

At A Summer Villa

Anton Chekhov

I LOVE YOU. You are my life, my happiness -- everything to me! Forgive the avowal, but I have not the strength to suffer and be silent. I ask not for love in return, but for sympathy. Be at the old arbour at eight o'clock this evening. . . . To sign my name is unnecessary I think, but do not be uneasy at my being anonymous. I am young, nice-looking . . . what more do you want?"

When Pavel Ivanitch Vyhodtsev, a practical married man who was spending his holidays at a summer villa, read this letter, he shrugged his shoulders and scratched his forehead in perplexity.

"What devilry is this?" he thought. "I'm a married man, and to send me such a queer . . . silly letter! Who wrote it?"

Pavel Ivanitch turned the letter over and over before his eyes, read it through again, and spat with disgust.

" 'I love you' " . . . he said jeeringly. "A nice boy she has pitched on! So I'm to run off to meet you in the arbour! . . . I got over all such romances and fleurs d'amour years ago, my girl. . . . Hm! She must be some reckless, immoral creature. . . . Well, these women are a set! What a whirligig -- God forgive us! -- she must be to write a letter like that to a stranger, and a married man, too! It's real demoralisation!"

In the course of his eight years of married life Pavel Ivanitch had completely got over all sentimental feeling, and he had received no letters from ladies except letters of congratulation, and so, although he tried to carry it off with disdain, the letter quoted above greatly intrigued and agitated him.

An hour after receiving it, he was lying on his sofa, thinking:

"Of course I am not a silly boy, and I am not going to rush off to this idiotic rendezvous; but yet it would be interesting to know who wrote it! Hm. . . . It is certainly a woman's writing. . . . The letter is written with genuine feeling, and so it can hardly be a joke. . . . Most likely it's some neurotic girl, or perhaps a widow . . . widows are frivolous and eccentric as a rule. Hm. . . . Who could it be?"

What made it the more difficult to decide the question was that Pavel Ivanitch had not one feminine acquaintance among all the summer visitors, except his wife.

"It is queer . . ." he mused. " 'I love you!' . . . When did she manage to fall in love? Amazing woman! To fall in love like this, apropos of nothing, without making any acquaintance and finding out what sort of man I am. . . . She must be extremely young and romantic if she is capable of falling in love after two or three looks at me. . . . But . . . who is she?"

Pavel Ivanitch suddenly recalled that when he had been walking among the summer villas

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the day before, and the day before that, he had several times been met by a fair young lady with a light blue hat and a turn-up nose. The fair charmer had kept looking at him, and when he sat down on a seat she had sat down beside him. . . .

"Can it be she?" Vyhodtsev wondered. "It can't be! Could a delicate ephemeral creature like that fall in love with a worn-out old eel like me? No, it's impossible!"

At dinner Pavel Ivanitch looked blankly at his wife while he meditated:

"She writes that she is young and nice-looking. . . . So she's not old. . . . Hm. . . . To tell the truth, honestly I am not so old and plain that no one could fall in love with me. My wife loves me! Besides, love is blind, we all know. . . ."

"What are you thinking about?" his wife asked him.

"Oh. . . my head aches a little. . ." Pavel Ivanitch said, quite untruly.

He made up his mind that it was stupid to pay attention to such a nonsensical thing as a love-letter, and laughed at it and at its authoress, but -- alas! -- powerful is the "dacha"enemy of mankind! After dinner, Pavel Ivanitch lay down on his bed, and instead of going to sleep, reflected:

"But there, I daresay she is expecting me to come! What a silly! I can just imagine what a nervous fidget she'll be in and how her tournure will quiver when she does not find me in the arbour! I shan't go, though. . . . Bother her!"

But, I repeat, powerful is the enemy of mankind.

"Though I might, perhaps, just out of curiosity. . ." he was musing, half an hour later. "I might go and look from a distance what sort of a creature she is. . . . It would be interesting to have a look at her! It would be fun, and that's all! After all, why shouldn't I have a little fun since such a chance has turned up?"

Pavel Ivanitch got up from his bed and began dressing. "What are you getting yourself up so smartly for?" his wife asked, noticing that he was putting on a clean shirt and a fashionable tie.

"Oh, nothing. . . . I must have a walk. . . . My head aches. . . . Hm."

Pavel Ivanitch dressed in his best, and waiting till eight o'clock, went out of the house. When the figures of gaily dressed summer visitors of both sexes began passing before his eyes against the bright green background, his heart throbbed.

"Which of them is it? . . ." he wondered, advancing irresolutely. "Come, what am I afraid of? Why, I am not going to the rendezvous! What . . . a fool! Go forward boldly! And what if I go into the arbour? Well, well . . . there is no reason I should."

Pavel Ivanitch's heart beat still more violently. . . . Involuntarily, with no desire to do so, he suddenly pictured to himself the half-darkness of the arbour. . . . A graceful fair girl with a

little blue hat and a turn-up nose rose before his imagination. He saw her, abashed by her love and trembling all over, timidly approach him, breathing excitedly, and . . . suddenly clasping him in her arms.

"If I weren't married it would be all right . . ." he mused, driving sinful ideas out of his head. "Though . . . for once in my life, it would do no harm to have the experience, or else one will die without knowing what. . . . And my wife, what will it matter to her? Thank God, for eight years I've never moved one step away from her. . . . Eight years of irreproachable duty! Enough of her. . . . It's positively vexatious. . . . I'm ready to go to spite her!"

Trembling all over and holding his breath, Pavel Ivanitch went up to the arbour, wreathed with ivy and wild vine, and peeped into it. . . . A smell of dampness and mildew reached him. . . .

"I believe there's nobody . . ." he thought, going into the arbour, and at once saw a human silhouette in the corner.

The silhouette was that of a man. . . . Looking more closely, Pavel Ivanitch recognised his wife's brother, Mitya, a student, who was staying with them at the villa.

"Oh, it's you . . ." he growled discontentedly, as he took off his hat and sat down.

"Yes, it's I" . . . answered Mitya.

Two minutes passed in silence.

"Excuse me, Pavel Ivanitch," began Mitya: "but might I ask you to leave me alone?? . . . I am thinking over the dissertation for my degree and. . . and the presence of anybody else prevents my thinking."

"You had better go somewhere in a dark avenue. . ." Pavel Ivanitch observed mildly. "It's easier to think in the open air, and, besides, . . . er . . . I should like to have a little sleep here on this seat. . . It's not so hot here. . . ."

"You want to sleep, but it's a question of my dissertation . . ." Mitya grumbled. "The dissertation is more important."

Again there was a silence. Pavel Ivanitch, who had given the rein to his imagination and was continually hearing footsteps, suddenly leaped up and said in a plaintive voice:

"Come, I beg you, Mitya! You are younger and ought to consider me. . . . I am unwell and . . . I need sleep. . . . Go away!"

"That's egoism. . . . Why must you be here and not I? I won't go as a matter of principle."

"Come, I ask you to! Suppose I am an egoist, a despot and a fool . . . but I ask you to go! For once in my life I ask you a favour! Show some consideration!"

Mitya shook his head.

"What a beast! . . ." thought Pavel Ivanitch. "That can't be a rendezvous with him here! It's impossible with him here!"

"I say, Mitya," he said, "I ask you for the last time. . . . Show that you are a sensible, humane, and cultivated man!"

"I don't know why you keep on so!" . . . said Mitya, shrugging his shoulders. "I've said I won't go, and I won't. I shall stay here as a matter of principle. . . ."

At that moment a woman's face with a turn-up nose peeped into the arbour. . . .

Seeing Mitya and Pavel Ivanitch, it frowned and vanished.

"She is gone!" thought Pavel Ivanitch, looking angrily at Mitya. "She saw that blackguard and fled! It's all spoilt!"

After waiting a little longer, he got up, put on his hat and said:

"You're a beast, a low brute and a blackguard! Yes! A beast! It's mean . . . and silly! Everything is at an end between us!"

"Delighted to hear it!" muttered Mitya, also getting up and putting on his hat. "Let me tell you that by being here just now you've played me such a dirty trick that I'll never forgive you as long as I live."

Pavel Ivanitch went out of the arbour, and beside himself with rage, strode rapidly to his villa. Even the sight of the table laid for supper did not soothe him.

"Once in a lifetime such a chance has turned up," he thought in agitation; "and then it's been prevented! Now she is offended . . . crushed!"

At supper Pavel Ivanitch and Mitya kept their eyes on their plates and maintained a sullen silence. . . . They were hating each other from the bottom of their hearts.

"What are you smiling at?" asked Pavel Ivanitch, pouncing on his wife. "It's only silly fools who laugh for nothing!"

His wife looked at her husband's angry face, and went off into a peal of laughter.

"What was that letter you got this morning?" she asked.

"I? . . . I didn't get one. . . ." Pavel Ivanitch was overcome with confusion. "You are inventing. . . imagination."

"Oh, come, tell us! Own up, you did! Why, it was I sent you that letter! Honour bright, I did! Ha ha!"

Pavel Ivanitch turned crimson and bent over his plate. "Silly jokes," he growled.

"But what could I do? Tell me that. . . . We had to scrub the rooms out this evening, and how could we get you out of the house? There was no other way of getting you out. . . . But don't be angry, stupid. . . . I didn't want you to be dull in the arbour, so I sent the same letter to Mitya too! Mitya, have you been to the arbour?"

Mitya grinned and left off glaring with hatred at his rival.

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