

A Tooth for a Chimney....

- Ally Dempster

It was no accident that his Surgery was opposite the cluster of ancient chimneys. Chimneys had always intrigued the young Dentist. How like rows of teeth they were, some new and robustly upright, some worn and crumbling, some blackened and neglected, others higgledy-piggledy and randomly spaced, revealing painful, yawning gaps, flanked by sad, forlorn stumps, assaulted by harsh weather and choked with soot and smog, gurgling and spluttering, shockingly resembling the mouths he peered into every day. His work was ever-challenging, serving this hopeless corner of town, jammed up against the pokey, but smart, premises of his Surgery, almost jostling against it, mocking the 'leerie' gaslight, soon to be lit by the hunched street-sweeper whose chunky wife steadied the wooden ladder which he would collect from the Surgery Close as twilight crept across the shabby buildings, rendering them classless as dusk filled the ugly gaps, blended with the belching smoke and muffled raucous evening exchanges.

Soon, the bowler-hats would be gone, the crisp collars and shined-up shoes swallowed up by thronging crowds, homeward bound, the postman hanging up his flat hat on its shoogly peg in the modest room he rented, snugly fitting beneath the tumbling chimneys, his mailsack slumped in a corner.

Once old Leerie had worked his magic on the lamp outside, its feeble glow would reach the burnished sign, swinging gently below the Surgery, religiously polished every Tuesday by the old woman who often used her woolly hat to encourage a final sheen. Sometimes, he encountered the couple carefully storing the wonky ladder and stiff brushes under the stairway in the dark close. The Dentist would pass a few moments with them, ignoring the 'Thank-yous' they assaulted him with every time, she shyly pulling him a toothless smile before thanking him yet again. He remembered that foggy day, hearing the moans below his workplace, the intermittent yelps of pain, the useless words of comfort from the old man as he propped the two brushes against the lamp-post and looked around helplessly, pulling a tangled wad of string from his torn pocket, spilling on to the pavement a battered 'Craven-A' tin which bounced out its contents of hard-won douts around the clattering tin. A few fluffy toffees followed among some humble coins.

Sensing the drama unfolding below, the Dentist involuntarily shouted 'No!' as the old man unravelled the string, tying one end to the knobbly railings at the corner of the scruffy alley-way leading to the street. Leaping two-at-a-time down the worn, stone stairway, he blustered outside, just as the old man wiggled the tooth (she had only one) of his crumpled, tearful spouse and tentatively approached her weary old mouth with the fraying string. The old man grabbed his wife roughly, trying to heave her away from the railing. She screamed, hands to mouth and shoved her husband against the railings.

'Stop! Please - No!' shouted the Dentist, encircling the suffering old woman with one arm while encouraging the pair of them up to the Surgery. They had often exchanged daily greetings with him on the stairway and had always been annoyingly deferential towards this politely-spoken, educated young man. Their deference embarrassed and irritated him, but he could see they trusted him as they calmed themselves, instinctively straightening their bulky clothing and screwing their hats in their gnarled fists. The old lady heaved herself clumsily into the chair and marvelled discreetly as it hoisted her towards the gently smiling face of the Dentist. It didn't take long. The tooth was already teetering on its rotten root and was out with one expertly engineered yank. The Dentist held up the gruesome trophy and the old lady gasped in relief, effusive, but humble, in her thanks. The old man helped her out of the chair, muttering his thanks and apologising for his empty pockets. The Dentist waved away his feeble offers of payment, instead making a pact with the sweeper and his wife, that they would continue to keep the street corner as tidy and clean as they always had, the brass sign burnished and well-oiled.

The Dentist saw the two of them, from time to time, sweeping wordlessly and solemnly. Sometimes, he would twitch back the net curtain and wave cheerfully to them, relishing the gummy grin his grateful patient now gave him.

He had his favourite clients, of course, but, even more cherished than the two street-sweepers, was the young girl who occasionally appeared to have her teeth routinely checked over. She had confided in him her huge dread of losing her teeth. Her grandmother had lost hers, due to her poor diet and relentless malnutrition. The girl intrigued the young Dentist. He reckoned she was rather younger than him, dreaming of becoming some kind of nurse, perhaps travelling abroad to wherever she was needed

most. She worked long evening shifts in the 'Cheerful Chew' as he called the dodgy local eatery, to fund her studies.

He watched her coming and going, the bowler-hats lowering to ogle her pretty little steps as she trotted to and fro in her threadbare coat and fraying bonnet. But, there was a jaunty defiance about her as she ignored the bowler-hats and whiled away a minute or two with the old street-sweepers. The Dentist would watch her tripping along and his spirits would lift, although she never looked up with her dark, hazel eyes.

And, she did have splendid teeth, dainty and even, with an endearing 'chimney-gap' just off top-centre. Not a smidgeon of soot or whiff of smoke. No crumbling, unsightly wreckage in the roughcast, no wobbly supporting bricks for her!

The Dentist mused and smiled to himself as he spotted her leaving the Café and negotiating the uneven cobbles on the other side of the street, head down, dark hair bobbing under her hat with its demure flower askew. A flutter of pigeons as she crossed the street, the bowler-hats tantalised but ignored. A quick, friendly smile for the Postman who surreptitiously slipped her a small envelope from the ungainly bag he shouldered. He smiled 'You forgot the stamp' he said.

The street-sweepers had paused and leant on their stiff brushes. Would she speak a little with them - she usually did, laughing her delightful chuckle and making them laugh too, lighting up their leathery old faces. 'A true Leerie' the Dentist mused, then started as the young girl broke into a skip, throwing her arms around the old lady, winking disarmingly at the weary old man.

'Grandma!' she cried. 'Happy Birthday!'