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WE REALLY ARE PUBLISHING MARK TWAIN TODAY

—THIS IS NOT A JOKE!—

THIS IS REALLY MARK TWAIN

THIS PIECE HASN'T AGED A DAY SINCE IT WAS WRITTEN

PEOPLE STILL HAVE TEETH

OR TEETH SUBSTITUTES

THIS PIECE COULD BE IN 'I WAS TOLD THERE'D BE CAKE'—THAT'S HOW CURRENT IT FEELS

WE HAVE A QUESTION ABOUT THE PUNCTUATION AT ONE POINT

YOU'LL SEE

IT'S WHERE THE QUOTATION MARK COMES AFTER A SEMICOLON

{PG. 2}

IS THAT HOW IT SHOULD BE DONE?

IT LOOKS WEIRD, LIKE WHEN YOU HUG SOMEONE GOODBYE OR HELLO

AND THEY HAD NOT BEEN INTENDING TO HUG

AND WHAT DO YOU DO WITH YOUR ARM NOW, AS IT'S COMING IN FOR A LANDING?

ANYWAY WE NEVER DO THE SEMICOLON-QUOTE THAT WAY

—BUT WE'VE PRESERVED IT HERE—

ALSO CHECK OUT THIS NABOKOV QUOTE:

'My tongue feels like somebody coming home and finding his furniture gone.'

— Nabokov to Edmund Wilson, 11/23/43, after having teeth removed

Happy Memories of the Dental Chair

By Mark Twain

Are all dentists active talkers? And have they come by this gift by inheritance? The barber was the first dentist; he had been pulling teeth for thousands of years before the earliest dental specialist made his appearance and became his professional child and heir; for thousands of years he had been the talker of talkers, and when his heir inherited and carried off the pattern of his barber-chair for use in the new field, doubtless he inherited along with it the barber's facility of speech, the gradually and patiently perfected marvel of those ages of faithful and pains-taking practice. ¶ But these are deep questions of theology, philology, mathematics; with them we have nothing to do. ¶ We will come to the point. ¶ I was not able to remember that I had ever sat in a dentist's chair; I was not able to remember that I had ever had a pain in any tooth. And so it was a cold awakening to me when a dentist who had caught a fleeting glimpse of my interior when I was laughing at something which spread me wider open than

usual, told me I ought to go to Dr. Riggs and get my teeth attended to. He said I had a certain disease of the teeth which had a scientific name but was sometimes called 'Riggs's disease' because Dr. Riggs had invented a method of treating it which cured it in some instances and arrested its progress and rendered it harmless in all; whereas it had formerly refused to succumb to dental science. ¶ Having got a vicious looking gouging-iron out of his pocket to fondle, his gift of talk came to him at once, just the same as if he had been behind his chair with a waiting subject paling under him, and proceeded with his flow. He said that most people had Riggs's disease, especially people whose teeth appeared to be perfectly sound and flawless; said one did not often find it with bad teeth; said it was heritable—where it existed in the parents, it would usually be found in the children. ¶ He said it was in the nature of blood poisoning; a secretion decayed the bone-surface of the roots of the teeth, then the gums retreated from these surfaces, pus was engendered in the gums, the teeth began to loosen, and the man's general

health was injured. ¶ He said that Dr. Riggs's method was to dig up under the gums with his instruments and carve and scrape all the dead bone away, down to the living bone; then the gums would return to their place, attach themselves to the living bone, and become healthy again. ¶ Then he went on to say that talk was generally wasted on a Riggs disease victim; there being no pain, they didn't mind the disease, and they did mind the desperate operation required to check the malady.

By way of example, he instanced the case of a young woman who came to him to have her teeth examined. ¶ They were beautifully white and regular, and perfectly sound, and he told her so; but he also told her that the whole thirty-two were in danger, because Riggs's disease was at their roots. ¶ She was a teacher, and had a salary of seven or eight hundred dollars; but she refused to pay 'any such price;' she hadn't any pain, and didn't choose to import any; she wouldn't take all that proposed thirty-two batches of agony as a gift, let alone go into the market and buy it. When the dentist had got this far, his gouging-iron slipped out of his hand, and this broke his connection and gave me a chance to get on first base with a question: which was, why he didn't propose to operate upon my Riggs disease himself. He said he doubted if any dentist could do the work quite as well as Riggs himself.

'Tons'

Dr. Riggs lives in my own town; so, when I reached home, I went to him. He was gray and venerable, and humane of aspect; but he had the calm, possessed, surgical look of a man who could endure pain in another person. I got in the chair and looked about me, noting the cuspidor at my left elbow, the convenient glass of water, the table at my right covered with long steel bodkins laid out in rows on a white napkin; then laid my head back in the rest, feeling pale and nervous, for this thing was all new to me; new and hellish, if I may use such a word without offense. ¶ The doctor bent over me, I spread my mouth, and he put a mirror the size of a nickel into it,

and inspected it all around. And began to talk. Not swiftly, not excitedly; but evenly, smoothly, tranquilly. He said I must have smoked considerable tobacco in my time. I responded, as well as the mirror would let me—'tons.' He said it was the best of preservatives for the teeth; and went on tapping around in there with the mirror and examining, while I made mental note of his remark for use against the anti-tobacco incendiaries. ¶ Presently he laid the mirror aside, raked among his bodkins, selected one, gave it a pass or two over an 'Arkansas stone,' laid a rag over my chin, placed a couple of fingers where I could have closed on them, and approached my mouth with the bodkin, which he held in the grip of his other hand. I began to shrink into myself and curl together, in a cold nightmare of expectancy. There was a strength-exhausting pause; then the doctor eased up his attitude and began to tell me some particulars concerning the Riggs disease. He said, among other things, that he had known it to so affect a victim's health as to prostrate him and keep him bed-ridden and



Photo: Adrian Kinloch

helpless during long intervals, the physicians doctoring his stomach, not suspecting that the chief trouble was in the teeth, and so failing to afford relief He instanced the case of a lady who had lain thus for a long time, under the hands of the most noted physicians of New York, until she was so wasted away that she

could be gathered up and carried in one's arms like a child. When the case came to him, at last, he stopped the medicines, went to work with his dental instruments, and she was presently sound and well. ¶ Then he put his tool into my mouth, rooted it up under a gum and began to carve. He seemed to fetch away chips of bone the size of my hand. In truth, what he removed could hardly have been seen without a microscope, I suppose—but my imagination is a microscope. ¶ If I had been honest enough to speak my mind, I would have said 'Owl' to every dig, and shouted it; but I was ashamed to do that, and so only said 'Um,' in a low voice, and kept back the exclamation point. The doctor worked fast, and with a hand that was as sure as it was vigorous, though along at first I was all the time expecting the instrument would slip and carry away all my Riggs disease at one rake. ¶ The doctor talked along entertainingly, and I responded 'Um' when my turn came—which was when I was hurt or thought I was. I was hurt a little, of course, but I think the main



discomfort about the operation was not the pain but the disagreeable sense of having my bone cut into; and then, too, your teeth are so near your ears, that the work sounds like

digging gravel and shoveling coal. I could go through those two days of bone-scraping now without minding it much; but I was inexperienced, then, and my imagination exaggerated the pain out of all reason.

At the end of an hour, something was said about chloroform. I knew I did not need it myself, but I believed my imagination did; so I accepted the bottle, and after that I held it always in my hand, and put it to my nose whenever my imagination got too brisk. The chloroform created a radical change; it made everything comfortable and pleasant. The pains were about as sharp as they had been before, but they rather seemed to be impersonal pains; pains that belonged to the community in general, including me, but not me particularly, not me any more than the others. So I did not care for them any longer; I do not care for a pain unless I can have it all to myself. The doctor's voice seemed removed to a little distance and somewhat subdued, or muffled; but his work seemed more aggressive and vigorous than ever

The whole thirty-two were in danger, because Riggs's disease was at their roots.

(as perhaps it was), and nearer by, too. ¶ The chloroform introduced the subject of anaesthetics, and the doctor told me about the first painless operation that was ever performed in this world; and his story had a most vivid interest, for the reason that he was the operator himself. We have been so accustomed, all our lives, to hearing about painless surgical operations, that I was as well prepared to be confronted by Columbus himself as to find myself in the living presence of the man who was midwife at the birth of the most merciful, the most beneficent of all the gracious hosts of the children of Science, the application of anaesthetics to the banishment of human agony. Yet it was true.

¶ The world had gone on enduring torture a thousand ages, and then science brought a miracle for its relief worth more than all the miracles that had ever preceded it; and had placed it, as her generous custom is, within the reach of every sufferer, instead of restricting it to a pious half dozen, after the old way. And this prodigious event itself had happened so long ago that it seemed part and parcel with the dim and dreamy antiquities; and yet it was certainly true that here was a man who was there at the time, and saw the thing done; was there, and himself inaugurated an event of such vast influence, magnitude, importance, that one may truly say it hardly has its equal in human history.

It was my ignorance that had made the event so old. It had happened in 1835. The doctor was a young dentist, then, and had just set up his shingle with young Wells. They visited a traveling laughing-gas exhibition one winter night, and were consumed with laughter over the grotesque performances of some of the Hartford youth while under the happy dominion of the gas. Presently one of them, a young chap named Cooley, went sprawling over a chair or a table, and reached the stage with a crash, but immediately jumped up and plunged into the fun again with no diminution of spirit.

‘So supernaturally sensitive’

I was in the chair a good part of two days—nine hours the first day and five the next—and then came out of it with my thirty-two teeth as polished and ship-shape and raw as if they had been taken out of the sockets and filed. It was a good job, and quickly and skillfully done; but if I opened my mouth and drew in a cold breath it woke up my attention like pouring ice water down my back. I could not touch anything to my teeth for several days, they were so supernaturally sensitive. But after that they became as tough as iron, and a thorough comfort. If by some blessed accident my conscience could catch the Riggs disease, I know what I would do with it. ¶ My teeth had lasted more than twenty years longer than people’s teeth usually last, but they had begun to develop specks of decay

here and there, and the doctor said that these places ought to be gouged out and filled; but I had had enough holiday for the present, and said I would chance them five or six years longer. Friends told me that they might all get to decaying in that time; but I doubted it and went my own way.

That was my first experience in dentistry. Physically, I mean, though not pecuniarily. I had paid plenty of dental bills, but had not made one before. When my six-year limit was up, I went to the doctor again, and he found, sure enough, that my harvest was fine and large and ripe for the sickle. I had to put the thing off, for a while, as I was just leaving for the summer; but as soon as I got a chance I hunted up a dentist. 🐻

This piece appears in Who Is Mark Twain?, by Mark Twain, to be published in a week’s time by Harper Studio.