

The First Orthodontist of Secunderabad

by David P. Gontar (March 2015)

I was straining at the oars of a wayward dinghy on Gandipet Lake. Meena, the exquisite queen of teens, was primping at the prow, delicately applying pink rouge as she gazed at her reflection in her ever-present compact mirror. Loftily from time to time she turned to confirm the performance of my unworthy labors. The late afternoon sun had emerged from cloudy confinement, and was beating down, showing me no mercy. Sweat rolled from my brow like the simmering waters of the River Musi. The luxurious chocolates I had presented her on bended knee had shriveled to a pool of dubious goo in the bilge.

“Devitri, we have been engaged to one another since age four. During all this time, have you ever given a single thought to your appearance?” she pouted.

“My appearance?”

“Indeed. How do you expect me to ever marry you in your present condition?”

“My darling, whatever are you talking about?”

“Silly boy. It’s your teeth. How awfully crooked they are!”

I dropped the oars and quickly shielded my mouth in embarrassment.

“Suppose our children should inherit choppers like yours. A family of freaks. Could I ever invite Jyoti and Indrina for lunch? What excruciating embarrassment! I fret about this night and day.”

Heedless of navigation, I leaped to embrace her, but clumsily tackled her torso a millimeter off center, causing the wavering vessel to tip and awkwardly capsize – with sadly predictable consequences. Need I say more? I was forthwith banished to the outer darkness where there is weeping, wailing and gnashing of overly abundant molars and incisors. Though I composed streams of contrite missives and florid verses in anapestic pentameter in her honor, all were returned unopened.

Well, as Lord Shiva would have it, it was just around this time that the esteemed Dr.

Bhavanath Bhaskarananda of Calcutta opened a storefront clinic on Rastrapathi Road for the correction of malformed dentition, the first such institution in town. I lost no time volunteering as his guinea pig. For I knew that if my beloved could just see me with a dashing Hollywood grin all would be quickly forgiven and our long-deferred honeymoon would be guaranteed. Once a week I therefore allowed myself to be strapped into a massive porcelain chair (which I later learned had actually been employed by some of the more progressive interrogators in the Spanish Inquisition) where sharp metal braces were affixed to my teeth and adjusted, a tedious and stressful ordeal. A red and white barber's pole left over from the previous tenant swirled in the tropical air outside like a bloody flag. I should have been dissuaded, of course, but, prompted by relentless hormones surging through my veins with the force of the Ganges, I could think of nothing but luscious Meena and the blessed path of thorns that led to her boudoir.

There is an old Sanskrit saying that before Brahma there are no secrets. Soon enough my cosmetic stratagem was discovered – and ironically by one of my closest friends, Jagadesh, who happened to be idly kicking a can down that very thoroughfare one morning when, glancing in the window, he recognized me as I was being vivisectioned by Dr. Bhaskarananda. In a heartbeat all my pals were there, holding their sides in hysteria at my distress. From my aching mouth protruded a Medusa-like host of metallic filaments which the good physician manipulated with pliers, tweezers, hammers and other impish implements. Worse, around the porcelain chair regularly gathered six or seven sadistic dental students who took turns exploring my oral cavity, poking me with menacing hooks and cables. You can imagine how I squirmed when I noticed those urchins, Saaj, Tabbu, Rabinesh and one or two other unruly classmates, making contorted faces and vulgar gestures through the window. My blood fairly curdled in embarrassment and helpless rage. But I couldn't lift a finger. As the days passed the crowd swelled. Photographers snapped pictures for the rotogravure. I was like a monkey in the zoo, mocked by idle brats playing hookey. In a week I was the laughing stock of the entire Hindustani community.

Naturally, the dreadful gossip soon reached the ears of Princess Meena. Unlike the fools and simpletons, however, she knew the reason I was making this awful sacrifice was because I truly adored her and was willing to undergo any trial, no matter how excruciating, to win her hand. Certainly she had no wish to join those gawkers on the curb. Whatever her faults, she was not a complete monster. The thought that I was enduring such grief on her account touched her well-lacquered heart. And the possibility that an orthodontically enhanced Devitri might fall into the clutches of a rival female was more than she could tolerate. The question was, What to do?

As might be expected, all this free publicity thrilled Dr. Bhaskarananda, who decided to expand his business by retaining the services of an assistant, a certain Miss Gwendolyn Simmons, lately of Liverpool, whose deft ministrations and buxom figure added to the sensational and giddy atmosphere that prevailed amongst the fevered throngs in Rastrapathi Road and even more amongst his orthodontic acolytes. Principally charged with handling the instruments, Miss Simmons also served as a nurse during procedures. Thus it was that I soon found myself in my customary recumbent position in the great chair, surrounded by awe-struck apprentices, whilst Miss Simmons, my head in her capable hands, adjusted my position as required by the good doctor. Despite my absurd posture and the mess of wires sticking out from my face like the bristle of a rutting walrus, I found I enjoyed a privileged and unparalleled view of a certain female form, and, had I not at that moment had a grotesque mouthful of metal, I might have fancied that Miss Simmons took some measure of satisfaction in our propinquity. For lo, as Dr. Bhaskarananda twisted a tiny bolt so tightly that the pain shot down my spine, Miss Simmons, no doubt in an attempt to stabilize the operation, grasped the patient's head in her smooth arms and held it firmly against her chest. Can the mask of comedy merge with that of tragedy? Certainly not if they are sporting braces. How was I to know that a few minutes earlier Meena had entered the office to congratulate me on my courage and tell me that in light of the sincerity of my penitence I had been absolved of all wrongdoing which, after all, was actually nothing more than the impetuosity of love. Unfortunately, the spectacle she encountered proved beyond her capacities.

I could see nothing, but heard a distinct thump and the shrieks of onlookers. She had fainted and had to be removed on a stretcher. And though I eventually did achieve the gloriously toothy smile of a matinee idol, we never saw each other again.

Naturally in the weeks following, Dr. B. (as I came to call him) noticed I was more than a little crestfallen. At length, Miss Simmons approached me, and giving me a radiant look, led me by the hand into the great man's study, redolent of sandalwood and the wisdom of the ages. After observing me carefully for a minute, he smiled and said, "Devitri, my son, how would you like to become the second orthodontist in Secunderabad?"