

THE DORMITORY INSPECTOR AND THE LOVE-LETTERS

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Miss B. was a teacher and the dormitory inspector of the C Girls' School. She was well known as an obstinate spinster and a steadfast Christian. She was an old maid of forty or so. Her face was covered with freckles and showed not the slightest trace of maidenly attractiveness, however hard one might look for it. Her skin was withered, rough and dry, a faded yellow that reminded one of a musty dried stone-fish. Her wrinkled forehead was broad and her thin hair was combed straight back instead of being plaited or curled in the current fashion. It was gathered up in a knot at the back of her head like a lump of sheep dung. From all this it was apparent that she was already growing old.

"When with tightly compressed lips she peered shortsightedly cold eyes through thick lenses at the pupils in the dormitory, they felt chilled with fear—so strict and tough was she. It was 'love-letters' that Miss B. hated most venomously—they almost stunned her. It is quite common for love-letters to be addressed to the dormitories of girls' schools. C's was one of the most renowned girls' schools, and among its pupils were many pretty girls. Every day several love-letters protesting undying affection were delivered at the dormitory. Miss B used to read every letter addressed to the pupils under her care, including these love letters. Whenever she read the sweet romantic words of the letters, she grew angry and excited, with flushed face and trembling hands. A pupil by no fault of her own might get into serious trouble through receiving one of these letters. When school finished for the day the pupil would be summoned to the dormitory inspector's room. Miss B would be roving around the room, breathing hard as if her fury was too much to bear. Then she would stand confronting the pupil and glare at her fit to kill. The pupil would not know why she had been summoned and would be frightened by the teacher's strange behaviour. She would hesitate for a few minutes and then say diffidently, "Did you send for me, Ma'am?"

"Yes, I did. And you know why?" she would answer fiercely as if she wanted to eat her, and then she would drag a chair up noisily and sit down violently, with an air of great displeasure. When she saw that the pupil was still standing she would screech shrilly, "Are you a statue on a mile-post? Can't you sit down?"

Teacher and pupil would sit facing one another with a small desk between them. Then without saying a word she would glare at the pupil as if to ask, "You know what you have done wrong, don't you?" After a few minutes she would take out the letter and thrust it under the pupil's nose. Then she would begin to interrogate her.

"To whom is this addressed?"

The pupil would find her name on the envelope and could only answer, "It's addressed to me, Ma'am."

Then the teacher would ask who had sent it. In most cases there was nothing to show who the writer was, and so, with great hesitation the pupil would answer that she did not know who he could be. Then the teacher used to shout in a threatening tone, "So you don't know who would write a letter like this to you, do you?"

Thereupon Miss B would make the pupil read the letter. So the innocent girl would read the honey-sweet words of love in a low voice, while Miss B waited with

growing impatience to know who the sender really was. In truth the writer might be a complete stranger to the girl, and she would protest her innocence, but Miss B would not believe her. She would threaten the girl with expulsion if she did not tell the truth, and demand how any man whose name she did not know could possibly have written her a letter, and insinuate that she must be in immoral relations with him. Furthermore, she would ask the girl how she came to be in correspondence with the man, since she must have met him somewhere. The girl would try to explain that the man must have chanced to see her at the school concert or bazaar. Then Miss B would press her for details of how the man's eyes struck her at the time and of her first conversation with him. So relentless and agonising was Miss B's investigation that she would take ten years off the poor girl's life.

When the interrogation had lasted two hours or more she would deliver a heated sermon, saying that this man would surely be an untrustworthy creature, and a devil who would try to devour women. She would rant that the phrases, 'Freedom of Love' and 'Love is secret', were nothing but temptations invented by such monsters. Then, with tears in her eyes, she would kneel on the floor and pray. In every form of words imaginable she would beseech the Heavenly Father to deliver the young lamb from the wiles of the Devil.

Moreover Miss B did not approve of men coming to the dormitory as visitors. So that the visitor might 'go away without meeting the girl he had come to see. She would tell him that it was strictly forbidden under the regulations. She would say this even to the fathers and brothers of the girls. Or she might say that they were in class. Because of her behaviour the pupils went on strike, and Miss B was cautioned by the Principal, but even so she would not mend her ways.

One autumn a strange happening occurred in the dormitory under Miss B's control. It might perhaps be better to say that something strange was found to be happening there, for at the beginning of the affair it might well have been known only to a ghost.

Late at night when all the pupils on the dormitory were sound asleep there was faintly heard the sound of strange laughter and whispered conversation. After a night or two one of the more sensitive girls heard them, but in her sleepy state she took them for the sound of dry leaves blowing about on the hill at the back or the cries of wild geese on the wing in the moonlight. 'Another girl heard them and was frightened, for she feared that they must be the sounds made by goblins, and she tried vainly to wake her friends. Then she felt that her fears were childish and went to sleep again, reassuring herself with the thought that they must be people talking in the near-by houses or her friends in other rooms talking in their sleep.

At last a time came when the riddle was solved. It happened that one night three pupils in the same room were awake at the same time. One girl got up to go to the toilet. She heard the strange sounds, and on her return she woke up the other two.

"Listen to that!" said the first girl, her eyes wide open in horror.

"What strange voices to hear at midnight!"

"Those voices frightened me last night. Is it a goblin? Is it?" said the second girl, rubbing her sleepy eyes.

The third girl, who was about seventeen, the eldest of the three, and known as a most cheerful and witty girl, said nothing for a few minutes and then said, as if she had not believed her friends, "That's very strange! I think I heard it myself too. There must be some other girls awake and talking."

At that very moment there came a roll of laughter from the strange voices. The three girls shrank in fear and listened more cautiously. In the stillness of the night, when there was no other sound to be heard, they could hear every word of the strange conversation, as if they had been listening close by.

“Oh, Mr. Tehun! How wonderful it would be.” said a coquettish woman’s voice.

“If you accept, Miss Gong-Sug, how happy you will make me! When will Gong-Sug understand my burning heart, devoted solely to you?” Without a doubt it was the voice of a passionate man.

There was a short silence.

“Let me go now! You are kissing me too long, aren’t you, I’m afraid someone will see us, don’t you think?” said a sweet woman’s voice.

“The longer the better, surely. Though I kissed you till I died I wouldn’t think it too long. Even then I would think it wasn’t long enough.” These words, which seemed to stem from a surge of blood were lost in a peal of laughter.

Everything certainly pointed to a passionate love-scene. How could such an affair take place in this dormitory, where all such things were so strictly prohibited. The three girls looked at one another. Surprise and fear mingled in their faces, but gradually curiosity got the better of their alarm. All sorts of romantic ideas suggested themselves to them. They imagined some man falling in love with one of the girls in this dormitory and wandering all around the neighbourhood trying to see her and then finally leaping over the fence at midnight, unable to endure longer the flame that burned in his heart.

When all the lights had been put out, the window-where only the moonlight shone like the god of silver-must have opened quietly and the girl must have called to her lover and waved her white handkerchief. Perhaps there had followed a scene, so often seen in films, where a long sheet was hung out of the window for the one above! to pull up and the one below to cling to and climb up. So the pair might meet and be carried away by the whispered affections of love.

This dreamy passion had a powerful appeal for the girls, and swathed them, body and mind, in a romantic mist. Their cheeks too began to burn.

Then the strange voices began again. “I don’t like you! I don’t like you! don’t like men like you.” It sounded like a woman vehemently repulsing a man.

“My angel, my heaven, my queen, my life, my love, spare my life, I beg you,” cried a man in a tone of agony.

A mischeivous idea suggested itself to the third girl. she sat upright. “Shall we go and see them?” she said. The others agreed and stood up. They looked at each other hesitatingly for a few moments, doubt, fear and curiosity mingled in their faces. Finally they opened the door softly and crept out of the room. They crawled carefully like rice weevils in the direction the voices seemed to be coming from. The white faces of the three girls who had woken from sleep moved silently as shadows.

They found the room the voices were coming from without any difficulty. When they found it they were so astonished that they stopped short in their steps. How could they have possibly guessed that the source would be the dormitory-inspector’s room, so close to their own? It was quite outside their expectation that it could be the very room of Miss B, who would have spat in the face of any man whatsoever.

They could still hear the fantastic protestations of a love-crazed man. “My angel, my heaven, my queen and my life! Are you determined to drive me to my death for love? Are you going to tear out my very heart? With your lips which rule my destiny“

The third girl boldly opened the door just a little. Three pairs of eyes peered through the chink into the room. What a strange scene met their gaze! The light was still on, and they could see Miss B on the bed alone, surrounded by the envelopes of the love letters addressed to the girls of the dormitory. The letters themselves were strewn about the room in disorder. Miss B sat alone on the bed. She stretched out her arms as if to draw someone her and gazed fixedly with her shortsighted eyes without her spectacles. She was murmuring these words in an imitation of a man's voice and pouting with a serious expression as if she was expecting a kiss. Then no sooner had this appealing gesture come to an end than her whole attitude changed, and she became cold and waved her arms to reject someone's entreaty and said, this time in a woman's voice, "I don't like you! I don't like you! I don't like men like you!" Then she burst out laughing. She took a love-letter addressed to one of the girls and rubbed it against her face. "Can it be true?" she cried. "Do you love me SO much? Do you love me as much as your life. Am I so much to you?" She drew herself up and there was a tearful catch in her voice.

"What's the matter with her?" the first girl whispered.

"She must be mad," the second answered. "Why does she get up alone at midnight and do this?"

"It's all very pitiful," said the third girl and wiped away the tears which, all unbidden, raced down her cheeks.