

A Note About This Story

This story takes place in England and Italy in 1921. At this time, when people travelled abroad, they went by ferry across the English Channel and then by train. It took about three days to travel from England to the Mediterranean coast.

Telephones were not used very much at this time. Messages were sent by letter or telegram.

The ladies in this story go to stay in a beautiful, medieval Italian castle by the sea. They rent the castle, San Salvatore, for the month of April. This means that they paid the owner of the castle some money to stay there. This money was for the servants and the rooms in the castle. The ladies had to buy their own food and pay for their ferry and train tickets.

The ladies find that the gardens of San Salvatore are very beautiful. In April, many beautiful flowers and trees bloom in Italy. Soon, Mrs Wilkins, Mrs Arbuthnot, Mrs Fisher and Lady Caroline believe that San Salvatore is a magic and enchanted place. Everyone will find love and happiness in this beautiful place.



Lottie Wilkins
is a young woman. She is married to Mellersh Wilkins, but she is unhappy.



Rose Arbuthnot
is a young woman. She is married to Frederick Arbuthnot. She is not happy.



Mrs Fisher is an old woman. Her husband is dead and she has a lame leg. She has to use a stick to help her walk.



Lady Caroline Dester is a rich and beautiful young woman. She has left London to get away from the many young men who want to marry her.



Mr Briggs is a young Englishman. He is the owner of San Salvatore.



Mellersh Wilkins is Lottie Wilkins' husband. He is a solicitor in London.



Frederick Arbuthnot is Rose Arbuthnot's husband. He is a writer. The Arbuthnots live in London.



These are the servants at San Salvatore. **Francesca** is the maid. **Beppo** looks after the house and the horses. **Constanza** is the cook. **Domenico** is the gardener.

The Advertisement

It was a cold afternoon in February. The streets of London were wet and dirty.

Mrs Wilkins was standing at the window of her club¹. Mrs Lottie Wilkins was tall and thin. Her clothes were dull and old-fashioned². Mrs Wilkins looked down at the crowded street. It was raining again. It was February in London!

Mrs Wilkins' club was not very comfortable, but it was cheap. So Mrs Wilkins sometimes ate lunch there. When she was in the club, she forgot her husband. She forgot her dull life with him in Hampstead³.

Mrs Wilkins did not want to go home this afternoon. She turned away from the window and sat down at a long table. The table was covered with newspapers. Mrs Wilkins picked up *The Times*.

Mrs Wilkins looked at the advertisements on the front page. Her eyes stopped at the words "To Let"⁴.

To Lovers of Sunshine and Flowers

TO LET

for the month of April,
a small Italian castle near the sea

Write to 'Z', Box 100, *The Times*

April in Italy! Sunshine and flowers! Lottie Wilkins sighed⁵. She had £90 in the bank. She had saved the money, penny by penny. But should she spend it on a holiday?

Mrs Wilkins put down the newspaper and went back to the window.

Mrs Wilkins had been married for two years. She had not spent a day away from her husband.

Her husband, Mellersh Wilkins, was a successful solicitor⁶. But it was not easy to live with him. Often, Lottie Wilkins made him angry. Sometimes she forgot things, then Mellersh Wilkins became very angry indeed.

Mrs Wilkins looked at her watch. She had to go and buy some fish for dinner. She turned to leave.

A sweet-faced young woman was reading *The Times* now. Her name was Mrs Rose Arbuthnot. Mrs Arbuthnot and her husband also lived in Hampstead. Mrs Wilkins had seen her there.

As Mrs Wilkins reached the table, Mrs Arbuthnot looked up. She smiled. Then, shy, pale Lottie Wilkins did a very surprising thing. She sat down opposite Rose Arbuthnot and spoke quickly.

‘Did you see the advertisement?’ Mrs Wilkins asked. ‘The one about the castle? The castle in Italy? Did you read it? I’m sure you did!’

‘Why, yes, I did,’ Mrs Arbuthnot answered slowly.

‘I would love to go to Italy, wouldn’t you?’ Mrs Wilkins said. Her big, grey eyes were very excited.

‘Yes, of course I would,’ Mrs Arbuthnot answered. ‘But it’s impossible, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh, no!’ Mrs Wilkins said. ‘If you want something strongly enough you sometimes get it!’

Mrs Wilkins leant across the table.

‘Why don’t we try?’ she whispered. ‘Let’s rent the castle together!’

‘But we don’t know each other . . .’ Mrs Arbuthnot began.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Mrs Wilkins said. ‘We’ll soon be friends. Everyone needs a holiday – even from a husband.’

‘Perhaps especially from a husband,’ Mrs Wilkins added sadly.

Rose Arbuthnot thought of her own husband. She had married Frederick Arbuthnot when she was twenty. They loved each other then. But things had changed.

Frederick Arbuthnot was now a successful author. He wrote clever, amusing books. They were stories about bad, but beautiful women.

Mr Arbuthnot’s books were very popular, but Mrs Arbuthnot did not read them.

Mrs Arbuthnot spent her time helping poor people. There were often days when Mr and Mrs Arbuthnot did not see each other. Mrs Arbuthnot’s sweet, round face always looked sad.

‘I couldn’t possibly leave . . .’ Mrs Arbuthnot began.

‘I’m sure you could!’ said Mrs Wilkins. ‘I can see us there. I can see us in that lovely garden. Think of it – April in Italy. We’ll be so happy there. Why don’t we write and find out more?’

‘Yes, perhaps I will write,’ Mrs Arbuthnot answered slowly. ‘I could find out about the rent . . .’

Mrs Arbuthnot stood up. She walked slowly to the writing desk and sat down. She wrote a short letter to ‘Z’, Box 100.

The two young women left the club in silence. Outside, they said goodbye. Mrs Arbuthnot promised to post the letter on her way home.

Mrs Wilkins went to buy the fish for dinner. And Mrs Arbuthnot went back to her lonely house.

2

Making Plans for a Holiday

The owner of the castle in Italy was a young Englishman. His name was Thomas Briggs. He answered Mrs Arbuthnot's letter at once.

The castle had beds for eight people. The rent was £60 for the month. Half of this rent must be paid in advance.

£60! £60 for one month! It was too much. Far too much. Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Wilkins could not believe it.

Mrs Wilkins had £90. Could she spend most of it on a holiday? No. Her husband, Mellersh Wilkins, would not allow⁷ it.

Mrs Arbuthnot did not tell her husband about the castle. She went to her bank. She took out £60. Then she went with the money to Mr Briggs' house.

Thomas Briggs liked pretty women. He liked Mrs Arbuthnot's dark hair and eyes.

'I am sure you'll be happy at the castle,' he said. 'It's called San Salvatore. It's a beautiful place. You will love it there.'

So Mrs Arbuthnot gave him the £60. Thomas Briggs gave her a receipt⁸.

'Now I'm richer,' he said, 'and you're happier. I've got the



'Why don't we try? Let's rent the castle together!'

money and you've got the castle. San Salvatore is beautiful in April. The gardens are full of flowers. You will be another flower in the garden.'

But Mrs Wilkins still had the problem of money. She had to pay half of the rent. Also she had to pay her fare to Italy and she had to pay for food. She could not ask her husband for money. He liked her to save money, not spend it.

So Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Wilkins put another advertisement in *The Times*. They wanted two other women to go with them to San Salvatore. They would all share the expenses⁹.

Two people answered the advertisement. One was a young woman. Her name was Lady Caroline Dester. Her family was one of the oldest and richest in England.

But Lady Caroline was unhappy and bored¹⁰. She wanted a holiday. She loved Italy, but she hated hotels. So she was very pleased when she read the advertisement about San Salvatore.

Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Wilkins liked Lady Caroline. They invited her to stay at the castle with them.

The second answer to the advertisement was from an old lady. Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Wilkins went to her house. Her name was Mrs Fisher. Mrs Fisher was a widow. She was lame and had to use a stick when walking. But she said that she would be no trouble. She just wanted to sit in the sun and remember the past. Mrs Fisher also said that she wanted references¹¹.

'Why do you want references?' Mrs Wilkins asked in surprise. 'Surely they are not necessary.'

Mrs Arbuthnot stood up. She spoke coldly and clearly.

'References are not necessary,' she said. 'I don't think you



'I don't think you will be happy with us.'

will be happy with us.'

Mrs Fisher thought quickly. She liked getting her own way¹². She wanted to go to San Salvatore. When she was there, she would give the orders.

'Very well,' Mrs Fisher replied. 'No references. I shall see you at San Salvatore in April.'

Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Wilkins left Mrs Fisher's dark house. They got on the bus to go back to their homes. They did not speak for a long time.

'I don't like Mrs Fisher,' said Mrs Wilkins. 'I wish she wasn't coming with us.'

'I think Mrs Fisher is a lonely old woman,' Mrs Arbuthnot replied. 'San Salvatore will be good for her.'

'You are right,' Mrs Wilkins said. 'Mrs Fisher needs San Salvatore too. Mrs Fisher will change at San Salvatore. I'm sure she will.'

Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Wilkins decided to travel to Italy together. They planned to reach San Salvatore on 1st April. Lady Caroline and Mrs Fisher were arriving on 2nd April. By then, everything would be ready for them at the castle.

The weather in March was cold and wet.

As the days went by, Mrs Arbuthnot became more and more worried. Mrs Arbuthnot was an unhappy woman. She was not used to enjoying herself. She was afraid of change. Now she was planning a month's holiday in Italy. A whole month of pleasure!

When Mrs Arbuthnot told her husband, he looked pleased. He gave her a cheque for £100. Mrs Arbuthnot gave the money to the poor. She felt more unhappy than ever.

Mrs Wilkins was worried too. She did not tell Mellersh Wilkins about her plan to go to Italy. But she gave him special meals every evening. Mrs Wilkins was a good cook. Mellersh was very pleased with her.

On the third Sunday of March, Mrs Wilkins cooked a delicious lunch. After lunch, Mellersh felt pleased and happy.

'I think I shall take you to Italy next month,' he said.

Mrs Wilkins was horrified¹³. She was never happy when she went on holiday with Mellersh. Mrs Wilkins did not know what to say.

Mellersh Wilkins was surprised when Mrs Wilkins did not say anything. Perhaps she had not heard him. So, more loudly, he repeated, 'I think I'll take you to Italy. In April. Didn't you hear what I said?'

'Yes, yes,' Mrs Wilkins said quickly. 'I was going to tell you. I've been invited to Italy – to stay with a friend¹ there. In her house, in April.'

That was a terrible afternoon for Lottie Wilkins.

At first, Mellersh did not believe her. He wanted to know about Rose Arbuthnot. He wanted to know who Rose Arbuthnot was and where she came from. He said his wife could go on holiday. But he was unhappy. The rest of March was like a terrible dream. But Mrs Wilkins had made her plans. She was going to go to Italy with Mrs Arbuthnot.

Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Wilkins left London on the morning of 30th March. They were both tired and worried. They did not feel that they were going on holiday.

'We should be feeling happy,' Mrs Wilkins said sadly, as

they got on the train. 'But we are not feeling happy. It's our own fault. We are to blame. We have done too much for our husbands. We have been too good to them.'

Mrs Arbuthnot did not answer. Her husband, Frederick, had been out when she left. He knew his wife was going to Italy for a month. He was not worried that his wife was going on holiday without him. She did not leave her address.

The 30th of March was wet and windy. The sea-crossing between England and France was terrible. The sea was rough and both women were very seasick.

After they landed in France, they began to feel better. They went by train to Paris. From there, they took another train to Italy.

By the afternoon of the next day, the two women had forgotten about Mellersh, Frederick and London.

3

The Journey to Italy

It was cloudy in Italy. Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Wilkins thought it was going to be bright and sunny. But the clouds did not matter. The two young women were in Italy and they were feeling very excited.

The hours in the train passed quickly. It began to rain. But they were in Italy. The sun would soon be shining!

Their train arrived at Mezzago four hours late. It was nearly midnight when they got off the train. The two women got

down from the train slowly. They felt very stiff and tired. It was dark. The rain was falling heavily. They stood there with their luggage. What was going to happen now?

Suddenly, a young man came out of the darkness. Speaking Italian, he told them his name was Beppo. Still talking loudly, he picked up their cases.

Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Wilkins did not know any Italian. But they thought they heard the name "San Salvatore". So they hurried after the young man – and their cases.

A horse-cab¹⁴ was standing by the side of the road. The horse was asleep. The two women climbed into the cab. The horse woke up and began to move.

Beppo ran after the cab and stopped the horse. In Italian, Beppo explained that he was in charge. They would all reach San Salvatore safely.

Beppo thought the English ladies looked pale and tired. So he decided to make them happy. As he drove along, Beppo talked about the beauty of San Salvatore.

'San Salvatore,' Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Wilkins said again and again in frightened voices.

'Si, si, San Salvatore!' Beppo cried. And he drove faster and faster along the winding¹⁵ road.

On their left, was a low wall. On their right, were high, black rocks. They could hear the sound of the sea.

'We don't know where he's taking us,' Mrs Arbuthnot whispered.

'No, we don't,' Mrs Wilkins agreed.

They were very frightened. It was so late and so dark. The road was so lonely. The rain was falling so heavily.

'I wish we had arrived in the morning,' Mrs Arbuthnot said sadly.