side as often as he can; he talks to her more frequently, and with more animation, than anyone else. And when they set out to accidentally meet, she is relieved to find him less than uniformly cheerful. He is wistful, amused, delighted, regretful, worried, merry; he asks about her brother and talks about his godson.

Helen, by now reasonably well-acquainted with her own feelings, tries not to be frightened of them.

“There is danger in all marriage,” Bella tells her, as sombre as Helen has ever seen her, “but as you must marry someone, I do not consider an older, settled man, a widower who will never require an heir from you, as at all unfortunate. If his affection is mutual, why – Helen, you will never have a better chance at happiness.”

Helen scrubs at her cheeks. “You are right, of course,” she says, smiling, “and – and I am not afraid of him.”

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The wedding is, quite properly, a small, quiet affair. Helen's father bursts into tears; Darcy's mother looks silently triumphant.

His son, at Eton with some cousins, sends a note of congratulations to Helen. It is short and perfunctory, and so excruciatingly formal that Helen wonders if she has misheard his age.

On the same day, another, rather longer, letter arrives from Lady Catherine de Bourgh. She is Lady Anne's only sister, and the expected congratulations consists entirely of a tirade against Helen, Darcy, their immediate and distant forebears, and indeed everyone connected with them except the Darcy children.

Helen cannot help but observe that aunt and nephew write in similar hands – close, and painstaking. Whatever their differences in style, she suspect that the same sentiments lie behind each.

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