

The last frontier

By V. V. Parthasarathy

THERE are those who enjoy Holi to the hilt and there are those who don't. I belong to the latter class. Frankly, hordes of people descending on you with powders in different hues — yellow, purple, green and crimson — and painting you right up to the hair is not my idea of fun. To stall them I used to get my apartment locked from outside by a neighbour's son and spend the day peacefully, reading, writing or just doing nothing. They (the direct descendants of Genghis Khan) come, shout, batter the door, vandalise a bit and go. To me, cowering inside, this day of the year has always been a day of compulsory fasting.

A feeling that I should face it bravely even if I cannot enjoy it all kept occurring to me. Wear a pair of old trousers and a shirt awaiting superannuation and go to face the hostile world. You will be unrecognisable anyway, I told myself. Mercifully, the restaurant was not far from my place.

Though I had braced myself for the worst my mind kept searching for a less hazardous alternative. No go! How in the world can one escape the brigade* of brigands (and colourful girls no less brigandish) from using their water-filled balloons and squirt guns on me. They respect none; they spare none. How, how? I asked myself as

I rummaged an old trunk for a pair of worn-out trousers and shirt. Ideas flashed past like zooming planes on Republic Day. And then it happened. An idea belonging to the Eureka-genre hit me 'between the eyes.

I set to work. Ninety-nine per cent chances of success, if I played my cards well. Psychology, that is it — bound to work as nothing else will.

I stepped out in style in sparkling white trousers and equally white shirt to match, polished shoes — spick and span is the word for it. The sheer contrast with the bedraggled appearance of the rest of the world will work wonders. I took firm, confident steps, like a major-general inspecting a guard of honour, as I went past the gate and ventured into the street. They were there all over the place waiting for the next sacrificial goat. I was surprised at my own cheek as I continued on my pre-set course, like the gun-toting sheriff in a wild-West movie.

None moved. They stood and stared — must have been intimidated by my mien and demeanour (ahem!) and the stark whiteness of my dress. Perhaps they mistook me for someone very important — Police Inspector? Luck seemed to be on my side though I kept my fingers crossed inside the trouser

pocket. The toughest test was yet to come. The Known Depradators of the locality, Dadas as they are called, had gathered near the paan shop. Beard the lion in his own den, I told myself, as I headed for the shop straight, rather brashly. A couple of them actually gave way as I bought myself a packet of cigarettes and some toffees. As I took out a cigarette to light it up a mean-looking chap volunteered to do it for me. And he did it too, obsequiously, I observed. No damage done. Dame Luck was on my side, for sure.

I moved jauntily away and had to restrain myself from whistling. I crossed more street corner groups without any calamity. They were all psychologically intimidated against making any move. Not a soul moved, in fact. It was like a painted street in a painted city, as the poet would have it.

My plan had worked. None dared to molest me. It was a nice feeling to be the solitary exception. A couple of teenagers who half started in a tentative sort of way were restrained by somebody. The hotel was only a few hundred feet away. Though the ordeal of a return trip had to be gone through still, I thought I should say my thanks to God for what was a reprieve from certain touching. I thanked God with closed eyes and

when I opened them I saw him; one of God's creatures. A near-naked, seven-year-old brat looking ineffably sad and hungry. Something welled up inside me. I decided to give him some toffees and went near him. As I stretched my philanthropic hand the lad took the toffees, all of them, and in a jiffy before you could say Michael Jackson, he produced — from nowhere — a water-filled balloon which he flung at me with unerring aim. The little hoodlum, let me admit, had a lazy style and panache in throwing. It was an effortless heave which would have done credit to Frank Worrell prowling in the cover region along the boundary line.

My chest got the full force of the balloon. The shirt got sullied. The pedestal on which I had been standing suddenly gave way. My virginity had been plundered, so to say. There was a hushed silence as if the audio in the TV set had failed. Now, hours later, cries of "Holi Hai" from a thousand throats is all that I remember.

As I was debating within myself how to muster courage and look at the mirror on the wall, the neighbour's boy came in, to get some doubt cleared.

"Who's the father of modern psychology, uncle?", he asked.

"If you really want to know, it's I young man, it's I!" I said.