



**Word of Mouth - 'A Dental tale from a century and a half ago'
Malvin Ring***

A short story, obviously copied from a British magazine or newspaper, appeared in its entirety in a weekly New York newspaper "The Home Journal" for Saturday, July 24, 1852. The paper, which bore on its masthead the following words "For the Cultivation of the Memorable, the Progressive, and the Beautiful," obviously thought that any story about dentistry would be of interest to its readers, especially one that was supposed to have taken place in such an exotic setting as Morocco. There is no attribution to the story, no hint of who the writer may have been, let alone whether the tale was a true one or exciting fiction. Strangely, it begins as printed here, with no explanation of how the three Frenchmen ended up in a Moroccan prison. Nevertheless, the tale is an interesting one and "holds one on the edge of his seat" until the triumphant ending!

A DENTAL OPERATION

As I knew that in all barbarous countries men skilled in the healing arts are held in great esteem, I did not fail to make known that we had in our company Dr. Codonel, a French surgeon, who was also a botanist, oculist and dentist, and whose skill was very celebrated. Martin de la Bastide announced himself as a geographer, the Abbe Deloni as an antiquary; and when we had all declared our profession, the pasha ordered the masgarines to put us into a meteore (a sort of prison) to await the further orders of the emperor, which were to be notified in the course of the day. He then went to inform the emperor of our names and qualities; and in order to make his court, he took care to say that among the captives was a surgeon and dentist, one of the ablest in France. The pasha well knew that this intelligence would please the emperor, who had for a long time been tormented with so violent a toothache that all applications had been ineffectual to relieve it. The evil could only be cured by the extraction of the tooth; but the emperor had not the courage to submit to this painful operation, and no Moorish surgeon had been found rash enough to undertake it. At the moment when the pasha was speaking to the emperor of the French surgeon and dentist, the shootings of the pain were so tormenting that the emperor immediately gave orders to have Dr. Codonel brought to the castle, intending to put himself entirely under his care. The pasha, pleased to have been able to offer his master a means of relief, returned quickly to the prison, followed by several Negroes carrying a complete dress for Dr. Codonel. The orders of the emperor were signified to him; and without yet being informed of the cause of this change of fortune, he was requested to suffer himself to be dressed. He was stripped of his great coat, and richly attired in the Moorish fashion. For his cocked hat and wig a turban was substituted, of studied elegance. He was perfumed with all sorts of essences, and unable to inform his companions, because unable to guess himself the purport of all this ceremony, he saw himself carried away in a very honorable manner, and conducted to the palace of the emperor, through a crowd of courtiers, who were already informed of his good fortune.

Everybody prayed for the happy success of the means to be employed by the French dentist, for the emperor, since he had suffered so severely, had become very savage and untractable. He often condemned to death persons who, but for his toothache, would certainly have obtained a pardon. To cure, or at least to relieve him, would be a benefit to the whole empire of Morocco.

The pasha introduced the doctor into a hall of the castle, and making him repose himself in a chair of honour, he told him to wait a moment, for he was going to announce his arrival to the emperor, who would soon pay him a visit.

Dr. Codonel remained alone, not knowing what to think. The idea of a visit from the emperor excited in him a certain shuddering of awe and terror which would be difficult to describe. "In what will all these ceremonies end?" he said to himself "Have they dressed me in this manner only to perish with more distinction?" He had not, however, much time for reflection before the emperor presented himself with an interpreter. The surgeon, confounded at the sight rose and made an obeisance; he was invited to sit down; the emperor seated himself also, supporting his jaw with his hand and making terrible grimaces. The interpreter began to speak, and held this discourse in French with Dr. Codonel:—"The august emperor of Morocco, Mohammed Ben Abdallah, descendant of the great prophet, having heard of you as an able surgeon and dentist, gives you your liberty from this moment and the title of his surgeon in ordinary; and if you shall succeed in curing the pain in his teeth, he engages himself by oath to grant you any request you shall make, let it be what it may."

Figure to yourself the astonishment of Dr. Codonel at these words! He did not suffer himself to be dazzled, however: he deeply felt all the danger of the honour offered him; and prudently distrusting himself, and still more the courage of the emperor, he loudly protested against the flattering report that had been made of him against his own consent; he protested that he had never been either an oculist or a dentist, but only a surgeon, and a surgeon in a village. He would much rather have been sent back to prison; but the more he disclaimed the reputation of skill, the more confidence he inspired; and all that he said of his want of science was attributed to modesty alone.

At length, as he persisted in refusing the honour offered him, the emperor, who was in great pain, arose, making a shocking contortion of countenance, spoke a word in the ear of his interpreter, and retired. The interpreter transmitted this message to Dr. Codonel; it was rather imperious. The emperor ordered him to relieve his malady, on pain of being strangled on the spot. After this severe command was notified to him, he was left alone for some minutes to consider the matter, and to take his resolution. Put yourself a moment in his place, and think how critical was his situation! It was no time to hesitate, as the wretched Codonel well perceived. "If I obstinately refuse," said he, "It is clear I am a dead man. If I undertake an operation above my skill, and which my natural timidity will render still more difficult, I certainly run a great risk of perishing. To draw the tooth of a private person is a delicate operation; but to draw the tooth of an emperor, and an emperor of Morocco, is of all things the most hazardous; but since death is presented to me on all sides, let me examine this fatal tooth; happen what may, at least I will not die without having extracted it." When he had taken this laudable resolution, he recommended his soul to God, and resigned himself entirely to the will of heaven. Then, when they came to know his intentions, he said that he was ready to do all that they desired of him. The emperor, at this news, felt a momentary joy in the midst of his pain. He came to the dentist, and, placing himself properly, begged him to examine the seat of the evil. The emperor was of a figure capable of intimidating the boldest operator. His breath was infected, and his teeth were in a terrible state. Dr. Codonel, after examining with the utmost attention the lower jaw, of which the emperor particularly complained, discovered a decayed tooth, and unfortunately, a very large one, the removal of which would be extremely difficult and painful. He begged for a delay of two days before he extracted it, to recover a little courage and to make some experiments on animals, and to

have an instrument made proper for the purpose. The two days passed quickly, and the fatal hour at length arrived when the operation was to be performed. The necessary preparations were made and the emperor presented himself, still suffering the most acute pain. The doctor inwardly trembled, but endeavored to conceal his apprehension. He had already got the dreaded instrument in his hand when he thought to address a short discourse to the emperor by means of the interpreter. "August emperor," said he, "since you have permitted me to extract this tooth which causes you such severe suffering, I beg one thing of you, which is, that you will order six of your slaves, under pain of death, to obey me during four minutes, in whatever I may command them in regard to your person." The emperor consented. Dr. Codonel then ordered six strong Negroes to seize the limbs of the emperor, and hold them so fast that he should not be able to make any resistance during the operation. The emperor submitted, from his earnest desire to obtain relief. Then Dr. Codonel, arousing all his courage fastened the instrument on the suspected tooth; and when he was sure he had got hold, he exerted all his strength. "I shall probably lose my life," said he to himself, "but the tooth shall come out; however fast it may be, I will not quit my hold!" He pulled indeed; and notwithstanding the firmness of the tooth, notwithstanding the cries of the struggling emperor, he had the courage to drag him forcibly all around the hall; and he would have pulled longer, if the large tooth had not at length yielded, and been torn, with its monstrous roots, out of the bleeding jaw. "Here it is!" cried he, in a transport of joy. But the emperor was still furious and almost frantic with pain. In his rage he gave orders for strangling the dentist, the slaves, the pasha, the masgarines, and all his court. Fortunately the pain soon became less violent, and then ceased entirely; so that the delighted emperor not only revoked the cruel orders he had given the moment after the operation, but sent for Dr. Codonel, and publicly testified his gratitude to him. He paid him a large sum, and made him several presents of very great value. Dr. Codonel received, the same day, two fine horses, a camel, a cloak, and turban of very rich stuff, a gold-hilted sabre, and a pair of horse pistols; besides which the emperor gave him apartments in his palace, and told him to ask that favour to which he attached the highest value.

The generous Codonel had no difficulty in deciding what this favour should be; he asked, and immediately obtained, the liberty of his companions in misfortune. A pasha was quickly sent to inform us that we were free; and you may easily imagine the delight with which we received the intelligence.

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