ROBERT GRAVES

WEEK-END AT CWM TATWS

I SHOULDN'T bring the story up -- there's nothing in it really, except the sequel -- if it wasn't already current in a garbled form. What happens to me I prefer told my own way, or not at all. Point is: I fell for that girl at first sight. So much more than sympathetic, as well as being in the beauty queen class, that...

In spite of my looking such a fool, too.

And probably if she'd had a wooden leg, a boss eye and only one tooth... Not that I was particularly interested in teeth at the moment, or in any position to utter more than a faint ugh, or even to smile a welcome. But how considerate of her to attend to me before taking any steps to deal with the heavy object on my lap! Most girls would have gone off into hysteria. But she happened to be practical; didn't even pause to dial 999. Saw with half an eye that... Put first things first. Besides looking such a fool, I was a fool: to get toothache on a Saturday afternoon, in a place like Cwm Tatws. As I told myself continuously throughout that lost week-end.

The trouble was my being all alone: nobody to be anxious, nobody to send out a search party, nobody in the township who knew me from Adam. I had come to Cwm Tatws to fish, which is about the only reason why anyone ever comes there, unless he happens to be called Harry Parry or Owen Owens or Evan Evans or Reece Reece or... Which I'm not. Tooth had already stirred faintly on the Friday just after I registered at the Dolwreiddiog Arms; but I decided to diagnose neuralgia and kill it with aspirin. Saturday, I got up early to flog the lake, where two-and three-pounders had allegedly been rising in fair numbers, and brought along my bottle of aspirins and a villainous cold lunch.

No, to fish doesn't necessarily mean being a Hemingway fan; after all, there was Izaak Walton, whom I haven't read either.

By mid-afternoon Tooth woke up suddenly and began to jump about like... I hooked a couple of sizeables, though nothing as big as advertised; both broke away. My error was waiting for the lucky third. That, and forgetting that it was Saturday afternoon. It was only when I got back to Cwm Tatws, which has five pubs (some bad, some worse), a police station, a post office, a branch bank and so forth -- largish place for that district -- that I decided to seek out the town tooth-drawer, Mr Griffith Griffiths, whose brass plate I had noticed next to 'Capel Beulah 1861'.

Not what you thought. Mr Griffith Griffiths was at home all right, most cordial, and

worked Saturday afternoons and evenings because that was the day when everyone... But he had recently slipped on a wet rock in his haste to gaff a big one and chipped a corner off his left elbow. Gross bad luck: he was left-handed.

'Let's look at it,' he said. And he did. 'No hope in the world of saving that poor fellow. I must yank him out at once. Pity on him, now, that he's a hind molar, indeed!'

What should X do next? Mr Griffith-heard-you-the-first-time will be out of action for the next month. X could of course hire a motor-car and drive thirty miles over the hills to Denbigh, where maybe tomorrow...

I pressed and pleaded. 'Is there nobody in this five-pub town capable of... A blacksmith, for instance? Or a barber? Why not the vet? Under your direction?'

'Well now, indeed, considering the emergency, perhaps, as you say, Mr Rowland Rowlands the veterinarian might consent to practise on you that which he practises on the ewes.'

Unfortunately Mr Rowland-say-it-twice had driven off to Denbigh himself in the last 'bus-motorr' (as they call it in Cwm Tatws), to visit his whatever she was.

Mr Griffith Griffiths right-handedly stroked his stubby chin. He couldn't shave now and thought the barber saloon vulgar and low. Said: 'Well, well, now, I shouldn't wonder if dear old Mr Van der Pant might peradventure play the good Samaritan. He is English too, and was qualified dental surgeon in Cwm Tatws, not altogether fifteen years ago; for it was from Mr Van der Pant that I bought this practice. A nice old gentleman, though a confirmed recluse and cannot speak a single word of Welsh.'

Welshlessness being no particular disadvantage in the circumstances, I hurried off to Rhododendron Cottage, down a wet lane, and up an avenue of wetter rhododendrons. By this time my tooth was...

You are wrong again. I found Mr Van der Pant also at home, and he had not even broken an arm. But took ten minutes to answer the bell, and then came out only by accident, having been too deaf to hear it.

Let us cut short the dumb-show farce: eventually I made him understand and consent to...

The room was... Macabre, isn't it? 'Only Adults Admitted.' Had been locked up since whenever, by the look of it. Cobwebs like tropical creepers. Dental chair deep in dust. Shutters askew. No heating. Smell of mice. Presence of mice. Rusty expectoration bowl and instrument rack. Plaster fallen in heaps from the ceiling. Wallpaper peeled off. Fascinating, in a way.

I helped him screw in an electric light bulb, and said: 'No, please don't bother to light a fire!'

'Yes, it must come out,' he wheezed. 'Pity that it's a posterior molar. Even more of a pity that I am out of anaesthetics.'

Fortunately he discovered that the forceps had been put away with a thin coat ing of oil, easily wiped off with... He eyed it lovingly. Might still be used.

Was used.

By this time the posterior molar... Or do I repeat myself? It could hardly have been more unfortunate, he complained. That forceps was not at all the instrument he should have chosen. Mr Griffith Griffiths had bought his better pair along with the practice. Still, he'd do his best. Would I mind if he introduced a little appliance to fix my jaws apart, so that he could work more cosily? He was getting on in years, he said, and a little rusty.

And please would I keep still? Yes, yes, most unfortunate. He had cut the corner of my mouth, he was well aware, but that was because I had jerked.

Three minutes best unrecorded. Not even adults admitted.

Mr Van der Pant then feared that we were getting nowhere. That forceps!

Tooth was rotten and he had nipped off the crown. Now we must go deeper, into the gum. It might hurt a little. And, please, would I keep still this time? I should experience only a momentary pain, and then... Perhaps if I permitted him to lash me to the chair? His heart was none too good, and my struggles...

Poor blighter! 'You can truss me up like an Aylesbury duckling, if you care, so long as you dig this... tooth out,' I said. He couldn't hear, of course, but guessed, and went out to fetch yards and yards of electric light flex.

Trussed me up good and proper: sailor fashion. 'Had he ever been dentist in a man-of-war?' I asked. But he smiled deafly. It was now about six-thirty on Saturday evening, and curiously enough he had begun telling me of the famous murderer -- one Crippen, before my time -- who had been his fellow dental-student when... His last words were: 'And I also had the privilege once of attending his wife and victim, Miss Belle Ellmore, an actress, you will remember. She had split an incisor while biting on an...'

I wish people would finish their sentences.

So, as I say, she turned up, providentially, at about eleven-fifteen, Monday, Mr Van der Pant's grand-niece, on a surprise visit. Lovely girl, straight out of Bond Street, or a band-box.

And there I sat in that dank room, on that dusty dental chair, with a dead dentist across my knees; my jaws held apart by a little appliance, a chill, a ripening abscess, my arms and legs and trunk bound tightly with yards of flex; not to mention, of course...

Yes, I like to tell it my own way, though there's not much in it. Might have happened to any other damned fool.

But the sequel! Now that really was...