



Word of Mouth – 3

The two previous extracts in this series were from classics - Mark Twain's "Tom Sawyer" and "Buddenbrooks" by Thomas Mann. This time we turn to detective fiction. Published in 1939, "In the Teeth of the Evidence" by Dorothy L. Sayers is an ingenious tale of dental deception in which the dentist-murderer attempts to falsify the evidence by doing a makeover of his victim's mouth before burning the body in a garage.



Lord Peter Wimsey as depicted by his first illustrator, John Campbell

It all turns on whether a filling is of fused porcelain or cast porcelain, since the latter came in only in 1928 and so could not have been done at the time indicated in the case notes.

We thought it would be interesting to find out just how accurate the author's description was, and our expert witness finds that she had done her homework pretty thoroughly.

This short whodunnit begins with Lord Peter Wimsey in the dentist's chair. His own dentist, who has already examined the victim's teeth, is persuaded to take a second look, accompanied of course by Lord Peter. We pick up the story as he reluctantly begins his examination.

The body was still unburied, Mr Lamplough, grumbling very much, went down to Wimbledon with Wimsey, and again went through his distasteful task. This time he started on the left side.

"Lower thirteen-year-old molar and second bicuspid filled amalgam. The fire's got at those a bit, but they're still all right. First upper bicuspid – bicuspid are stupid sort of teeth – always the first to go. That filling looks to have been rather carelessly put in – not what I should call good work; it seems to extend over the next tooth – possibly the fire did that. Left upper canine, cast porcelain filling on anterior face – ."

"Half a jiff," said Wimsey, "Maggs's note says "fused porcelain." Is it the same thing?"

"No. Different process. Well, I suppose it's fused porcelain – difficult to see. I should have said it was cast myself; but that's as may be. "

"Let's verify it in the ledger. I wish Maggs had put the date in – goodness knows how far I shall have to hunt back, and I don't understand this chap's writing or his dashed abbreviations.

"You won't have to go back very far if it's cast. The stuff only came in about 1928, from America. There was quite a rage for it then, but for some reason it didn't take on extraordinarily well over here. But some men use it. "

"Oh, then it isn't cast," said Wimsey. "There's nothing here about canines, back to '28. Let's make sure; '27, '26, '25, '24, '23. Here you are. Canine, something or other,

"That's it," said Lamplough, coming to look over his shoulder. "Fused porcelain. I must be wrong, then. Easily see by taking it out. The grain's different, and so is the way it's put in."

"How, different?"

"Well," said Mr Lamplough, "one's a cast, you see."

"And the other's fused. I did grasp that much. Well, go ahead and take it out."

"Can't very well; not here."

"Then take it home and do it there. Don't you see, Lamplough, how important it is? If it is cast porcelain, or whatever you call it, it can't have been done in '23. And if it was removed later, then another dentist must have done it. And he may have done other things – and in that case, those things ought to be there, and they're not. Don't you see?"

"I see you're getting rather agitated," said Mr Lamplough; "all I can say is, if I refuse to have this thing taken along to my surgery. Corpses aren't popular in Harley Street."

In the end, the body was removed, by permission, to the dental department of the local hospital. Here Mr Lamplough, assisted by the staff dental expert, Dr Maggs, and the police, delicately extracted the filling from the canine.

"If that," he said triumphantly, "is not cast porcelain I will extract all my own teeth without an anaesthetic and swallow them."

Comment:

In the very first paragraph the description of the dental chair as "a green velvet torture chair" and the patient's description of his molar tooth as a "jolly old left-hand upper grinder" set the scene and of course immediately capture the attention of the dental reader. There is more to come: a dentist commits murder and attempts to pass off the corpse as his own, and his eventual conviction is brought about by a fellow-dentist who knows the difference between a conventional fused porcelain filling and the new cast porcelain technique.

This casting of porcelain was new to me, as I am involved in prosthodontics, but our ever-resourceful dental library held the answer in the form of the 1929 edition of the *Dental Record*, which contains an article on "Porcelain Casting" by "H.O. in *Western Dental Bulletin*" (the only clue to its authorship). This article very expertly describes the advantages of this innovation from the point of view both of materials and technique. It states that at the BDA conference a demonstration had been given of a new medium "Neo-eldentog", a casting porcelain material which "has for its principal advantages edge strength, translucency, power to resist action of oral secretions, and the simplicity of the apparatus required for casting." But although the

story says that "the stuff" came in from America there is no mention of this in the article, which says that it had been "tested out for a considerable period on the Continent."

I passed all this information to a fellow dental instructor in conservation, Grant Taylor, and he was intrigued and thought the author had expertly described the subject. However, it occurs to me that the murdering dentist was really caught because of the precise dental health records that enabled a fellow-professional to make comparisons. You would think he would have known better and destroyed the records; but then there would have been no story.

Patrick Lilly

* * * * *