what a charming, wicked creature!

by madrigan

Summary

"The Baroness was, as Max had so suggested, the most charming and amiable person he had come across in Austrian high society. She was elegant, cultured, educated, and unfailingly graceful in her manners."

Georg grieves, but finds a new friend in the process. Takes place largely before the events of the film.

Notes

I'm not sure if Elsa's title is hereditary, but for the sake of fiction, let us say it is. Title taken from Lady Windermere's Fan, my favourite of Wilde's plays.

See the end of the work for more notes
"Another one, Max? Forget it," Georg waved his oldest- and best- friend away impatiently, but Max was nothing if not tenacious.

"It is time for some cheer, my friend, the children wouldn't want to see their father so unhappy all the time."

"Children should learn to be seen, not heard."

Max sighed. A year ago he would never have dreamed that such words would come from Georg's mouth, but the dead cannot come back to life, and there was to be no reprieve for Georg's broken heart.

"Georg, just one more, I promise. You know I get so terribly lonely at these society parties."

At this, Georg let out a disbelieving snort, "you don't find it a party until you have two ladies hanging off your arms, my old friend," and after a brief pause, added, "and the occasional gullible young man."

"I can't help it, they're so easily corrupted," Max nodded cheerfully.

"How about it, then? I hear the old Baron has finally kicked the bucket. His eldest daughter inherited the title."

"Just the title?"

"Ah, this is where it gets interesting. She's very clever, the apple of her father's eye- he left everything to her! Everything!"

"That bloody old baron who once broke Lord Douglas' leg with his cane?"

"Yes, that's the one," Max chuckled, "I will never forget the commotion it caused. Lady Martha was beside herself in fits that it should happen at her soiree of all places."

"Hm," Georg replied, and that was all the answer Max needed.

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"Is that the grieving Captain, Marie?" Elsa nudged her friend, careful not to make it too obvious that she had noticed him at all.

"Oh yes! Gorgeous, isn't he? A sprawling mansion in Salzburg, acres and acres of land and river. He's a real Captain, you know. Decorated with honours, too. Pity that he's so devoted, he would have made a brilliant candidate for marriage, dear one."

"Do you doubt my ability to capture his attention, Lady Marie?" Elsa asked, eyes sparkling with mirth, and her best friend laughed throatily.

"Would you be upset if I told you our circle has already run a pool on how soon you can get him to call on you?"

"Devious witches!" Elsa scolded, but the smile on her face only brightened.

"We know you, Baroness. Now go over there and get yourself a delicious-looking, brooding Captain."

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"Max, darling, introduce your friend to me?" Elsa smiled, all bright eyes and a voice full of money.

"Of course, my dear Baroness," he grinned wolfishly.

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"Georg! This here is Elsa, the Baroness Schraeder."

"How do you do?" Georg nodded stiffly, waiting for her to hold out a hand.

Elsa laughed in his face, and he startled, blinking owlishly.

"Why, what a sombre one you are! I have never met a man so unhappy to see me. You're tainting my reputation, Captain. Is that how a gentleman should behave?" She teased, but his expression did not change.

"You think very highly of yourself, Baroness," Georg laughed harshly, and Max sucked in a quick breath.

"You will too, Captain, once you are well-acquainted with me," Elsa smiled, not at all offended.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to agree with your assessment then, Baroness. The chances of me getting well-acquainted with you are slim. But don't look on it as an offence, I would say the same to any other person in this room."

"You make a grave mistake, Captain. I am not 'any other person'," Elsa shot back, then turning serious, stepped closer to him, and gently placed a hand on his arm.

"I am truly sorry for your loss, Captain. She must have been an amazing person. I only wish I had the privilege of knowing her."

Then she stepped away, and smiled at both men once more.

"Auf Wiedersehen, darling. I will see you soon."

After a long pause, Max looked to his friend, and muttered, "Somehow I don't think she was talking to me."

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He didn't call on her. Not right away, but then a letter arrived, a few weeks later, bearing her insignia and smelling of her perfume - roses and bergamot.

He waited a few more days, then called for the car. He was going to Vienna.

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"Elsa, you are amazing," Keira praised, pressing a fond kiss to the cheek of her best friend.

"I told you she could do it," Marie boasted, and the entire circle laughed.

"Truly, girls, I do have an interest in knowing him better," Elsa insisted, and they nodded patiently.

"Yes, he does seem very devoted. Maybe you could be the woman to help him out of his grief. How romantic!" Georgiana giggled.
"Take thou some new infection to thine eye, and the rank poison of the old will die," Keira quoted faithfully.

"We'll see," Elsa mused.

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The Baroness was, as Max had so suggested, the most charming and amiable person he had come across in Austrian high society. She was elegant, cultured, educated, and unfailingly graceful in her manners.

She also had a startlingly wicked streak about her, as Georg came to realize after a year of calling on her and being witness to the elaborate machinations she would concoct with her friends, stirring drama within the circles of high society.

"Don't you worry, Violetta," Elsa had assured, after the poor girl had come crying to her at 3 in the afternoon about catching her bastard of a husband in bed with another of the society ladies. "Neither of them will have the face to show themselves in society for at least a year after I'm done with them."

After Violetta had been consoled and sent home, Elsa had turned to a raptly watching Georg, "3 in the afternoon? How decadent. They simply must be taught a lesson."

The next week, at Violetta's small and early, the seam to Henri's pants had unravelled in the midst of him speaking to a group of bashful debutantes. And if that wasn't enough, three elderly matrons from town had barged into the ballroom to accuse him of taking advantage of their daughters. One even produced a bawling child as product of their illicit liaisons.

With all the commotion that was going on, no one believed a word when Henri had sputtered until his face turned purple, denying all accusations and claiming not to have ever met those women in his life.

"How disgusting!" The Duchess had whispered to Elsa, who was watching the events unravel gleefully from behind the cover of her fan.

"Yes, Duchess, and I heard from a close source that the household caught him in flagrante delicto mid-afternoon with one of his mistresses," she stage whispered, and the Duchess' offended gasp had Elsa laughing uproariously for weeks.

Violetta had showered her with gifts after the scandal, mostly sweet treats, a famous favourite of the Baroness', all of which she happily consumed.

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Georg felt nothing but fondness for the woman who brought him out of his personal hell, but it never turned to a personal love. His greatest fear was that he had given off the wrong impression, but she never seemed to mind when all he spoke of was a woman who would set a fine example to his children. He was not looking for a wife, no, that position had long been filled in his heart by Agathe, but he wanted a companion, and Elsa had seemed perfect.

Until, of course, Maria came along and trumped every single doubt he had about opening his heart to love ever again.

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"Bit chilly tonight," Georg coughed, clearing his throat nervously.

"Really? Seemed rather warm to me," Elsa arched a perfect brow delicately, and he winced.

He so often bore witness to her caustic wit that he had forgotten how sharp it could be when he was the one on the receiving end.

He had tried his best to surpress his burgeoning love for his governess, but it was as effective as trying to dam a spring with a pebble, she was like nothing and no one he had ever known.

And so was Elsa, he thought to himself unhappily. She deserved more than broken promises and a union unfulfilled. He could be just as happy with her.

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No, he couldn't.

He loved Elsa, but not the same way he loved Maria. It would never be the same way.

He didn't know where to start. She was chattering on about their supposed honeymoon together, but it rang hollow in his ears.

"Elsa," he started, and stopped. "Elsa, it's no use, you and I. I'm being dishonest to the both of us, and utterly unfair to you. I - "

"No, don't, don't say another word, Georg, please? You see, there are other things I've been thinking of. Fond as I am of you, I really don't think you're the right man for me." She was looking at him the same way she had the very night she pressed a hand to his arm and told him she was sorry for his loss- the first person in Austrian society who had dared to do so- and the only one who had meant it.

"You're much too independent, and I need someone who needs me desperately, or at least, needs my money desperately," Elsa gave a small laugh then, and a wistful sigh. "I've enjoyed every moment we've had together. I do thank you for that. Now, if you'll forgive me, I'll go inside, pack my little bags, and return to Vienna where I belong."

But Elsa had always been a compassionate soul, a loving soul, and she was nothing if not genuine in her love for this friend of hers.

She caught sight of Maria strolling towards the pavillion, and smiled. She would see their happy ending fulfilled, and soon.

"Somewhere out there is a young lady who I think will never be a nun," she said slowly, and Georg turned to her, eyes wide, before the look of resigned admiration settled on his face. She had always been able to read others better than they could themselves.

"Auf Wiedersehen, darling," she bid fondly, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

She did not say, 'see you soon', but she didn't have to.

Both of them knew it wasn't ever going to be a solemn goodbye.

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Elsa receives a letter not a month later, and upon reading it she laughs, a weight lifted off her heart. She calls for the car. There was a wedding to be planned in Salzburg, and she would be the
one doing it.

End Notes

The dialogue between Elsa and Georg at the end is taken straight from the film. This fic was edited on 27/4/16, with corrections from Lilly (in the comments) - thank you!

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