

TONGUE TROUBLES

by

S.B. v. RENEN.

My first experience of tongue troubles begins during a reading lesson when I was brought out to the front of my class at a junior school and asked whether I was trying to annoy my teacher or attract attention by reading in such a hesitant and tense manner.

When I was unable to give a satisfactory reply it was taken for granted that I was just being awkward and I was beaten before the whole class and ordered to stop "stuttering".

From that point onwards I took the same path as hundreds of perfectly normal "stutterers" had taken before me and, however much I regret it, others will continue to suffer unless an attempt is made to change the attitudes and policies, the evaluations, of parents and teachers concerning the child as a person and speaker. From that moment onwards I apparently ceased to be a "normal" child to so-called "normal" people, and I was looked upon as somebody quite different. In fact I was looked upon as a stutterer.

At High School teachers soon realised that in Standard VII there was a stutterer, who thus had to be handled gently. I was never to be asked to read aloud or recite - in fact my "stutter" was to be made as obvious as possible to all the others in the class. Fortunately for me I was able to hold my own amongst the boys as I excelled at sport. If I could not speak normally to my superiors (I never stuttered otherwise) I could at least run faster, or tackle better than anyone else my age, which gave me some sense of satisfaction and confidence.

Everything went on quite normally until I left school. I was a stutterer well enough - by now everybody knew it - in spite of them pretending that they did not. Then something happened which brought my "stutter" horribly to the forefront. Since my childhood days I always had the ambition of one day becoming a soldier. I had been at school during the war, but by now I had annexed a Matriculation certificate, two athletic records and a fine testimonial, I accordingly applied for admission to an officers' cadet course. My application was accepted and I was called before a selection board. I remember entering the room feeling confident and at ease but all of a sudden I found myself face to face with a major general. He asked me a question and I opened my mouth to answer, but I was concentrating more on the thought "don't stutter now or show him that you are a stutterer" than the reply to his question. The result -

rejected as unsuitable for training as an officer.

Here I was brought face to face with the truth - I was a stutterer. Could anything be done about it? I racked my brain, I read books: in fact, I even thought of doing away with myself. Then I was referred to a speech therapist. It was not long before I was walking into shops and asking the prices of different articles - definitely faking as I asked, though it required some courage in the first instance. I was beginning to face up to my problem more objectively as I stopped trying to hide the fact that I stuttered from others.

Slowly it dawned on me that if I walked up to a person and stuttered - yes, stuttered as if it was the most common thing in the world - he would not notice that there was anything particularly defective about my speech, and would therefore not react differently towards me. To prove to myself that it was the way I reacted to people first that mattered I purchased the most "zoot" tie (yellow with pink elephants) and colourful socks, which I wore to a party soon afterwards. As I entered the room I could feel the people looking at the tie but I reacted as if everything was perfectly normal - the result - nobody even remarked about my tie. As I sat down I made sure to show my socks, and one girl burst out laughing at them. I asked what the joke was, and then she suddenly seemed to come to her senses, as she could not answer me.

That evening was certainly a triumph for me, slowly but surely I was gaining confidence. If I could wear that tie without myself feeling conspicuous, it would be accepted as part of me. If I therefore stuttered without feeling ill at ease or self-conscious it would be accepted as my manner of speech.

I enrolled at a public speaking class next and the first evening everyone had to rise and say why he had come to the class. The first said that they found it necessary for business purposes to be able to talk fluently and easily in public, etc. Then came my turn - no worrying about stuttering this time - I faked for an extra long period on my first word and watched all the faces turn towards me. Some became uneasy in their seats, as I went along but that was just what I wanted; for years I had always been the one to tense up. They seemed quite bewildered as I went on to explain that I had joined the class in order to familiarise myself with public speaking. That a stutterer wanted to learn public speaking seemed too absurd for them, until I explained that it was only by such means that I could rid myself of the tenseness which every stutterer experiences. Everybody speaks in a hesitant manner at times but only the stutterer becomes tense.

I am re-applying for admission to the Cadet scheme, and although I may be rejected again, it will certainly not be because of my belonging to the company of Moses, Charles Lamb,

King George VI and Somerset Maugham to mention but a few "stutterers".

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Editor's Note:

Mr v. Renen received treatment for 15 months at the Pretoria Hospital. His success in overcoming his stutter was largely due to his own courage and persistence, and the insight which he gained into his problem. During this period he became interested in starting the Pretoria Demosthenes (Stutterers') Club, of which he was elected chairman, a position which he filled admirably.

We hope his experience will prove stimulating and encouraging to our readers and we wish him every success for his future.