A Tale of Two Nurses (1965)

In the days when I got my “three hots and a cot” in the Pembina/Taché Hall complex, there was a University Nurse whose name was Miss C. Voetberg, RN. She had a Dutch or German accent and an office in “Ward E” (the Infirmary) of East Taché. Like most of the residence staff, she was an elderly and competent individual, probably in her mid ’60s.

In addition to first-aid duties, such as patching up cuts and scrapes, Miss Voetberg was on call for any physical, mental, or psychological problems of both resident and non-resident students. She was in charge of the Infirmary, where ailing dormitory students, other than those requiring special treatment, were accommodated. As the campus doctor’s representative, she made appointments on his behalf and assisted him when he was on site. She was at hand from 7:00 AM to 11:00 PM, although a sports injury may have kept her busy all night. It was her view that her job was not one for a young nurse, since experienced counselling was an important aspect of work as a University Nurse. To that I say “Amen,” for reasons to be stated below.

Not being a sickly lad nor one prone to disabling accident, I very rarely had cause to call upon Miss Voetberg’s services. I do remember paying her a visit once, and I must have mentioned to her that I had a fiancée because she offered some collateral advice that was touching in its way. She reminded me that my mother was the first woman in my life, and that young men like me, who were away from home and family and looking forward to meeting the girl of our dreams (as I already had), should never forget our mothers and the truly singular role they played in our lives. The best wife in the world could ne’er replace one’s mother, who should forever hold a special place in our hearts. Such was the genuinely human manner of Miss C. Voetberg, RN.

To change the topic slightly, bringing liquor into the residence building and consuming it there was verboten. In saying this, I’m not thinking of Miss Voetberg, although the rule no
doubt applied to her as well. More to the point, it was not uncommon for students to indulge in the dew of the barley on a Friday or Saturday night and greet the following morn with vicious hangovers. My church-mouse poverty precluded any abiding commerce with the local bootlegger, so I can truly say I didn’t have a drinking problem—I simply couldn’t afford one.

But on one memorable weekend morning, I did indeed have a raging hangover. The entire contents of my skull were screaming to leave the premises and, to put it very mildly, I had an upset tummy. I had the gall to grope my way down to Miss Voetberg’s office for some warm motherly sympathy and serious medical relief. Of the former there was, on that occasion, absolutely none and the medical attention I got was, like life in the Stone Age, nasty, brutish, and short. Gosh, that sure wasn’t the TLC that I expected from the gentle Miss Voetberg. It was almost like she wasn’t there.

And as a matter of fact she wasn’t there; she was away for some reason (weekend break?), and her place had been taken by a much younger colleague. Alas, the stand-in’s bodaceous looks proved to be misleading and of cold comfort; she obviously harboured a jaundiced eye for (A) foolish young (B) wretchedly sick and (C) badly dehydrated “little boys” (her words) who knowingly placed themselves at Death’s door and hence were fully deserving of sharp rebuke. True to Miss Voetberg’s perception of young nurses, I thankfully got no industrial-strength counselling in my time of misery and distress.

Under the circumstances, Miss Voetberg probably wouldn’t have bathed me in the milk of human kindness either, but neither would she have resorted, I’m sure, to the temp’s harsh, four-part cure for a hangover, to wit, (1) a cutting glare that could sunder the walls of Jericho; (2) a brief but testy tongue-lashing; (3) a two-bit dose of aspirin that was doomed to failure; and (4) the bum’s rush. If it’s true that “God looks after drunks and little children,” suffice it to say that this woman wasn’t God. Was she perhaps favouring me with some tough love? If so, well please honey, not that morning…I had a splitting headache.

You’d have thought that my rakish (if somewhat bedraggled) good looks would have inspired said nurse to cut me some slack. But the simple fact is, she wasn’t to be swayed by mere masculine physiognomy. The support personnel in Taché Hall were all true professionals—and they knew exactly what to do with specimens like me. Perhaps it was thanks in part to the memory of that nurse’s ‘surgical’ technique that I have more or less behaved myself ever since.

And to give the late Miss C. Voetberg her due, may I take this closing moment to assure her that thoughts of my mother’s unfailing devotion are ever with me.