



No laughing matter

Our latest extract is from P.G. Wodehouse's "Laughing Gas", published in 1936, in which a startling case of identity confusion occurs in a dental surgery. The hero has a tooth extracted under nitrous oxide – laughing gas – and returns to consciousness to find himself in the body of a child film star who has been undergoing similar treatment on the same premises. (The two dentists, incidentally, are described as "fang-wrenching rivals.") As the hero explains: "Owing to some bad staffwork during the period when we were simultaneously sauntering about in the fourth dimension there had been an unfortunate switch" The boy film star is, of course, equally dismayed, but eventually a motor bike accident restores the status quo.

I.J. Zizzbaum proved to be a rather gloomy cove. He looked like a dentist with a secret sorrow. In reply to my "Good afternoon," he merely motioned me to me chair with a sombre wave of the hand. One of those strong, silent dentists.

I, on the other hand, was at my chattiest. I am always that way when closeted with a molar-mangler. I dare say it's the same with you. I suppose one's idea is that if one can only keep the conversation going, the blighter may get so interested that he will shelve the dirty work altogether in favour of a cosy talk. I started in right away.

"Hullo, hullo, hullo. Here I am. Good afternoon, good afternoon. What a lovely day, what? Shall I sit here? Right ho. Shall I open my mouth? Right ho."

"Wider, please," said I. J. Zizzbaum sadly.

. . . . I hunted in my mind for some soothing speech that would bring the roses back to his cheeks, but all I could think of was a statement to the effect that recent discoveries in the Congo basin had thrown a new light on something or other. I had this on the authority of the National Geographical Magazine.

It didn't seem to cheer him up to any marked extent. Not interested in the Congo basin, probably. Many people aren't. He simply sighed rather heavily, levered my jaws a bit farther apart, peered into the abyss, sighed again as if he didn't think highly of the contents, and motioned to his A.D.C. to cluster round with the gas-bag.

And presently, after a brief interlude during which I felt as if I was being slowly smothered where I sat, I was off.

Comment:

The unpleasant effects of nitrous oxide, described by the character Reggie Havershot in P.G.Wodehouse's 'Laughing Gas', were commonplace until oxygen and other gases were added, although it was thought that the cause of the euphoric effects was the presence of impurities in the gas. Induction of anaesthesia is now commonly carried out by an intravenous anaesthetic.

Nitrous oxide, popularly known as 'Laughing Gas,' was discovered in 1772 by the English chemist Joseph Priestly, and a few years later in 1799 Humphrey Davy accidentally inhaled

the gas and proposed in a paper published in 1800 that the gas might be used to render patients insensible before surgical procedures. Apparently Davy organised 'hilarious' gatherings experiencing the euphoric and excitable state brought about by inhalation. No one took Davy seriously until in 1844, Horace Wells attended such a laughing gas exhibition in the U.S.A and noticed that a young man who had inhaled the gas and had gashed his leg severely, was running about apparently unaware of any pain. Next day, Wells obtained a supply of the gas and persuaded a colleague to extract one of his own wisdom teeth with nitrous oxide.

Stage acts demonstrating the effects of the gas were commonplace in London and an old play bill from the Adelphi Theatre dated Saturday 5th June 1824, publicised such a performance. The bill announced positively the last appearance of M Henry at the theatre in the Strand, who would exhibit "Experiments on Gas." An open invitation was extended to any of the audience " who chuse (sic) to inhale it..."

An interesting aspect of the whole subject of anaesthesia, is that its pain-reducing qualities were widely known to alleviate the pain *after* an extraction and from an earlier period.

In 1889, Doctor Parsons Shaw, first Dean of Victoria Dental Hospital, Manchester, drew attention to popular poems first published around 1809. It has not been established which one of the following actually wrote the poem, probably around 1820; Ackermann, Rowlandson or Corribe in which a fictitious character Dr Syntax and his wife attend the 'dentist's shop' of Le Charlatan. The relevant verse is quoted:

*"Our dentist quickly twisted out
The offending tooth and Dolly rose,
Le Charlatan observed, "suppose,
Madame, you snuff some Nitrous oxide gas,
To assuage the torment of your face."*

In spite of a great deal of research by dental historians, the true authorship of Doctor Syntax and Le Charlatan remain a mystery. Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and a host of others have all been proposed but no conclusive evidence has been produced for an author. The truth may never be known.

Rufus M. Ross

Pepys and evolution

How wonderful to learn that Samuel Pepys, the great diarist, took an interest in comparative dental anatomy when he discussed with Lord Brouncker, a President of the Royal Society, "whether Nature gave each creature teeth suitable to a particular food, or whether teeth adapted to the food available". Pepys became a member of the Royal Society in 1665 and this was typical of the great mysteries of the day which were debated. Had Pepys been more scientifically qualified and had he persisted with this line of enquiry, he might have reached some of Charles Darwin's conclusions a full two centuries before evolution became a serious topic. In the Royal Society at that time Pepys would meet Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle the chemist, Christopher Wren, and Robert Hooke the microscopist. He watched the dissection of a hanged man at the

Surgeon's Hall and attended lectures on anatomy. But there was still great uncertainty about some of the simplest matters. Charles Allan published the first textbook on dentistry in the English language in 1685 and was still uncertain as to how deciduous teeth were replaced by their permanent successors. Allan believed that when the crown of the deciduous tooth was shed, decayed or 'withered', the root remained in the jaws and supported the growth of the crown of the permanent tooth in its place.

The study of comparative dental anatomy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed greatly to our understanding of the anatomy and physiology of the teeth, the jaws and the masticatory apparatus. The topic of Pepys's discussion with Lord Brouncker would have made an excellent question in a dental anatomy examination paper in the middle of the twentieth century but the subject of comparative dental anatomy is now in decline with so many grand mysteries solved and scientific minds now focussed on detailed problems peculiar to the human dentition.

H.W.N.

"Samuel Pepys - The Unequalled Self" (2002 Whitbread Book of the Year) by Claire Tomalin, Page 256, Pub. Penguin Books, 2003.