

IN BRIEF

- Literary references to health and hygiene.

In sickness and in health

M. E. Richardson¹

This final instalment in the literary series deals with the relationship between general and oral health and methods of maintaining good oral hygiene.

IN HEALTH

DENS SANA IN CORPORE SANA. The literary world recognises the importance of good general health for maintenance of a healthy dentition. James Joyce¹ was aware of the relationship between a healthy diet and good general and dental health:

'-It is indeed, ma'am, Buck Mulligan said, pouring milk into their cups.

-Taste it, sir, she said.

He drank at her bidding.

'-If only we could live on good food like that, he said to her somewhat loudly, we wouldn't have the country full of rotten teeth and rotten guts.'

Katherine Mansfield's² hero was proud of his sound teeth which he attributed to a healthy diet and good oral hygiene:

'Andreas Binzer woke slowly. He turned over on the narrow bed and stretched himself – yawned – opening his mouth as widely as possible, bringing his teeth together afterwards with a sharp 'click'. The sound of that click fascinated him; he repeated it quickly several times, with a snapping movement of the jaws. What teeth! he thought. Sound as a bell, every man jack of them. Never had one out, never had one stopped. That comes of no tomfoolery in eating, and a good regular brushing night and morning.'

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Naomi Mitchison³ noted the role of heredity in dental health:

'The routine yearly visits to the dentist were rather fun than not, for I had a good dental inheritance and had also been breast-fed.'

IN SICKNESS

The systemic effects of dental disease are presented in verse by John Betjeman:⁴

*“Dr Macmillan, who's so good and cheap,
Says I will tire my kidneys if I stoop,
And oh, I do love gardening, for now
My garden is the last thing I have left.
You'll help me with the weeding, won't you
John?”*

He says my teeth are what is wrong, the roots

*Have been attacked by dangerous bacilli
Which breed impurities through all my blood,*

*And this inflames my kidneys. Mrs Bent
Had just the same (but not, of course, so bad):*

*She nearly died, poor thing, till Captain Bent
Insisted she should have them out at once.*

*But mine are ossified into my gums—
No dentist could extract them. Listen,
John...”*

*Poor mother, walking bravely on the lawn,
Her body one huge toothache! Would she die?*

And if she died could I forgive myself?”

And further explored in prose by George Birmingham:⁵

'Like many another, I returned from the war a sick man. There was no glory or

romance about it. I was not wounded or gassed. I did not even suffer from shell-shock or a nervous breakdown. With me it was simply and most prosaically stomach. I suffered almost constant pain. It was not severe, but it was very unpleasant and I was afraid to eat because when I did the pain got worse. This went on for about four years and I got tired of it.

Various doctors tried to cure me and all failed. I do not in the least blame them. They never had a fair chance, for I always told them before they examined me that it would be no use their recommending an abdominal operation. I was determined not to submit to that. I also said that I particularly disliked taking medicine. The wonder was that these doctors consented to treat me at all, but they did, though the only weapon left in their armoury was diet. Perhaps in their hearts they agreed with me about the value of the usual remedies. Doctors, I fancy, seldom deceive themselves. With medical advice I tried various schemes of diet. Ada, who was determined to get me well again if she could, saw to it that I kept to them. Indeed, lest I should be tempted above what I could bear by the sight of pleasant food, she kept herself and her household rigidly to the diet recommended to me. My children complained afterwards that there were times when they got nothing to eat but water biscuits. That was an exaggeration, but they were certainly deprived of things they liked for no reason except that I liked them too.

The result of four years of continual dieting was that I lost nearly three stone in weight and the pains remained much as they were at the start. It was a dreary

Then I got perfectly well, so well that I could eat things like lobster and whipped cream without a suggestion of a pain afterwards.

Health and cure of diseases are so interesting to most people that I need scarcely apologise for stating briefly how I came to get well. Unfortunately, there is some difference of opinion about this. Ada always held that I was cured by having six teeth pulled out, all at once. It was and still is to some extent a fashionable theory that bad teeth cause disease. But my teeth were perfectly good when I first took to having pains and only decayed afterwards. So I do not think it can have been teeth with me.

I got well when we went to Dinard, and at Dinard the tide goes out for a considerable distance, leaving behind it enormous stretches on damp sand. My theory is that the sea contains something – the word ozone has gone out of fashion – which is very good for the human body. This gas, if it is a gas, gets into the air and we breathe it. It comes most abundantly, not from the sea itself, but from the sea-soaked sand. Therefore, the more sea-soaked land there is left by a receding tide, the more health-giving is the air which passes over it. That is the theory. I have never met anyone who believed it; but the facts are plain. At Dinard the tide goes out for miles and as soon as I went to Dinard I got well. There may be no connection between the two, but if I ever get ill again in that particular way I shall, if I can, go to Mont St. Michel and take rooms in an hotel for a couple of months. At Mont St. Michel the tide goes out even farther than it does at Dinard and for hours every day the little town is entirely surrounded with stretches of damp sand. There are, I believe places with higher and lower tides than the coast of Brittany, but they all seem to be a long way off. Mont St. Michel is easily accessible.

It is, of course, possible that my pains simply got well of themselves, as most ills do if left alone long enough. But that would be a dull thing to believe. I much prefer something more picturesque, like the ebb and flow of the tide.'

Even Irish policemen understood the connection between general and oral health:⁶

'He was very big and fat and the hair which strayed abundantly about the back of his bulging neck was a pale straw-colour; all that was striking but not unheard of...

His hands were red, swollen and enormous and he appeared to have one of them halfway into his mouth as he gazed into the mirror.

"It's my teeth," I heard him say, abstractedly and half-aloud. His voice was heavy and slightly muffled, reminding me of a thick winter quilt. I must have made some sound at the door or possibly he had seen

my reflection in the glass for he turned slowly round, shifting his stance with leisurely and heavy majesty, his fingers still working at his teeth; and as he turned I heard him murmuring to himself:

"Nearly every sickness is from the teeth..."

"It would be no harm if you filled up these forms," he said. "Tell me," he continued, "would it be true that you are an itinerant dentist and that you came on a tricycle?"

"It would not," I replied.

"On a patent tandem?"

"No."

"Dentists are an unpredictable coterie of people," he said. "Do you tell me it was a velocipede or a penny-farthing?"

"I do not," I said evenly. He gave me a long searching look as if to see whether I was serious in what I was saying, again wrinkling up his brow.

"Then maybe you're no dentist at all," he said, "but only a man after a dog licence or papers for a bull."

"I did not say I was a dentist," I said sharply, "and I did not say anything about a bull."

The sergeant looked at me incredulously.

"That is a great curiosity," he said, "a very difficult piece of puzzlement, a snorter..."

"It is lucky for your pop that he is situated in Amurikey," he remarked, "if it is a thing that he is having trouble with the old teeth. It is very few sicknesses that are not from the teeth."

"Yes," I said. I was determined to say as little as possible and let these unusual policemen show their hand. Then I would know how to deal with them.

"Because a man can have more disease and germination in his gob than you'll find in a rat's coat and Amurikey is a country where the population do have grand teeth like shaving-lather or like bits of delph when you break a plate."

"Quite true," I said.

"Or like eggs under a black crow."

"Like eggs," I said.

"Did you ever happen to visit the cinematograph in your travels?"

"Never," I answered humbly, "but I believe it is a dark quarter and little can be seen at all except the photographs on the wall."

"Well it is there you see the fine teeth they do have in Amurikey," said the sergeant.

He gave the fire a hard look and took to handling absently his yellow stumps of teeth...

"In my day," said the sergeant, "half the scholars in the National Schools were walking around with enough disease in their gobs to decimate the continent of Russia and wither a field of crops by only looking at

them. That is all stopped now, they have compulsory inspections, the middling ones are stuffed with iron and the bad ones are pulled out with a thing like the claw for cutting wires."

"The half of it is due to cycling with the mouth open," said Gilhaney.

"Nowadays," said the sergeant, "it is nothing strange to see a class of boys at First Book with wholesome teeth and with junior plates manufactured by the County Council for half-nothing."

"Grinding the teeth halfway up a hill," said Gilhaney, "there is nothing worse, it files away the best part of them and leads to a hob-nailed liver indirectly."

"In Russia," said the sergeant, "they make teeth out of old piano-keys for elderly cows but it is a rough land without too much civilisation, it would cost you a fortune in tyres."⁶

Frank McCourt⁷ in his autobiographical novel *Angela's Ashes*, exemplifies the relationship between smoking and dental disease.

'Mam says, I'm a martyr for the fags and so is your father. There may be a lack of tea and bread in the house but Mam and Dad always manage to get the fags, the Wild Woodbines. They have to have the Woodbines in the morning and any time they drink tea. They tell us every day we should never smoke, it's bad for your lungs, it's bad for your chest, it stunts your growth, and they sit by the fire puffing away. Mam says, If 'tis a thing I ever see you with a fag in your gob I'll break your face. They tell us the cigarettes rot your teeth and you can see they're not lying. The teeth turn brown and black in their heads and fall out one by one. Dad says he has holes in his teeth big enough for a sparrow to raise a family. He has a few left but he gets them pulled at the clinic and applies for a false set...

Mam's teeth are so bad she has to go to Barrington's Hospital to have them all pulled at the same time and when she comes home she's holding at her mouth a rag bright with blood. She has to sit up all night by the fire because you can't lie down when your gums are pumping blood or you'll choke in your sleep. She says she'll give up smoking entirely when this bleeding stops but she needs one puff of a fag this minute for the comfort that's in it. She tells Malachy to go to Kathleen O'Connell's shop and ask her if she would ever let her have five Woodbines till Dad collects the dole on Thursday. If anyone can get fags out of Kathleen, Malachy can. Mam says he has the charm, and she tells me, There's no use sending you with your long puss and your father's odd manner.

When the bleeding stops and Mam's gums heal she goes to the clinic for her false

When the bleeding stops and Mam's gums heal she goes to the clinic for her false teeth. She says she'll give up the smoking when her new teeth are in but she never does'...

George Orwell's⁸ vision of the treatment of non-conformers in his famous novel '1984' illustrates the effect of starvation and abuse on general and dental health:

'He seized Winston's shoulder and spun him round... "Look at the condition you are in!" he said "Look at this filthy grime all over your body...Even your hair is coming out in handfuls. Look!" He plucked at Winston's head and brought away a tuft of hair. "Open your mouth. Nine, ten, eleven teeth left. How many had you when you came to us? And the few you have left are dropping out of your head. Look here!" he seized one of Winston's remaining front teeth between his powerful thumb and forefinger. A twinge of pain shot through Winston's jaw. O'Brien had wrenched the loose tooth out by the roots. He tossed it across the cell...

They had given him a bath...dressed his varicose veins...pulled out the remnants of his teeth and given him a new set of dentures.'

Barbara Trapido⁹ believes that the effect of premature birth on the teeth cannot be compensated for by diet:

'Dinah's family dentist is called Dr Goldman...He grumbles while he's injecting your gums with what feels like a large rusty nail grinding through bone and gristle, but Dinah's mum won't let the girls switch to young Dr Weiss, the junior partner, who gives injections you can't even feel, just in case Dr Goldman gets offended. Dr Goldman is always so busy touching up his female assistants that he never finishes your fillings in one session. He does temporary fillings over and over and tells you to keep on coming back.

The dentist has always loomed large for Dinah, who's got useless, hazard-prone teeth in spite of all the nutritious force-feeding in childhood and the gollops of cod liver oil and malt from the big elliptical brown glass jar. Being premature and anaemic and sub-standard has meant that she's forever in there with Dr Goldman and his rusty-nail routine...

.....
Harold Macmillan's "Winds of Change" speech has mainly seemed to have had the effect of causing comment on his teeth. White students are used to blacks having terrible teeth. And poor white Afrikaners, as well, are often missing some teeth. But a posh-voiced English Milord?! Those derelict, tobacco-brown teeth?!

.....
'Jeez, man, have you checked out his

teeth?' the students are saying to each other. 'Jeez, man, can you credit it? Teeth as bad as that?'

'I'd like to kiss you, but I won't,' he (her date) says, taking the wind out of her sails. 'I had two molars out this afternoon and the inside of my mouth is still feeling like lumps of chopped liver.'

The date's teeth are a disaster area because he's spent his years at university letting the students at Wits dental school attend to his mouth for free. So now he's got lots of unnecessary crowns and experimental bridge work. He's got fly-overs and cantilevers all threatening to come down.'

ORAL HYGIENE

A time honoured method of tooth cleaning is noted by Harold Owen:¹⁰

'Once tea was over I would scrub my hands and wash myself very clean, whitening my teeth by rubbing on soot which I gathered straight from the chimney. This was a secret process of mine that I had somehow heard about and it was most effective. I liked the taste of soot too.'

And by V. S. Prichett¹¹ in his autobiography 'A Cab at the Door':

'She was in awe of him; he kept his nails perfect and there was a pleasant smell of Pear's soap and cachous about him and his teeth were white. He cleaned them – as his mother did – with soot or salt.'

Toothpicks and floss

James Joyce¹² in 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' describes the use of these aids to hygiene:

'Cranly came out through the door of the entrance hall, his hat thrust back on the nape of his neck and picking his teeth with care....dislodged a figseed from his teeth on the point of his rude toothpick and gazed at it intently.

...Cranly repeated, rooting again deliberately at his gleaming uncovered teeth... He took a reel of dental floss from his waistcoat pocket and, breaking off a piece, twanged it smartly between two and two of his resonant unwashed teeth.'

Graham Greene¹³ introduced the water-pick in 'The Human Factor':

'Amusing little gadget, that of yours. Fashionable, too. I suppose it really is better than an ordinary toothbrush?'

"The water gets between the teeth," Daintry said. "My dentist recommended it,"

"I always carry a toothpick for that," Percival said. He took a little red Cartier case out of his pocket. "Pretty, isn't it? Eighteen carat. My father used it before me."

"I think this is more hygienic," Daintry said.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure of that. This washes easily. I was a general consultant, you know, Harley Street and all ..."

Match sticks, bicycle spokes and village gossip

Hugh de Selincourt¹⁴ describes rough and ready toothpicks:

'Tom Hunter had hardly entered his shop, and was still helping the breadcrust out of his teeth, which the doctor had told him the evening before should all be extracted, with his tongue and a split match, when he saw young Joe Mannerly come down the street, pushing along a bicycle which belonged, he knew for certain, to Paul Gauvinier.

"Mornin', Tom," said young Joe cheerfully. "The Boss wants you to mend a puncture in the back wheel, and while you're about it, he says, you might give the old bike a good oilin' all over,"

"All right!" said Tom, thoughtfully sucking the match, and proceeding to insert the point with some difficulty in the far corner of his mouth. Young Joe looked on attentively.

"Busy this morning, then?"

Tom Hunter paid no heed to the insinuation.

"Bike spokes come wonderful handy for that job," the boy went on.

Tom Hunter turned serious eyes upon him, distaining from ten years' superiority in age any precocious effort at humour. Everyone knew that Joe Mannerly was a cheeky young devil, every bit the same as his father before him, elders would add. A good enough kid, of course, for all that, and a favourite with Tom Hunter, when he was in a good temper, which was less seldom the case than it used to be before he was affected by trench fever and poison gas.

"Boss says he'll fetch it later on."

"Good for 'im," grunted Tom, chewing the match.

"Got to lose 'em, I hear," Joe threw out by way of conversation, for he liked to talk and be seen talking with Tom Hunter, who was Tillingfold's best forward and one of the hardest hitters in the cricket eleven – especially to be seen talking thus to a man by a group of little school-boys and girls, mere children, dawdling on their way to the swings on the Recreation Ground.

"Lose 'em! Lose what?" Tom growled, so surlily that Joe's self-possession flickered.

"Y'r teeth," he said as airily as possible, feeling the eyes of the whole group staring at him.

"What a place! sneered Tom Hunter, 'what a cacklin' bloody 'ole of gossip! Only knew of it meself last night."

"Mrs Hawkins mentioned it to mother. That's all. They was sorry."

"And who the 'ell mentioned it to Mrs 'Aukins? P'raps she could tell your mother what I 'ad for breakfast this morning."

"Make a pretty fairish guess, I lay a tanner."

Tom Hunter spat the match out contemptuously...

Joe stopped whistling to greet a very solid man almost as thick as he was long who was carrying, with great care, an extremely small basket with three eggs in it.

"Mornin', Mr Bird!" sang out young Joe...

Tom Hunter looked up and said less glumly than he had spoken to young Joe:

"H'lo, Sam!"

"H'lo, Tom!" answered Bird, and stopped.

"A lovely morning!" he went on after a moment's pause, a smile widening over his immense face. "In my opinion, it's likely to be hot this afternoon. A real hot scorcher." he put his head a little on one side. "Just your day, too. You always take a few off Raveley, ... Very glad you're able to play, though."

"Why shouldn't I be able to play, then?"

He was instantly on the defensive, remembering Sam's presence in the Village Room during his outburst that he was done with cricket.

"Well, I heard say as you'd trouble with your teeth."

"Lord! If that ain't the blommin' limit. Whoever heard of such a place? Doctor says last night - I'd been to get some med'cine - 'let's look at your mouth, Tom. Yes, you'd be better without that lot. They're rotten.' You know his straight way?"

Sam Bird assented with a sagacious shake of his heavy head, a convincing, expressive shake.

"I didn't even tell me sister; and here this morning young Joe Mannerly - cheeky young devil -"

"He is that," Sam interrupted to agree.

"Losin' y'r teeth, then,' he says. Whole blasted village knows it. How's it done? That's what beats me."

Nature's toothpick Elsbeth Huxley:¹⁵

'photographed a crocodile lying on a sand-spit with its jaws wide open. The reptile paid absolutely no attention. Some locking mechanism enables crocodiles to lie for hours with open jaws, which cools them down and allows access to a small plover who cleans their teeth by plucking bits and pieces from their great big molars.'

Tooth brushes

Osbert Sitwell's¹⁶ father:

'...when younger, ...had invented many other things; at Eton, for example, a musical toothbrush which played "Annie Laurie" as you brushed your teeth, and a small revolver

for killing wasps.'

Margaret Atwood's¹⁷ character Ainsley, in "The Edible Woman"-

- 'has a job as a tester of defective electric toothbrushes for an electric toothbrush company: a temporary job. What she is waiting for is an opening in one of those little art galleries, even though they don't pay well: she wants to meet the artists.

"Oh god," said Ainsley, "I can't face it. Another day of machines and mouths. I haven't had an interesting one since last month, when that lady sent back her toothbrush because the bristles were falling off. We found out she'd been using Ajax."

.....
 "...we've had quite a bit of excitement," she said. "Some woman tried to bump off her husband by short-circuiting his electric toothbrush, and one of our boys has to be at the trial as a witness; to testify that the thing couldn't possibly short-circuit under normal circumstances."

I suspected Ainsley of making this story up, but her eyes were at their bluest and roundest.'

Which toothpaste

E. R. Braithwaite's¹⁸ students were curious:

'I'd prepared the lesson carefully. Geography. Covering the course of the Amazon River from source to mouth. The territory through which it flowed and the inhabitants of that territory. Their way of life and the changes through which it had evolved. In brief, I tried by careful research to provide a comprehensive simulated voyage. Illustrated with maps and my own impromptu sketches on the blackboard. Focusing on the children of the territory their schools, their language, their games and pastimes, their work. Drawing parallels with the East End scene. They were quiet. Attentive I thought. Then a raised hand.

"Yes, Jackson." Delighted with the question as further evidence of their interest.

"What kind of toothpaste do you use, Sir?" As usual, any digression received unanimous support.

"Yes, do tell us. What toothpaste do you use?" From another.

"Do blackies have to go to the dentist? Me Mum says all blackies have good teeth." And another.

"I seen some blackies on the flicks and they all had these big white shining teeth."

"Is it true some blackies eat people? Me dad says that's why they all have strong teeth." Laughter.

"Go on, Titch, don't be daft." Someone chided him.

"Well, 's what me dad said."

On and on, tossing it to and fro among

themselves. Myself frustrated and angry at the ease with which the carefully prepared lesson had been shredded into nothingness.'

Graham Greene's¹⁹ Dr Fischer invented the ultimate in toothpaste:

'I think that I used to detest Dr Fischer more than any other man I have known just as I loved his daughter more than any other woman. What a strange thing that she and I ever came to meet, leave alone to marry. Anna-Luise and her millionaire father inhabited a great white mansion in the classical style by the lakeside at Versoix outside Geneva while I worked as a translator and letter-writer in the immense chocolate factory of glass in Vevey. We might have been a world not a mere canton apart. I would begin work at 8.30 in the morning while she would be still asleep in her pink and white bedroom, which she told me was like a wedding cake, and when I would go out to eat a hasty sandwich for my lunch, she was probably sitting before her glass in a dressing-gown doing her hair. From the sale of their chocolates my employers paid me three thousand francs a month which I suppose may have represented half a morning's unearned income to Dr Fischer who many years before had invented Dentophil Bouquet, a toothpaste which was supposed to hold at bay the infections caused by eating too many of our chocolates. The word Bouquet was meant to indicate the choice of perfume, and the first advertisement showed a tasteful bunch of flowers. 'Which is your favourite flower?' Later glamorous girls in soft photography would be seen holding between their teeth a flower, which varied with every girl.'

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