

24th June 2025

Chapping

“Shut, shut the door, good John!’ fatigued I said,
‘Tie up the knocker, say I’m sick, I’m dead ...”

Alexander Pope, *An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*

I was in a pub recently where four old men were playing dominoes at a corner table. They were quiet as they sipped their pints and concentrated on their game. But my ears pricked up when I heard a quiet knocking, and the voicing of the word, “Chapping.” It’s what you do in dominoes. When you can’t play, you lightly tap a domino on the table and say, “Chapping!”

It comes from “chap”, used in Scots for “to knock”. We talk of someone “chapping at the door” or “the chapping of a clock” when it strikes the hour. No one seems quite sure what its origins are, though it may come from the Middle Dutch or German word *kappen*, “to chop off”. And, of course, it has echoes of those hard and broken lips that are “chapped” and quite uncomfortable.

Alexander Pope’s “Dr Arbuthnot” didn’t want *any* chapping to cause him to be disturbed, whether from a doorknocker, dominoes, or anything else. “Tie up the knocker!” he cried. “Tell folk I’m sick. Tell them I’m dead, if you like. But please ... no interruptions, no disturbance, no knocking. Fatigue, you see! I’m tired. I need my space. I just want to be left in peace.”

I had a lecturer in Divinity College who was a member of a small Holy Order which had a house in the country. His prayer cell was a hut in the garden, where the devout man spent a lot of his time. Being in demand, he was constantly interrupted, but his housekeeper didn’t like having to lie to his callers to protect him. So, they had a sign made, reading “Edinburgh”, which hung on the outside of his prayer-cell. And when he was at his devotions and someone called, his housekeeper could *legitimately* say, “I’m sorry. He’s not available. He’s in Edinburgh and won’t be back for a while.” No need to “tie up the knocker” to stop anyone chapping, or for a housekeeper to say he was sick – or even dead. His quiet place was protected. He could continue his devotions without interruption.

Where is your quiet place, where there’s no “chapping” to disturb you? No dominoes, no doorknocker, no phones, no texts, no housekeepers, no lies, just you, at peace, when your devotions matter ...

A prayer for today

Living God, help me to shut out the noise, so I can hear the whisper of your voice. Amen

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