

The Country Dentist (absurd)

I was in great perplexity. I had to start on an urgent journey. A boy with a severe toothache was waiting for me in a village ten miles off and thick blizzard of snow filled all the wide spaces between him and me. I had a carriage, a light carriage with big wheels, exactly right for our country roads. Muffled in furs, my bag of instruments in my hand, I was in my courtyard all ready for the journey, but there was no horse to be had, no horse.

My own horse had wandered away. My servant girl, Rose, was now running around the village trying to borrow a horse, but it was hopeless. I knew it, and I stood there forlornly, with the snow gathering more and more thickly upon me, more and more unable to move. In my gateway Rose appeared, alone, and waved the lantern. Of course, who would lend a horse at this time of night for such a journey?

I strode through my courtyard once more and I could see no way out. In my confused distress I kicked at the dilapidated door of my yearlong uninhabited pigsty. It flew open and flapped to and fro on its hinges. A steam and a smell of horses came from it. A dim stable lantern was swinging inside from a rope. A man, crouching on his behind in that low space, showed an open blue-eyed face.

"Shall I yoke up?" he asked, crawling out on all fours. I did not know what to say and merely stooped down to see what else was in the pigsty. My servant girl was standing beside me. "You never know what you're going to find in your own house," she said, and we both laughed.

"Hey there Brother, hey there Sister!" called the man, and two horses, enormous creatures with powerful flanks, one after the other, their legs tucked close to their bodies, each well-shaped head lowered like a camel's, by sheer strength of buttocking squeezed out through the low door which they filled entirely. But at once they were standing up, their legs long and their bodies steaming thickly. "Give him a hand," I said, and the willing girl hurried to help the groom with the harnessing.

Yet hardly was she beside him when the groom clipped hold of her and pushed his face against hers. She sighed and stepped into him; on her cheek was the trail of his tongue. "You brute," I yelled in fury, "do you want a whipping?" but in the same moment reflected that the man was a stranger, that I did not know where he came from, and that of his own free will he was helping me out when everyone else had failed me. As if he knew my thoughts he took no offence at my threat but still busied with the horses, only turning around once toward me.

"Get in," he said then, and indeed, everything was ready. A magnificent pair of horses, I observed, such as I had never sat behind, and I climbed in the carriage happily. "But I'll drive, you don't know the way," I said. "Of course," said he, "I'm not coming with you anyway, I'm staying with Rose." "You're coming with me," I said to the groom, "or I won't go, urgent as my journey is. I'm not thinking of paying for it by handing my servant girl over to your lusts."

"Gee up!" he said, clapped his hands, the horses started, my carriage whirled off, I could just hear the sound of their hands on one another and I was deafened and blinded by a storming rush that steadily buffeted all my senses.

But this only for a moment, since, as if the boy's farmyard had opened out just before my courtyard gate, I was already there, the horses had come quietly to a standstill, the blizzard had stopped, moonlight all around, the boy's parents hurried out of the house, his sister behind them, I was almost lifted out of the carriage, from their confused speech I gathered not a word, in their house the air was almost unbreathable, a neglected stove was smoking, I wanted to push open a window but first I had to look at the boy.

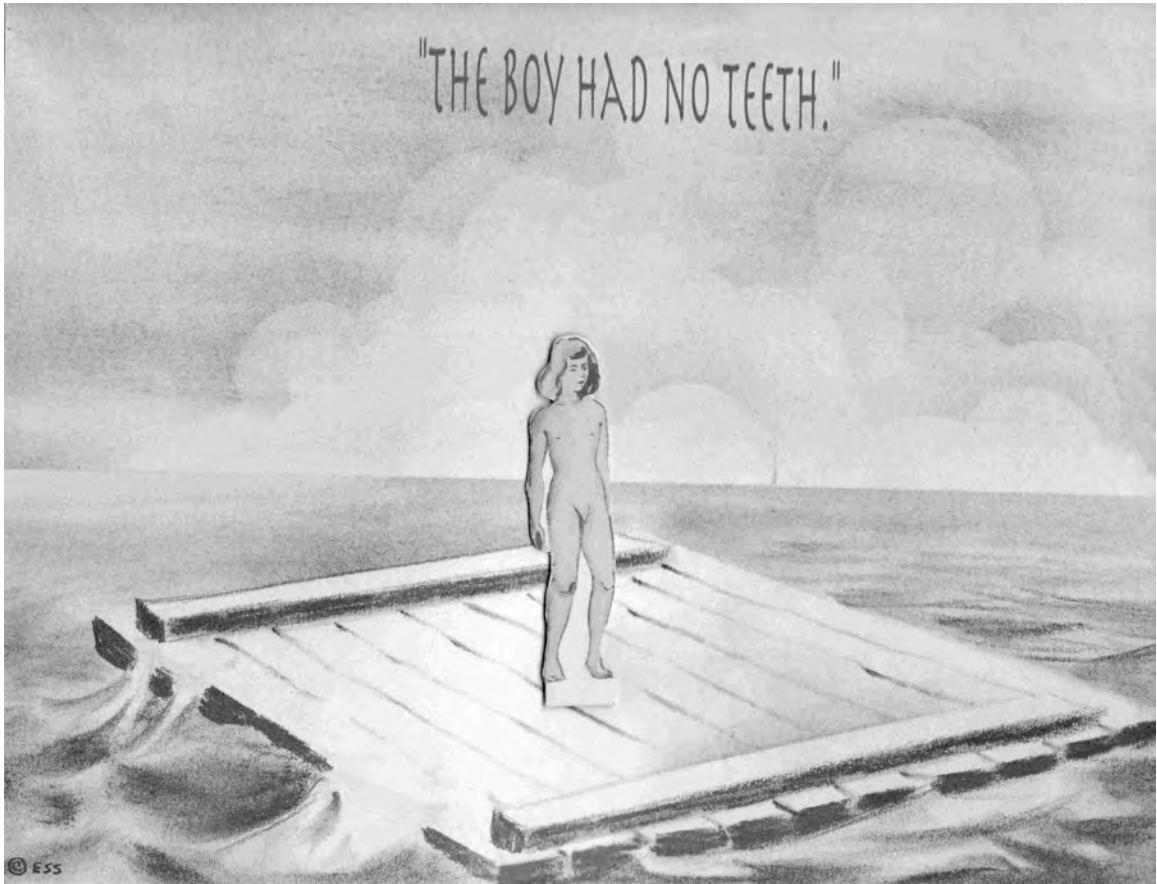
The youngster heaved himself up from under the feather bedding, threw his arms around my neck, and whispered in my ear, "Pull my tooth." I glanced around the room. No one had heard it. The parents were leaning forward in silence waiting for my verdict. The sister had set a chair for my handbag. I opened the bag and hunted among my instruments. The boy kept clutching at me from his bed to remind me of his entreaty. I picked up a pair of pliers, examined them in the candlelight, and laid them down again.

"Yes," I thought blasphemously, "in cases like this the gods are helpful, send the missing horse, add to it a second because of the urgency, and to crown everything bestow even a groom—"

" And only now did I remember Rose again; what was I to do, how could I get to her, how could I pull her away from under that groom at ten miles' distance, with a team of horses I couldn't control?

These horses, now, they had somehow slipped their reins, pushed the windows open from the outside; I did not know how. Each of them had stuck a head in at a window and, quite unmoved by the startled cries of the family, stood eyeing the boy.

The mother stood by the boy's bed and cajoled me toward it; I yielded, and, while one of the horses whinnied loudly to the ceiling, leaned my head to the boy's face, which shivered under my wet beard. I confirmed what I already knew; the boy had no teeth.



Well, this should be the end of my visit, I had once more been called out needlessly, I was used to that, the whole district made my life a torment with my night bell, but that I should have to lose Rose this time as well, the pretty girl who had lived in my house for years almost without my noticing her—so beautiful- that sacrifice was too much to ask, and I somehow had to get it reasoned out in my head with the help of what craft I could muster, in order not to let fly at this family, which with the best intentions in the world could not restore young Rose to me.

But as I shut my bag and put an arm out for my fur coat, the family meanwhile standing together, the father sniffing at the glass of sherry in his hand, the mother, apparently disappointed in me—why, what did these people expect?—biting her lips with tears in her eyes, the sister fluttering a towel, I was somehow ready to admit conditionally that the boy might have teeth after all.



I went toward him, he welcomed me smiling, as if I were bringing him a delicious candy—ah, now both horses were whinnying together. The noise, I suppose, was ordained by heaven to assist my examination of the boy—and this time I discovered that the boy did indeed have teeth. In his right molar, near the back, was an open cavity, dark brown, in many variations of shade, dark in the hollows, lighter at the edges, softly granulated, open as a surface mine to the daylight. That was how it looked from a distance.

But on a closer inspection there was another complication. I could not help a low whistle of surprise. Worms were wriggling from their fastness in the interior of the cavity towards the light, with small white heads and many little legs.



The family was pleased; they saw me
busying myself; the sister told the mother, the
mother the father, the father told several guests
who were coming in, through the moonlight at
the open door, walking on tiptoe, keeping their
balance with outstretched arms and singing,
"Will you pull his tooth?" That is what people
are like in my district. Always expecting the
impossible from the dentist.

Then my coat was off and I looked at the family quietly, my fingers in my beard and my head cocked to one side. I was altogether composed and equal to the situation and remained so, although it was no help to me, since they now took me by the head and feet and carried me to the boy's bed. They laid me down in it next to the boy. Then they all left the room; the door was shut; the singing stopped; clouds covered the moon; the bedding was warm around me; the horses' heads in the open windows wavered like shadows.

But now it was time for me to think of escaping. The horses were still standing faithfully in their places. My clothes, my fur coat, my bag were quickly collected; I didn't want to waste time dressing; if the horses raced home as they had come, I should only be springing, as it were, out of this bed and into my own.







The Country Dentist (straightforward)

I was becoming extremely worried. I had to set out to help a young boy who had a terrible toothache, but a morning snowstorm had made the roads surrounding my home nearly unpassable. To make matters worse, my horse had recently escaped from the barn, so while I had a sleigh, it wasn't going to be of any use.

The young boy with the toothache lived in a village several miles away, so there was no possibility of my walking there in this weather. I had sent my housekeeper, Rose, into town to see if I could borrow someone's horse, but it didn't seem likely that anyone would lend me their horse in this terrible weather.

I paced and paced around the courtyard of my home, waiting for Rose to arrive with some news. It had begun snowing again, the wind was picking up, and night was falling. I began to feel like the situation was hopeless. In frustration, I kicked open the door of my home and cursed to myself.

I had just finished pulling off my boots when I heard Rose's voice calling from the courtyard. I ran outside and saw her standing at the gate holding a lantern and smiling excitedly. Standing behind her was the local postman, John Cheevers, who held the reigns of an enormous horse that he used to pull his mail cart. I couldn't believe our good fortune!

“You aren’t going to get very far in your socks!”
called Cheevers, and just then I realized that I
had forgotten to put my boots back on. We all
laughed as Rose fetched them for me. Cheevers
began to harness the horse to my sleigh and I
began to bundle up for the trip. Even with a
sturdy horse, this was going to be a long journey
in the growing darkness and I had to make sure
that I was prepared for the worst.

As Rose began packing the sleigh with supplies, I could not help but notice both her and Cheevers stealing glances at one another in the dim lanternlight. I had suspected for some time that Rose was smitten with this young postman, and I imagined that it was no coincidence that she had gone to him for help in our hour of need.

When all of the supplies were packed and the horse harnessed, I climbed onto the sleigh and prepared to set out. Cheevers began to climb onto the sleigh with me, but I waved him away. “You’ve done enough, John. Why don’t you take Rose into town and have a nice meal. It’s my treat.” I tried to hand Cheevers a few dollars, but he politely refused the money.

“Alright,” I said, “have it your way. Just make sure that you have her back in time to fix me my own dinner when I return.” Cheevers promised that he would, and Rose held his hand tightly in hers. “Gee up!” I cried, and the horse lurched forward.

By now the night was settling in, and the wind was howling through the trees. My lantern was barely able to penetrate the sea of blowing snow, and the road I was following was lost under a thick blanket of white. I followed the treeline as I made my way through the woods, though it seemed like I had traveled a long time without making a great deal of progress.



Though the horse was well-trained to pull heavy loads though winter storms, he was clearly laboring to make his way through this blizzard. The snow was nearly up to the horse's knees, and it was falling even more heavily than when I had first begun my journey. I considered turning back and returning home, but I was not sure if I was closer to my destination or my own warm bed.



W. B. Woodman

After what seemed like hours, I finally spied what appeared to be dim lights through the howling, swirling whiteness that surrounded me. Surely, I must have arrived at the village! As I drew nearer, I could make out the form of young woman holding a lantern and a small shack behind her that seemed nearly buried in snow. “Over here!” she yelled, and waved the lantern over her head to guide me.



The horse was by now exhausted, and a thick steam arose from his body as he shuddered to a stop in front of the shack. I slowly pulled myself from the sleigh and grabbed hold of my bag of dental tools and medical supplies. “It’s my son,” the woman cried, “he has a terrible toothache and he’s been moaning about it for days!”

I followed the woman into the shack and was surprised at what I saw. Despite the tiny confines of the room, an entire family greeted me with expectant, worried faces. There were two small girls, the young woman and her husband, and what appeared to be a grandmother and grandfather, all huddled around a small boy lying in a small bed by the fireplace.



I hastily introduced myself as the dentist they had sent for, and asked if I could examine the boy. The family spent several moments staring at me in silence. Often, rural people are somewhat awestruck by doctors whom they treat with a kind of wonder, understanding that we are here to help, but not having any understanding of our knowledge or craft.

Finally, the mother motioned me silently towards the young boy, who appeared to be in terrible pain. His left cheek was swollen, and he let out a low moan as I sat on a stool beside his bed. “Can you open your mouth?” I asked, and he shook his head ‘no’. Very gently, I helped the boy ease open his clenched jaw, and what I saw confirmed what I had feared; his left molar was badly decayed.



“Is there anything you can do to fix the tooth?” the mother asked. I explained to her that the tooth was in too poor a condition and would need to be pulled at once. At this news, the family looked surprised and disappointed. I’m not sure what they were expecting I would be able to do for the boy, and it is possible that they had overestimated a dentist’s abilities.

“Pull the tooth?” cried the grandfather. “We could have done that ourselves, without wasting time and money on you coming out here!”

Given the trouble I had gone to in making the trip to help this boy –without the expectation of payment– I was more than a little annoyed with the older man’s remarks, and made no effort to conceal my annoyance.

“Please, just do what you can,” said the mother. She put her hand on my shoulder and shot the older man an angry look. He sheepishly stepped away and reached into an old cloth sack. “I’ve been saving this for an emergency,” he said, and pulled out a bottle of brandy. “This should warm you up.” He handed me the bottle and I courteously took a swig of the liquor, which did make me feel a little better. This also seemed to put the family at ease.

I reached into my dental bag and went to work. Of course, things would have been easier if we had been in my office in town, but I was able to make do. With little difficulty I was able to remove the young boy's rotten tooth, though not without great discomfort for the child.

Unfortunately, that couldn't be helped in these difficult circumstances, and I knew that he would soon be feeling much better.

The older man tried to hand me a few dollars, but I politely refused the sum of money which most likely represented their earnings for the week. Instead, I told them that they might do me a favor and allow me to spend the night rather than trying to return home in this snowstorm. They readily agreed, and I was soon was fast asleep, propped up on the stool leaning against in the boy's bed.

By morning, the sky had cleared and it was safe for me to return. The family provided me with a hot bowl of porridge and a strong cup of coffee, and I was soon my way back home. By noon I had arrived back in my courtyard, and after I led the horse into the barn, I entered my home and called out to Rose to let her know that I had arrived safely.

In place of a reply, there was a note on the kitchen table which read “Dear Dr. Gable, John has asked me to marry him and I have accepted. We have gone into town to find Reverend Jones. John feels bad that I will no longer be working for you, but he says that you can keep his horse. Rose. PS. Sorry I forgot to leave your dinner before I left.”

I laughed and put the note into my pocket.



The End