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In which we meet Mrs Groves

Mrs Groves, headmistress of Mrs Groves' Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers, was an interesting woman. Of course, when I say *interesting*, it is really a polite way of saying *just a teeny-weeny bit odd*. And when I say *just a teeny-weeny bit odd*, it is really a polite way of saying *completely befuddled*.

Mrs Groves was kind enough in her own special way, though easily flustered and not terribly organised. She hoped for order in her school, dreamed of good behaviour amongst her pupils, but could never quite bring herself to demand it.

Short and plump, she blustered around the school, her apron flapping this way and that, her white mobcap wobbling on her head. Her cheeks blushed deeply with every surprise that came her way, and there were *many* surprising things that happened *every single day* at

Mrs Groves' Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers.

On the afternoon that our story begins, Mrs Groves had just snacked on crumpets and honey and was making her way from her private parlour, along the winding corridors, towards the back stairs that led down to the kitchen. As usual, she nodded encouragingly to each of the students she met, provided they were not doing anything involving dynamite or bad smells.

‘Good morning, Peter,’ she cooed. ‘My word! Doesn’t that painting of the Queen look *fabulous* now that you have used a permanent marker to draw on a moustache and beard?’

Mrs Groves’ cheeks glowed a rosy red and she trotted onwards.

‘Hello, Tommy,’ she said, fluttering her eyelashes nervously. ‘Goodness gracious me! I don’t think you could stick your finger any further up your nose if you tried. That’s quite a talent you have there!’

Mrs Groves took a lace handkerchief from her apron pocket, flapped it before her face and continued on her way.

‘Marvellous job, Reginald,’ she clucked and nodded as she passed one of the study rooms. ‘You have spread that butter *beautifully* all over the bookshelves and the desktops. Quite impressive the way you can make a simple 250-gram

packet of butter go so far ... and with nothing more than a blunt knife and a bit of imagination.

‘Good dog, Scruffy! What a wonderful job you are doing of licking all that butter *off* the door handles and textbooks. Well done! Well done!’

Mrs Groves halted at the first-storey landing overlooking the large entrance hall. ‘Eduardo! Alfonzo! Anastasia!’ she gasped. ‘That crystal chandelier is working very well for you all as a swing today, isn’t it? Oh, and Sparky, you are doing a splendid job of juggling those three flaming torches and Ginger the cat all at the same time. Although I’m not sure that Ginger’s tail should be flaming quite so brightly as the torches!’

Pushing her little round glasses further up her nose, she bumbled forth once more.

‘Morning, Glenda,’ she cooed to the unconscious goose, lying in the library. ‘Good to see you having a go at that maths homework, even though you are a goose of muddled intellect. Never mind that you faint every time you attempt the nine times tables. It can happen to the best of us. Truly it can. I once fainted at the sight of a particularly tricky recipe for date scones.’

Mrs Groves dabbed her brow with her lace handkerchief, then tucked it up her sleeve. She trundled

around the corner and was confronted with a rather disturbing spectacle.

Carlos, a happy lad of twelve, had gathered a large mound of books in the centre of the corridor. Protruding from beneath the books was a stick of dynamite. It was *definitely* a stick of dynamite, no matter how hard Mrs Groves tried to pretend it was a cylindrical tube of coloured pencils. From the dynamite ran a long, wriggly piece of string, which could not really be called anything other than a fuse, no matter *how* hard Mrs Groves tried to come up with another less-troubling explanation. Carlos was holding a box of matches in his hand and it was really quite obvious that he was about to light the fuse, even though Mrs Groves would have *liked* to have thought that he was about to light some birthday cake candles.

‘Oh dear!’ cried Mrs Groves, pulling a large gold fob watch from her apron pocket. ‘Is that the time?’

This was a silly gesture, for the fob watch did *not* tell the time. It had not worked since Mrs Groves had absent-mindedly mistaken it for her tea bag and dunked it up and down in her cup of hot water for three whole minutes. The hands were permanently frozen at two minutes past eleven. But still, she carried it in her apron pocket, day in and day out, for just such emergencies.



‘Oh dear!’ she cried again, looking at the fob watch.
‘Is that *really* the time?’

Then she hurried away, trotting back along the corridor, down the grand staircase and across the entrance hall, until she came to her office. She dashed inside, shut the door, plugged her fingers in her ears and waited.

KABOOM!

The windowpanes rattled, fragments of plaster crumbled from the ceiling and a little puff of dust came in through the keyhole. Whoops of delight and Scruffy’s barking could be heard from the corridor above.

Goodness knows how many books had been blasted into tiny flakes of paper this time! And the walls and carpet in that section of the corridor would now be quite shabby indeed!

‘Better not to think about it,’ said Mrs Groves, dusting the plaster off her mobcap and shoulders.

And that, dear reader, was her approach to *all* disturbing happenings at Mrs Groves’ Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers.

Better not to think about it.

Now, this is not a particularly effective way to run a boarding school, but it is how Mrs Groves had done things for the last twenty-seven and a half years and she was not about to change now.

Mrs Groves straightened her apron, walked across the room to her desk, lifted the lid on a silver sweets dish and popped a peppermint into her mouth. Then, stepping to the window, she took three deep breaths, felt the sunshine warm her face and looked out into the street below.

Her hand flew to her chest. ‘Goodness gracious me!’ she gasped. ‘It can’t be!’

Mrs Groves removed her little gold glasses and polished them on her apron. She returned them to her nose and peered out the window again.

‘Oh deary, deary me!’ she cried. ‘It really is! Right here! Heading towards my esteemed Boarding School for Naughty Boys, Talking Animals and Circus Performers!’

She was quite flabbergasted at the sight of it.

Finally, however, she managed to get the words out.

‘It’s a ... a ... What is it? Not a naughty boy. Not a talking animal. Not even a circus performer. Oh me, oh my! It’s a simple, ordinary, everyday *girl!*’