



Word of Mouth

Manners maketh the dentist

Edna Robertson*

The following extract comes from “The Vanished Poms of Yesterday” by Lord Frederic Hamilton, part of a trilogy of anecdotal memoirs under the collective title of “My Yesterdays”. Hamilton was a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century diplomat who seems to have been posted at one time or another to most British embassies throughout the world. A quick tour of Internet sites reveals that his books are still in demand, with new editions being constantly produced on both sides of the Atlantic.

“Once at Kyoto in Japan, I had occasion for the services of a dentist. As the dentist only spoke Japanese, I took my interpreter with me. After removing my shoes at the door – an unusual preliminary to a visit to a dentist – we went upstairs, where we found a dapper little individual in kimono and white socks, surrounded by the most modern and up-to-date dental paraphernalia, sucking his breath, and rubbing his knees with true Japanese politeness. Eager to show that a foreigner could have delightful manners, I sucked my breath, if anything, rather louder, and rubbed my knees a trifle harder. “Dentist says,” came from the interpreter, “will you honourably deign to explain where trouble lies in honourable tooth?”

“If the dentist will honourably deign to examine my left-hand molar, “I responded with charming courtesy, “he will find it requires stopping, but for heaven's sake, Mr Nakimura, ask him to be careful how he uses his honorable drill, for I am terrified to death of that invention of the Evil One.” Soon the Satanic drill got well into its stride, and began boring into every nerve of my head. I jumped out of the chair. “Tell the dentist, Mr Nakimura, that he is honourably deigning to hurt me like the very devil with his honorable but wholly damnable drill.” “Dentist says if you honourably deign to reseal yourself in chair, he soon conquer difficulties in your honourable tooth.” “Certainly. But dentist must not give me honourable hell any more.” . . . I am bound to admit that the little dentist's workmanship was so good that it has remained intact up to the present day.”

Comment:

All the comments in this series so far have been by dentists so it's only fair to give a turn to someone at the receiving end of the drill. However it's quite difficult to identify with the patient in the passage above. His predicament was highly unusual. Nowadays we are used to removing our shoes at airports, but not generally as the prelude to elaborate displays of courtesy by all concerned. Poor Lord Frederic had to remove them at the doorway of the dental surgery, thus giving a new meaning to the term pain threshold. High-speed drills were still undreamed of in his day - he had to cope with real pain plus a very demanding form of politeness (though a hefty degree of hyperbole can be detected on both counts). He felt he had to reciprocate in kind - how, though, did he manage to spit out the honourable mouthwash politely? Or could the dentist have been putting on an act in an unsuccessful attempt to distract his nervous patient from the satanic drill?

Hamilton's caricature is obviously dated but he was not the last westerner to be disconcerted by oriental courtesy. The travel writer Paul Theroux cynically remarked that the Japanese had taken politeness to the point where it was indistinguishable from rudeness. A somewhat impolite comment.

But what of etiquette for patients? There are pitfalls here too. When the Wednesday conversation group at the RCPSG recently discussed the subject of courtesy a little book of etiquette by George Washington was produced. "Cleanse not your teeth with the table cloth, fork or knife," he warned. "But if others do it, let it be done with a toothpick." Flossing at the dinner table would definitely be bad manners as well. So for that matter would removing your shoes.

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