

THE GENERAL

That April, a highly exaggerated spring had burst upon our valley. In and around our small town most of the trees had overdone themselves in burgeoning and, consequently, looked dumbfounded. A little moonlight was incentive enough for the cuckoos to keep cooing at midnight, infusing unpredictable elements into a few thousand dreams.

It was the assortment of fragrances in the breeze and the audacity of the cuckoos that had spurred us right up to the gate of the house on the hillock.

Three large dogs began barking at us from the other side of the gate. But the season was in our favour. We tried to rouse their conscience through choice words and, in the process, attracted their master's attention.

"Good evening, General!", we greeted in a chorus.

General Valla seemed pleased. He kept his dogs under control with one hand and opened the gate with the other.

He was one and a half times over average height. His moustache looked like a pair of rusty hammers joined at their handles.

"Young men, don't believe in your text-book proverb that a barking dog does not bite. It is extremely doubtful if the dog itself has any idea of the proverb, warns a great man".

The General raised his voice and laughed like one of those automatic guns in action. The dogs fell silent in appreciation.

Manoj Das

We entered the compound. As we sat down on the sofas on the veranda, the General brought out a ten-rupee note from his pocket and held it out for us.

"Sir?"

"Don't expect more. You are the third team of holy beggars this week!"

"But, General, we are..."

"Different from others! I don't care."

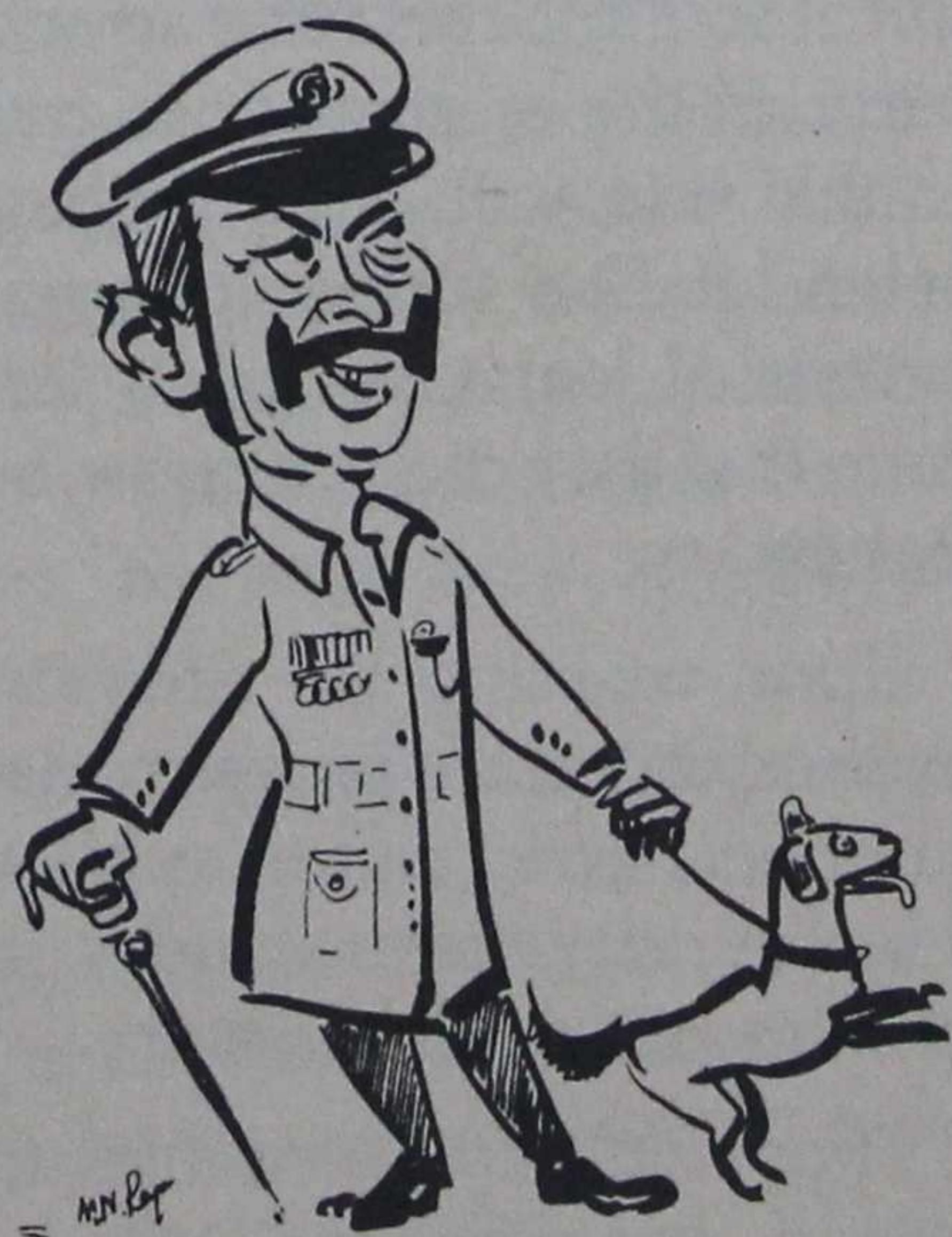
I even don't wish to know whether it is a night school, or a library, or a puja. I have fixed one rate for all the charity collectors".

The dogs sensed our inability to see their master's point. They growled.

"Sir, we're — uh — artistes going to stage a play. We have been regularly doing one at this time of the year and our function has come to be accepted as almost the other name for life in this town. Here is the writer — this very fellow", Mardaraj said pointing to me. "And I happen to be — uh — the director".

Mardaraj and myself blushed together.

The General was still not sure what he ought to do with the note and was squeezing it like a handkerchief.



"There is a role in the third scene of the third act, that of the king's commander, and our writer has executed the character well. He bagged an award in the State drama festival last year", Mardaraj said again.

"And Mardaraj is a gifted director. The weekly *Lion's Roar* observed that a director like him could make even a dog act like a lion!" Bantoo informed the General and himself blushed, for it was he who had reviewed the production under a pseudonym.

We stole glances at the dogs to see if they took offence.

"And, Sir, pardon us if we are talking foolish, but how wonderful it would be if General Valla himself appeared in that small but cardinal role! We have never known of a true commander ever acting a commander's role", said I.

"It would be a historic event, General", said Bantoo.

"It would be the most flattering experience for the audience, our townsfolk", said Mardaraj.

The General slipped the note into his pocket and gave two pats to his moustache and exploded into a laugh. So far only one bulb lighted the veranda. He switched on two more, illuminating the pictures along the wall depicting the various achievements of his life. His face

looked as awfully chummy as a circus tiger's.

Not knowing what to do, we would have stood up. But the dogs had come to place their forelegs on our laps and were trying to inspire us to kiss them.

We found no chance to leave our seats. At the same time it was difficult to get the dogs to desist.

Our ordeal, however, came to an end with the General ordering his dogs to behave like gentlemen. He then called out to his cook to bring us tea and biscuits.

Then, in many words, most of them swallowed up by his laughs, he informed us that he had accepted our proposal.

We felt overwhelmed as we came out of the bungalow. Below the hillock, the town covered with the shawl woven of dim lights and fog, lay cuddled like a child. Indeed, our association with the General had made formidable adults of us.

He, after all, was no ordinary General. Stories galore circulated about him — stories of valour and amazing exploits. On the hilly frontier, during the last war, once he deemed it necessary to survey the other side of the hill. The road to the hill-top was narrow and dangerously stiff, with a precipice on one side. Seeing that his driver was hesitant, the General threw him out of the jeep

No one could have dreamt that the General, after his retirement, would choose to settle down in our sleepy little town. Since that had happened, we had dreamt of making it possible for our people to have a taste of the General's epoch-making laughter.

and took over the steering himself and drove up like a rocket, signalling twenty other jeeps to follow him.

He realised rather too late that he had been provided with the map of a wrong hill. There was no place atop it for a single jeep, leave alone the twenty that were following him.

His jeep rolled down along the other side. The other twenty followed suit. It so happened that an advance party of the enemy lay in ambush on that side, with a bigger battalion behind it. The sudden descent of a torrent of jeeps so much terrified them that they did not know how to escape.

Upon realising the situation, the General, still in the process of descending, had given out a laugh which is rumoured to be the loudest laughter in recent military history.

Thus did the General's move, looked upon by the enemy as a

strategic push, win us a victory on that front.

No one could have dreamt that the General, after his retirement, would choose to settle down in our sleepy little town. Since that had happened, we had dreamt of making it possible for our people to have a taste of the General's epoch-making laughter.

Needless to say, we felt like conquerors.

The news of a true commander, acting the commander, spread into every nook and corner of the town. Walking through the bazaar, we could feel the silent admiration with which the townsfolk looked at us.

On our meeting the General the next day, he suggested that the rehearsal be conducted in his bungalow. His family was away and there was no ceiling to the noise we could make. The suggestion was gratefully accepted.

The General's frequent laughter and the profusion of tea and biscuits helped us get over our preliminary shyness. There was some problem with the three dogs. Though chained up, they barked furiously when the

king in our play had to thunder out his wrath, and they moaned when our whimpering princess had to expound her anguish. But they rapidly learnt to put up with it all.

The princess had fallen in love with the enemy prince. While the battle was going on, she secretly met the commander of her father's army, a great warrior, and implored him to spare the enemy prince.

The commander was required to say only a few words, but laugh aloud at this strange request.

Whenever the third scene of the third act came, a grateful Mardaraj told the General, "Please, Sir, you don't have to stand up. You'll manage it all right".

"Of course, I will", said the General as he laughed. The rehearsal continued for six weeks and the General sat it out.

The news of a true commander, acting the commander, spread into every nook and corner of the town. Walking through the bazaar, we could feel the silent admiration with which the townsfolk looked at us.

The General must have sent the news to relevant quarters. We saw him receiving two telegrams, one from his wife and the other bearing the names of his daughter, his son-in-law and his month-old grandson, wishing him success.

But on the morning of the big

day the General looked grave. By noon his graveness had become so formidable that after a hurried consultation among ourselves, we decided to question him about it. Mardarai

Can't you postpone the drama?" the doctor sounded like an alarm clock.

"Don't be silly, Doc!", cried out the General from behind, emerging



and myself proceeded to his bungalow.

We ran into the General's close friend, Dr. Ugrasen, on the steps.

"I was looking for you chaps

on the veranda. His smile was a painful grimace.

"Didn't I ask you to lie down?" Dr. Ugrasen's voice betrayed anxiety.

"Listen to me, Doc, don't play foe to me. Haven't I been a soldier to my fingertips? You surely haven't forgotten how I blew off the aggressors and recaptured our camp on a stormy night — how I successfully led my men through a shower of fire to rescue a besieged outpost. Now, must I retreat from a mere dramatic performance? How dare you say that I am feeling nervous? Who will believe you?"

The General pressed his hands to his chest and turned away.

"You are too obstinate for any doctor, Valla!", observed Dr. Ugrasen and he drove away.

We stood befuddled. Mardaraj scratched his tousled head. The spectre of a possible postponement of the performance — after all the preparations and publicity — was driving us crazy. True, we could do without the General. There were others who could step into his small role, even though the change would prove embarrassing. But what could be done unless the General himself proposed the change?

The cook beckoned us and showed us to the General's room.

The General reclined on his bed. We who were accustomed to see him either grave or laughing, felt inexplicably sad when he smiled at us.

"The Doc says I'm afraid of facing

an audience. Who, but a numbskull can say such a thing? I'm in fine fettle, I assure you".

He gasped and challenged us, "Do I look like a funk?"

"Ho, ho! Funk and you!"

We took leave of him after some forced attempts at making light of the doctor's remark. Out of the bungalow, we massaged our hearts.

By the evening, Dr. Ugrasen had been able to fetch from the neighbouring town, Dr. Karmakar, the noted cardiologist. Dr. Karmakar was accompanied by his assistant.

The doctors took up their position inside the wings well ahead of time. From our side, we let two budding doctors, our friends, to amble about in the prohibited area, displaying their stethos. Besides, Mardaraj's father, a celebrated homoeopath, sat in a corner of the green room, his cheeks sunk in his palms and his handy casket by his side.

Despite the battered state of our minds, we acted out our roles rather well, thanks to the rehearsals held under the General's patronage.

The General made up as a commander of old, looked magnificent.

But he sat as quiet as a sculpture, flanked by the two veteran physicians.

Came the third scene of the third act. Mardaraj walked up to the

General apologetically. But the General knew his business. He stood up. So did his doctors.

He stepped into the stage at the right moment. At once the buzzing audience slumped into a reverential silence.

After the brief dialogue between the princess and the commander, the princess moaned out her piteous request. That was the moment for the General to laugh.

But he stood silent. Slowly, his right hand went up to his chest. Mardaraj looked pale and I began to shiver. Dr. Karmakar's assistant advanced towards the volunteer holding the rope for the curtain. Obviously he wanted the curtain to drop. Dr. Ugrasen, unmindful of the audience, was about to rush to his friend's side.

But then the General started laughing. And what a resounding laughter it was! The princess leaped back, startled. We stood amazed. The audience sat awe-struck.

The General laughed and laughed, much longer and louder than necessary. The curtain came down rhythmically to thunderous applause when he stopped. The doctors closed in upon him immediately.

The play was a grand success.

The General was carried home as soon as his role had been over

and declared bedridden. But he laughed again and again. His cook confided to us that there was real happiness in his laughter.

His family, informed of his condition, arrived the next day, resulting in our losing access to him.

We rejoiced when he recovered. But he succumbed to another heart attack six months later.

Newspapers, in their obituary columns, recounted several heroic

But then the General started laughing. And what a resounding laughter it was! The princess leaped back, startled. We stood amazed. The audience sat awe-struck.

deeds of the General. We, however, were not quite satisfied. Bantoo drafted a letter to the editors, claiming that the late lamented General's most heroic achievement had been his participation in our drama.

But, on second thought, we did not mail the letter.

Source: *The Submerged Valley and Other Stories*.

(Reproduced with the author's permission)

* * *

YUVA BHARATI