

# The Yatomic Bhamp

*By John Heins*

"Have you still got it, Heins?" asked Lyle, squinting at me anxiously through the thick lenses of his wire-rimmed glasses.

"Got what?" I asked as I turned to face the fidgety eleventh grader. A greasy hank of dark hair perennially hung over his pimply forehead. The never-shaven, brown peach fuzz on his upper lip trembled as he gave his high-pitched nervous giggle.

"The Atomic Bomb!" he exclaimed. "They said you bought two and still have one left."

"Well, I do," I replied, "but I'm saving it for something really special."

Lyle started his little prance again, tugged at my sleeve, and whinnied eagerly, "Come see, behind the dorm. It's perfect."

My first "atomic bomb" had blown an empty #10 can, still smelling of U.S. Army K-ration peanut butter, into a ragged piece of shrapnel soaring in a fifty foot arc over the precipice in front of "Boy's Block", the dormitory for high school boys attending the school for missionary children in Kodaikanal, South India. Impressive as that detonation had been, I felt my second atomic bomb should be employed in a manner less prosaic. After all, the two firecrackers had set me back my week's entire allowance. My roommate insisted that setting it off in a lift-top school desk would be "keen", but that had been done before, and, besides, the culprit had been charged for the costs of repair for both the desk and the classroom windows that had shattered.

In 1951 the Atomic Bomb was still very much a topic of conversation, even in a remote "Hill station" in southern India. It was only to be expected that V. T. Pillai, proprietor of The Kodai Warehouse, whose sign proclaimed him "Purveyor of Wholesale Goods and Sundries", should name his most powerful firecracker after the formidable weapon.

"Yes, master," Shri Pillai had intoned, seated cross-legged on the floor in his loin-cloth dhoti, and bare-chested, except for the sacred thread of a Brahmin crossing from shoulder to waist, "this is most definitely the finest of my pyrotechnic wares." He set the four-inch tube on the foot-high glass topped counter that faced the entrance to his shop located halfway down the steeply sloped bazaar hill. "With this cracker you are getting first little sparkles and then one beauteous fountain rising higher and higher each moment...then is coming one grand explosion - BOOM!" He waggled his head from side to side approvingly, "Truly one yatomic bhamp!" He smiled as he removed his Congress Party cap, vigorously rubbed his stubble of gray hair, and delicately spat a

stream of red beetle nut juice into an empty cup that he kept at hand for the purpose.

V.T. Pillai's shop was a source of many hard-to-obtain items. When I had entered the shop to purchase the fireworks, V.T. was striking a match to demonstrate the high alcoholic content of a small bottle of "Vanilla Essence" to a couple of men seeking to slake their craving in a province that strictly enforced prohibition. The small puddle of liquid on the glass counter-top burned with a low, blue flame that glittered in the eyes of his eager customers.

Lyle's eyes were also glowing with excitement as he hurried me along to see his discovery. Like an anxious puppy, he scampered ahead, then ran back to tug my sleeve. "You'll see; it's really perfect. C'mon!"

I was skeptical. Lyle was one of those eccentric geniuses who often have strange tastes - mathematics, for instance. While most of us read novels, (a practically worn-out copy of *Forever Amber*, was a favourite that year), Lyle preferred "reading" advanced calculus books, and giggling hysterically when he found a mistake or a printing error. In those days, before electronic calculators and computers, Lyle had used almost a whole roll of toilet paper in writing out the solution to some esoteric problem in physics. He was definitely a very weird fellow. Nevertheless, I allowed myself to be led to a ten-foot square grassy area behind the dorm, enclosed on three sides by the laundry room, the back bedroom of the housemother's cottage (in which were temporarily housed two seventh grade boys), and, on the third side, a wall of the housemother's kitchen with its two small windows high up to let out the leaking wood smoke from the cast iron cook stove.

And there it lay in pristine glory, exactly in the geometrical centre of the square. The cow must have been a contented one to have stood there in the early dawn patiently plopping this classic specimen of "The Kodai Rose." Cows in India are permitted to roam, undisturbed, where they will, because they are considered to be sacred creatures. This cow's "holy" contribution was impressive in its bulk. The cow pie was least a foot and a half in diameter and a good four inches high. In texture and colour it appeared somewhat like spinach souffle. A light crust had formed to give it a gloss; it was unblemished by hoof print and had hardly yet been discovered by flies. Lyle had seen it and his scientific mind had immediately grasped its potential.

There was no question about it: this impressive pile of excrement offered a worthy employment for that last hoarded explosive! I hurried to my room and reverently extracted the treasured firework from the trunk under my bed. Meanwhile, Lyle exuberantly bounded about gathering spectators, all of whom, when they saw the target and heard I was getting my atomic bomb, bobbed their heads appreciatively and hovered nearby in anticipation.

"Omigosh," "Neat," "Keen," and the cynical, "I'll laugh if that thing's a dud," were among the comments by the onlookers as I tore the top paper to expose the fuse. A chorus of appreciative "Ooo's" greeted my insertion of the firecracker almost all the way into the squishy green centre of the enormous cow pie.

By the time I was ready to light the fuse, the crowd had grown to some thirty boys, a few still in their pyjamas on this early Saturday morning in August. On the third try, I got a match to light and touched it to the fuse paper. The fuse sputtered and seemed to go out; then, magically, it sputtered again, gaining force as sparks shot from the top. With a hiss, a full-bodied jet of sparks began to spray into the air with increasing intensity.

The walls enclosing the sound magnified it, but the visual effect was even more spectacular...the three white-washed walls were suddenly transformed! The spray nearly reached the ecstatic spectators crouched in doorways, but Lyle could not contain himself and went rushing out into the combat zone to survey the results even as the "fallout" came raining down from above. He danced about gleefully, oblivious to the splattering in his hair and on his shoulders. Those of us more cautious were still able to watch the gray-green slime ooze down the walls and drip from the festooned chicken wire screening of the bedroom window.

The next day, as I used a scrub brush and a bucket to clean, or at least to lighten the colour of the walls, I smiled to myself at the memory of "every boy's dream come true." Having to wash down the walls and being restricted for a week to the school compound was worth it. One of my roommates, Freddy Swart, came over and reported to me, in all seriousness, that my atomic bomb had created a "ghost image."

"Waddya mean?" I asked, dipping my brush into the pail. "You mean like the ghost images in the rubble at Hiroshima?"

"Well, sort of," he replied. He pointed behind me. "You know that bedroom window there was open yesterday, and the guy's bed was right under it. They say you could see the hexagonal pattern of that chicken wire outlined on the white bedspread, but, you know, sort of elongated."

Another classmate, perhaps in condolence for my being punished, conspiratorially informed me that someone had overheard Mrs. Dibbs, the housemother, complain to the cook the previous day that her breakfast porridge had "tasted unusual."

Before I had finished the first wall, I was joined by a few volunteer helpers who appreciated having been treated to such a stupendous spectacle, and who seemed to feel a moral obligation to pitch in. But it really was not I who deserved the credit. After all, it had been Lyle who had discovered the perfect use for the "yatomic bhamp"