

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

The Gold Ring*

“**W**HAT—YOUR HAIR LOOKS LIKE A RAT’S NEST. Some new fashion or what? Can’t understand.”

“Nothing of the sort. If you ever had to go through the hassle of getting a haircut, you would know the value of the peace that comes with letting your hair grow long.”

“Why would I want to have a haircut in the first place?”

“Women do. Thousands, indeed tens of thousands are getting their hair clipped short like men to keep up with the current rage.”

“A curse upon them.”

“Whose curse?”

“God’s—who else’s? Hair is a woman’s ornament. It’s mind-boggling that they should want to have it cropped short and parade around in pants like men. May they perish from the earth!”

“No matter how hard you pray, they’re not about to perish from the earth. But I do agree with you about one thing: women shouldn’t put on pants, otherwise called slacks. And, yes, they shouldn’t smoke either.”

“While you can go through a whole tin of cigarettes in a day.”

“That doesn’t count—I’m a man. I’m allowed to.”

“Who allowed you? I’m rationing you, you’ll get only one pack a day from now on.”

“And your girlfriends, who visit you all the time to snatch my cigarettes—where will they get their supply?”

“They ... they don’t smoke.”

“That’s a blatant lie. Whenever one of them drops in, you grab my tin, why, even my matches, and disappear into the living room. Often I have to call you to return it. When I get it back, it’s always short half a dozen cigarettes.”

“Half a dozen—you’re the one who’s lying. My poor friends, they hardly

* “Sōnē kī Aṅgūṭhī,” from the author’s collection *Manṭōnāma* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mīl Publications, 1990), 709–15.

smoke one cigarette.”

“What can be ‘hardly’ about smoking one cigarette.”

“I don’t want to argue with you about it. You love to argue as you have nothing else to do.”

“Why, I have a million things to do. And you, like you have a whole field to plow. You lie around in bed all day long.”

“And you stay awake around the clock drowned in some *wazifa*?”

“No, not *wazifa*, although I can say with confidence that I sleep only six hours at night.”

“And how many hours during the day?”

“None. I don’t sleep; I just stretch out on my back for three, maybe four hours with my eyes closed. It’s very relaxing. All the fatigue slowly washes away.”

“But where does your fatigue come from? You don’t do any hard work like a laborer.”

“I get up at the crack of dawn, read newspapers, eat breakfast, take a shower, and then get ready to put up with your bitching. That’s hard work.”

“You call it hard work? So tell me, how true is this accusation of bitching?”

“As true as it can be. In the early days, I mean for the first two years after our marriage, life was so pleasant and peaceful, and then suddenly, God knows what got into you, and you made it your routine to quarrel with me every day. I wonder what the reason is.”

“The reason always escapes you men. You never tried to understand.”

“When did you leave me in peace to understand it. Every day you find one thing or another to bitch about. Now what was the matter today that you started making so much fuss over?”

“You haven’t had a haircut for six months—you don’t think that’s reason enough to get upset? Just look at the collars of your *achkans* ... how grimy they’ve become.”

“Shall I send them for dry-cleaning?”

“It’s your head that needs dry-cleaning. God, it’s revolting to look at your hair, I swear. I feel like dousing it with kerosene and sticking a match into it.”

“To finish me off. But I don’t have a problem if you want that. Bring some kerosene from the kitchen, pour it slowly over my head, and set it afire. The less rubbish in the world the better.”

“Do it yourself. If I tried, you’d say I don’t know how to do anything properly.”

“Which is true. You don’t. You don’t know how to cook or sew, or even keep the house tidy. As for the children, you know nothing about raising them. God protect them.”

“Yes, sure, it’s you who’s been raising them up until now. I’m a total moron, a good-for-nothing.”

“I don’t want to say anything more about this matter. Stop this bickering for God’s sake.”

“I’m not bickering. But to you every little thing is bickering.”

“Maybe they’re little things to you. Now leave my hair alone. I’ve always had this much hair. You know well enough that I don’t have a moment to breathe, much less to go to the barber.”

“Oh sure, how could you have time, you’re always up to your neck in your own enjoyment.”

“What enjoyment?”

“Do you work? Are you employed anywhere? Any salary? Anything that requires hard work, you shirk, consider it the biggest calamity.”

“Don’t I slog away? Just a few days ago I worked my butt off to supply bricks for a contract.”

“If anyone worked it must be the donkeys who hauled the bricks, you were probably dozing.”

“Donkeys are passé. It’s trucks, now, that I have to supervise. The contract was for a hundred million bricks. I had to stay awake all night.”

“I can’t believe you could stay awake even one night.”

“You’ve formed a wrong opinion of me. I can’t get it out of your head. Even if I gave you a hundred proofs to the contrary, you’re not likely to believe me.”

“I stopped believing you a long time ago. You’re a liar, a first-rate liar.”

“You’re second to no woman in making false accusations. I have never ever lied in my life.”

“Oh yeah. You told me the day before yesterday that you’d been at a friend’s. Then you drank a little and it went to your head. Now you’ve told me that you had gone to meet some actress.”

“That actress is also a friend. She isn’t an enemy, I mean she’s the wife of one of my friends.”

“As a rule, all your friends’ wives are generally either actresses or sluts.”

“It’s not my fault if they are.”

“Then it must be my fault ...”

“How so?”

“Because I married you. I’m neither an actress nor a slut.”

“I despise both ... very much. I have no interest in them. Who says they’re women? On the contrary, they’re like writing slates. Anyone can scribble a few words or lengthy sentences on them and then just erase everything.”

“So why did you go to see her ... that actress?”

"My friend invited me to come over and I obliged. He'd just married this actress who had been married four times before and he wanted to introduce us."

"How did she look?"

"Considering her four previous marriages, she looked quite fit, unbelievably young. I'd even say in a lot better shape than ordinary unmarried girls."

"What's the secret of these actresses for keeping so young and fit?"

"I don't know much about it ... except they take good care of their bodies."

"I've heard that they have questionable morals ... and they tend to be rather lewd."

"God knows best. I know nothing about these things."

"You always evade answering such things."

"What answer can I give when I know next to nothing about a particular thing—your temperament for instance? What can I say about it with any degree of confidence when it keeps wavering between extremes?"

"Look, I don't want you to say anything about me ... ever. You always put me down. I can't take it anymore."

"When have I ever put you down?"

"Isn't it putting me down to say that in fifteen years of being married you still haven't figured me out? What else does it mean except that I'm demented, half-crazy, a rank ignoramus, rough and coarse ..."

"Well, at least you're none of those. All the same, it's difficult to figure you out. I still don't understand why you suddenly started talking about my hair, because when you do start talking about something suddenly, there's sure as hell always something else lurking behind it ..."

"What could that something else be? All I wanted to say was that your hair has grown too long and you must get a haircut. The barbershop isn't very far, a hundred steps at most. Go get a haircut. Meanwhile I'll get water heated for your bath."

"I will, I will, but let me first smoke a cigarette."

"No, you won't. You've—let me see the tin—my God, you've already smoked twenty cigarettes. Twenty."

"That's not too many ... it's getting on toward 12:00 o'clock ..."

"Don't prattle ... on your way to the barber's ... get this extra-baggage off your head."

"I'm going, I'm going. Is there something you want done?"

"Nothing. Don't look for excuses to elude me."

"Okay, I'm leaving."

"Hold on."

“Yes?”

“How much money do you have on you?”

“About 500 rupees.”

“Well then, stop by Anarkali before going to the barber and buy a gold ring worth at least 200 or 250 rupees. One of my friend’s has her birthday today.”

“Why would I need a haircut after that? I’ll already be bald right there in Anarkali. I’m gone, bye.” □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*