

A profile in courage

Short story by 'Mini'

PATRACHARI (for that is the unromantic name of our hero) was not cast in the conventional heroic mould. He had none of the attributes which make him eligible to the hall of fame or to occupy a pedestal. It would appear that one has to be an illustrious person of distinguished bravery or be idealised in comic strips or scale the Everest to be accepted as a hero.

Patrachari is a specimen of humanity which is getting rarer and dearer today. He had the distinguishing marks which singled him out as a fine target

from the boys. Patrachari walked up to the professor and, after making sure that he was in the proper section, took his seat. The professor who had already taken the attendance asked him for his name, which he gave out in an unnecessarily loud voice. It took two minutes for the laughter which it evoked to die down. This was how he entered our life in the college.

Sitting duck

There was no doubt that Patrachari was going to be the butt of ridicule for the rest of

beauty of the class and the object of Alexander's flattering attention, once waited outside the class and asked Patrachari for his notes. He became almost coy and spoke with his eyes fixed on the floor, like a new bride. There was a chorus of boos and catcalls from the Mad gang headed by Alec.

Glint in the eye

Patrachari just ignored them and went his way, but Alec overtook him in the corridor and as if in a gesture of friendliness put his arm around Pat-

Patrachari. Student after student went up the rostrum cockily. Most of them exposed their shallowness by fumbling for words and ideas. Some made up for their shortcomings by their cultivated accent and some resorted to slangs and witticisms which were completely out of place.

I was keeping my fingers crossed and hoping that Patrachari would miss his bus or something. His name was called and he rose from a seat in some corner. He shuffled along the aisle and my heart was in my mouth. He seemed to me to be a sacrificial goat. When ascending the rostrum he tripped, but balanced himself by holding the mike. There was a moment of uneasy silence which was followed, as I had feared, by pandemonium. The Jesuit Professor stood up and gestured to the students to quieten down. Patrachari stood there oozing self-confidence like one waiting for the cheering and applause to abate.

"Heroism down the Ages" was the subject of the oratorical competition. As he stood there, Patrachari looked such a lonely, forlorn and unheroic figure. He clutched the mike and began in a slow voice. As he warmed up, his voice assumed a sureness which was reassuring. He dealt with the forbidding subject in a manner which cast a spell on the audience. His erudition, his delivery and his accent, left nothing to be desired. There was no doubt that he was on top and the Alec gang just didn't dare to interrupt or even titter. Such was the magic that he wove with words, anecdotes and names dug up from history. The smooth flow of well-chosen words and phrases and the silence in which he was heard had a comforting effect on my apprehensive ears.

Not a mouse squeaked

Then suddenly it happened, just when I thought that the worst was over.

The tuft on Patrachari's head got loosened and a cascade of hair fell on his shoulders giving him an eerie look. I closed my eyes and waited for the world to crash around my ears.

Not a mouse squeaked, not even Alec. That was Patrachari's moment of triumph. He gathered up his hair and tied it up into a bun without stopping his peroration. As he finished his piece with a fine flourish and got down from the rostrum, there was a deafening applause from the audience. Patrachari got a big trophy and a big hand from the judges.

I don't know where Patrachari is now. He dared the whole world to be thought unheroic, but did everything with the sureness of a hero. He didn't want to be different. He dared to be himself.



for ridicule. A tall, gangling man of sparse build, he sported on his forehead the namam, that symbol of Vaishnavite persuasion—two white stripes with a shrieking red line in between. A pair of dazzling ear-rings and a home-washed dhoti with a broad border completed the picture of barefooted Patrachari. To top it all, he had a glorious tuft which was a luxuriant effusion gathered up at the crown. He was a perfect anachronism in the midst of the drainpipe trousers, terylene shirts and cigarette-smoking dandies.

On our first day in college, he came fifteen minutes late with a 'little boy lost' look in his face. There was a suppressed ggle from the girls' side and soon this escalated into an uproarious and derisive welcome

the session. To the gay Lotharios who wanted to show off to the girls, he was a convenient alibi—a sitting duck. There was a smart Alec by name Alexander who was particularly nasty. Barbed comments and paper balls flew from his direction with monotonous regularity. But Patrachari took everything stoically. Even the professor seemed to encourage the ragging. He would give a deliberate pause when coming to Patrachari's name at the time of taking attendance and this seemingly innocuous action was the signal for continuous table-thumping.

In his studies, Patrachari was ahead of the swim and scored over the rest by miles. This won for him a new found respect among the girls. Mayura, the

rachari's shoulder. With a flick of the wrist he upset the neatly tied up tuft. The other boys laughed approvingly and Alec could not help glancing towards the girls triumphantly. But Patrachari reacted quickly. There was murder in his eyes as he caught the now terrified Alec by the scruff of his neck and said in a menacing tone, "Don't do that again". And that was that.

Alec was smarting under the insult administered to him in the presence, of all persons, of Mayura. He would throw paper balls and gem-clips from a vantage point in the last bench of which he had taken lease. The girls had a sneaking sympathy for Patrachari, because he was one against so many. But he never behaved like an odd man out though undeniably, he was one. He had a knack of asking for clarifications a few minutes before the period was over. As this meant extension of the period by some minutes, there would invariably be boos whenever he got up. Patrachari was often the central figure in such incidents and we all had our dose of excitement.

That Patrachari was a talented student was accepted on all hands, but I was myself taken aback when he gave his name for the inter-collegiate oratorical competition. I shuddered to think of the jeering he would be subjected to by the other students. He just didn't seem to fit in. Word had gone round that Alec was planning to have his vendetta.

The university hall where the competitions were being held was packed to capacity with students from a number of colleges. The judges headed by the bearded Principal of a Jesuit college were seated on the rostrum. We girls were filled with apprehension at