

SALMAN RUSHDIE: THE PROPHET'S HAIR

Early in 19—, when Srinagar was under the spell of a winter so fierce it could crack men's bones as if they were glass, a young man upon whose cold-pinked skin there lay, like a frost, the unmistakable sheen of wealth was to be seen entering the most wretched and disreputable part of the city, where the houses of wood and corrugated iron seemed perpetually on the verge of losing their balance, and asking in low, grave tones where he might go to engage the services of a dependably professional thief. The young man's name was Atta, and the rogues in that part of town directed him gleefully into ever-darker and less public alleys, until in a yard wet with the blood of a slaughtered chicken he was set upon by two men whose faces he never saw, robbed of the substantial bank-roll which he had insanely brought on his solitary excursion, and beaten within an inch of his life.

Night fell. His body was carried by anonymous hands to the edge of the lake, whence it was transported by shikara across the water and deposited, torn and bleeding, on the deserted embankment of the canal which led to the gardens of Shalimar. At dawn the next morning a flower-vendor was rowing his boat through water to which the cold of the night had given the cloudy consistency of wild honey when he saw the prone form of young Atta, who was just beginning to stir and moan, and on whose now deathly pale skin the sheen of wealth could still be made out dimly beneath an actual layer of frost. The flower-vendor moored his craft and by stooping over the mouth of the injured man was able to learn the poor fellow's address, which was mumbled through lips which could scarcely move; whereupon, hoping for a large tip, the hawker rowed Atta home to a large house on the shores of the lake, where a painfully beautiful girl and her equally handsome mother, neither of whom, it was clear from their eyes, had slept a wink from worrying, screamed at the sight of their Atta - who was the elder brother of the beautiful girl - lying motionless amid the funereally stunted winter blooms of the hopeful florist. The flower-vendor was indeed paid off handsomely, not least to ensure his silence, and plays no further part in our story. Atta himself, suffering terribly from exposure as well as a broken skull, entered a coma which caused the city's finest doctors to shrug helplessly. It was therefore all the more remarkable that on the very same evening the most wretched and disreputable part of the city received a second unexpected visitor. This was Huma, the sister of the unfortunate young man, and her question was the same as her brother's, and asked in the same low, grave tones: 'Where may I hire a thief?'

The story of the rich idiot who had come looking for a burglar was already common knowledge in those insalubrious gullies, but this time the girl added: 'I should say that I am carrying no money, nor am I wearing any jewels; my father has disowned me and will pay no ransom if I am kidnapped; and a letter has been lodged with the Commissioner of Police, my uncle, to be opened in the event of my not being safe at home by morning. In that letter he will find full details of my journey here, and he will move Heaven and Earth to punish my assailants.' Her extraordinary beauty, which was visible even through the enormous welts and bruises disfiguring her arms and forehead, coupled with the oddity of her inquiries, had attracted a sizable group of curious onlookers, and because her little speech seemed to them to cover just about everything, no one attempted to injure her in any way, although there were some raucous comments to the effect that it was pretty peculiar for someone who was trying to hire a crook to invoke the protection of a high-up policeman uncle. She was directed into ever-darker and less public alleys until finally in a gully as dark as ink an old woman with eyes which stared so piercingly that Huma instantly understood she was blind motioned her through a doorway from which darkness seemed to be pouring like smoke. Clenching her fists, angrily ordering her heart to behave normally, the girl followed the old woman into the gloom-wrapped house.

The faintest conceivable rivulet of candle-light trickled through the darkness; following this unreliable yellow thread (because she could no longer see the old lady), Huma received a sudden sharp blow to the shins and cried out involuntarily, after which she instantly bit her lip, angry at having revealed her mounting terror to whatever waited there shrouded in black. She had, in fact, collided with a low table on which a single candle burned and beyond which a mountainous figure could be made out, sitting crosslegged on the floor. 'Sit, sit,' said a man's calm, deep voice, and her legs, needing no more flowery invitation, buckled beneath her at the terse command. Clutching her left hand in her right, she forced her voice to respond evenly: 'And you, sir, will be the thief I have been requesting?'

Shifting its weight very slightly, the shadow-mountain informed her that all criminal activity originated in this zone was well organized and also centrally controlled, so that all requests for what might be termed freelance work had to be channelled through this room. He demanded comprehensive details of the crime to be committed, including a precise inventory of items to be acquired, also a clear statement of all financial inducements being offered with no gratuities excluded, plus, for filing purposes only, a summary of the motives for the application. At this, Huma, as though remembering something, stiffened both in body and resolve and replied loudly that her motives were entirely a matter for herself; that she would discuss details with no one but the thief himself; but that the rewards she proposed could only be described as 'lavish'. 'All I am willing to say to you, sir, since this appears to be some sort of employment agency, is that in return for such lavish rewards I must have the most desperate criminal at your disposal, a man for whom life holds no terrors, not even the fear of God. The worst of fellows, I tell you - nothing less will do!'

Now a paraffin storm-lantern was lighted, and Huma saw facing her a grey-haired giant down whose left cheek ran the most sinister of scars, a cicatrice in the shape of the Arabic letter 'S'. She had the insupportably nostalgic notion that the bogymen of her childhood nursery had risen up to confront her, because her ayah had always forestalled any incipient acts of disobedience by threatening Huma and Atta: 'You don't watch out and I'll send that one to steal you away - that Sheikh Sin, the Thief of Thieves!' Here, grey-haired but unquestionably scarred, was the notorious criminal himself- and was she crazy, were her ears playing tricks, or had he truly just announced that, given the circumstances, he himself was the only man for the job?

Struggling wildly against the newborn goblins of nostalgia, Huma warned the fearsome volunteer that only a matter of extreme urgency and peril would have brought her unescorted into these ferocious streets. 'Because we can afford no last-minute backings-out,' she continued, 'I am determined to tell you everything, keeping back no secrets whatsoever. If, after hearing me out, you are still prepared to proceed, then we shall do everything in our power both to assist you and to make you rich.' The old thief shrugged, nodded, spat. Huma began her story.

Six days ago, everything in the household of her father, the wealthy moneylender Hashim, had been as it always was. At breakfast her mother had spooned khichri lovingly onto the moneylender's plate; the conversation had been filled with those expressions of courtesy and solicitude on which the family prided itself. Hashim was fond of pointing out that while he was not a godly man he set great store by 'living honourably in the world'. In that spacious lakeside residence, all outsiders were greeted with the same formality and respect, even those unfortunates who came to negotiate for small fragments of Hashim's great fortune, and of whom he naturally asked an interest rate of 71 per cent, partly, as he told his khichri-spooning wife, 'to teach these people the value of money: let them only learn that, and they will be cured of this fever of borrowing, borrowing all the time - so you see that if my plans succeed, I shall put myself out of business!' In their children, Atta and Huma, the moneylender and his wife had sought, successfully, to inculcate the virtues of thrift, plain dealing, perfect manners and a healthy independence of spirit.

Breakfast ended; the family wished each other a fulfilling day. Within a few hours, however, the glassy contentment of that household, of that life of porcelain delicacy and alabaster sensibilities, was to be shattered beyond all hope of repair.

The moneylender summoned his personal shikara and was on the verge of stepping into it when, attracted by a glint of silver, he noticed a small phial floating between the boat and his private quay. On an impulse, he scooped it out of the glutinous water: it was a cylinder of tinted glass cased in exquisitely wrought silver, and Hashim saw within its walls a silver pendant bearing a single strand of human hair. Closing his fist around this unique discovery, he muttered to the boatman that he'd changed his plans, and hurried to his sanctum where, behind closed doors, he feasted his eyes on his find. There can be no doubt that Hashim the moneylender knew from the first that he was in possession of the famous holy hair of the Prophet Muhammad, whose theft from the shrine at Hazratbal the previous morning had created an unprecedented hue and cry in the valley. The thieves - no doubt alarmed by the pandemonium, by the procession through the streets of the endless ululating crocodiles of lamentation, by the riots, the political ramifications and by the massive police search which was commanded and carried out by men whose entire careers now hung upon this single lost hair - had evidently panicked and hurled the phial into the gelatine bosom of the lake. Having found it by a stroke of good fortune, Hashim's duty as a citizen was clear: the hair must be restored to its shrine, and the state to equanimity and peace.

But the moneylender had formed a different notion. All about him in his study was the evidence of collector's mania: great cases full of impaled butterflies from Gulmarg, three dozen miniature cannons cast from the melted-down metal of the great gun Zam-zama, innumerable swords, a Naga spear, ninety-four terracotta camels of the sort sold on railway-station platforms and an infinitude of tiny sandalwood dolls, which had originally been carved to serve as children's bathtime toys. 'And after all, Hashim told himself, 'the Prophet would have disapproved mightily of this relic-worship: he abhorred the idea of being deified, so by keeping this rotting hair from its mindless devotees, I perform - do I not? - a finer service than I would by returning it! Naturally, I don't want it for its religious value: I'm a man of the world, of this world; I see it purely as a secular object of great rarity and blinding beauty - in short, it's the phial I desire, not the hair. There are American millionaires who buy stolen paintings and hide them away - they would know how I feel. I must, must have it!'

Every collector must share his treasures with one other human being, and Hashim summoned - and told - his only son Atta, who was deeply perturbed but, having been sworn to secrecy, only spilt the beans when the troubles became too terrible to bear. The youth left his father alone in the crowded solitude of his collections. Hashim was sitting erect in a hard chair, gazing intently at the beautiful phial.

It was well known that the moneylender never ate lunch, so it was not until evening that a servant entered the sanctum to summon his master to the dining-table. He found Hashim as Atta had left him. The same, but not the same: because now the moneylender looked swollen, distended, his eyes bulged even more than they always had, they were red-rimmed and his knuckles were white. It was as though he was on the point of bursting, as though, under the influence of the misappropriated relic, he had filled up with some spectral fluid which might at any moment ooze uncontrollably from his every bodily opening. He had to be helped to the table, and then the explosion did indeed take place. Seemingly careless of the effect of his words on the carefully constructed and fragile constitution of the family's life, Hashim began to gush, to spume streams of terrible truths. In horrified silence, his children heard their father turn upon his wife, and reveal to her that for many years their marriage had been the worst of his afflictions. 'An end to politeness!' he thundered. 'An end to hypocrisy!' He revealed to his family the existence of a mistress; he informed them of his regular visits to paid women. He told his wife that, far from being the principal beneficiary of his will, she would receive no more than the seventh portion which was her due under Islamic law. Then he turned upon his children, screaming at Atta for his lack of academic ability - 'A dope! I have been cursed with a dope!' - and accusing his daughter of lasciviousness, because she went around the city barefaced, which was unseemly for any good Muslim girl to do: she should, he commanded, enter purdah forthwith. He left the table without having eaten and fell into the deep sleep of a man who has got many things off his chest, leaving his children stunned, his wife in tears, and the dinner going cold on the sideboard under the gaze of an anticipatory bearer.

At five o'clock the next morning the moneylender forced his family to rise, wash and say their prayers; from that time on, he began to pray five times daily for the first time in his life, and his wife and children were obliged to do likewise. Before breakfast, Huma saw the servants, under her father's direction, constructing a great heap of books in the garden and setting fire to it. The only volume left untouched was the Quran, which Hashim wrapped in a silken cloth and placed on a table in the hall. He ordered each member of his family to read passages from this book for at least two hours per day. Visits to the cinema were also forbidden. And if Atta invited male friends to the house, Huma was to retire to her room.

By now, the family had entered a state of wild-eyed horror; but there was worse to come. That afternoon, a trembling debtor arrived at the house to confess his inability to pay the latest instalment of interest owed, and made the mistake of reminding Hashim, in somewhat blustering fashion, of the Quran's strictures against usury. The moneylender, flying into a rage, attacked the fellow with one of his large collection of bull-whips. By mischance, later the same day a second defaulter came to plead for time, and was seen fleeing Hashim's study with a great gash on his arm, because Huma's father had called him a thief of other men's money and had tried to cut off the fellow's right hand with one of the thirty-

eight kukri knives hanging on the study walls. These breaches of the family's laws of decorum alarmed Atta and Huma, and when, that evening, their mother attempted to calm Hashim down, he struck her on the face with an open hand. Atta leapt to his mother's defence and he, too, was sent flying. 'From now on,' Hashim bellowed, 'there's going to be some discipline around here!'

The moneylender's wife began a fit of hysteria which continued throughout the night and the following day, and which so provoked her husband that he threatened her with divorce, at which she fled to her room, locked the door and subsided into a raga of sniffing. Huma now lost her composure, challenged her father openly, announced (with that same independence of spirit which he had encouraged in her) that she would wear no cloth over her face: apart from anything else, it was bad for the eyes. On hearing this, her father disowned her at once and gave her one week in which to pack her bags.

By the fourth day, the fear in the air of the house had become so thick that it was difficult to walk around. Atta told his shock-numbered sister: 'We are descending to gutter-level - but I know what must be done.'

That afternoon, Hashim left home accompanied by two hired thugs to extract the unpaid dues from his two insolvent clients. Atta went immediately to his father's study. Being the son and heir, he possessed his own key to the moneylender's safe, which he now used, and removing the little phial from its hiding-place, he slipped it into his trouser pocket and re-locked the safe door.

Now he told Huma the secret of what his father had found in Lake Dal, and cried: 'Maybe I'm crazy - maybe the awful things that are happening have made me cracked - but I am convinced there will be no peace in our house until this hair is out of it.' His sister instantly agreed that the hair must be returned and Atta set off in a hired shikara to Hazratbal mosque. Only when the boat had delivered him into the throng of the distraught faithful which was swirling around the desecrated shrine did Atta discover that the relic was no longer in his pocket. There was only a hole, which his mother, usually so attentive to household matters, must have overlooked under the stress of recent events. . . . Atta's initial surge of chagrin was quickly replaced by a feeling of profound relief. 'Suppose,' he imagined, 'I had already announced to the mullahs that the hair was on my person! They would never have believed me now - and this mob would have lynched me! At any rate, it's gone, and that's a load off my mind.' Feeling more contented than he had for days, the young man returned home.

Here he found his sister bruised and weeping in the hall; upstairs, in her bedroom, his mother wailed like a brand-new widow. He begged Huma to tell him what had happened, and when she replied that their father, returning from his brutal business trip, had once again noticed a glint of silver between boat and quay, had once again scooped up the errant relic, and was consequently in a rage to end all rages, having beaten the truth out of her - then Atta buried his face in his hands and sobbed that, in his opinion, that hair was persecuting them, that it had come back to finish the job.

Now it was Huma's turn to think of a way out of their troubles. While her arms turned black and blue and great stains spread across her forehead, she hugged her brother and whispered to him her determination to get rid of the hair at all costs: she repeated this last phrase several times. 'The hair,' she then declared, 'must be stolen. It was stolen from the mosque; it can be stolen from this house. But it must be a genuine robbery, carried out by a real thief, not by one of us who are the hair's victims - by a thief so desperate that he fears neither capture nor curses.' Of course, she added, the theft would be ten times harder to pull off now that their father, knowing that there had already been one attempt on the relic, was certainly on his guard.

'Can you do it?' Huma, in a room lit by candle and storm-lantern, ended her account with this question: 'What assurances can you give that the job holds no terrors for you still?' The criminal, spitting, stated that he was not in the habit of providing references, as a cook might, or a gardener, but he was not alarmed so easily, not by any children's djinn of a curse. The girl had to be content with this boast, and proceeded to describe the details of the proposed burglary. 'Since my brother's failure to restore the hair to the mosque, my father has taken to sleeping with his precious treasure under his pillow. However, he sleeps alone and very energetically: only enter his room without waking him, and he will certainly have tossed and turned quite enough to make the theft a simple matter. When you have the phial, come to my room,' and here she handed Sheikh Sin a plan of her home, 'and I will hand over all the jewellery owned by my mother and by myself. You will find . . . It is worth . . . You will be able to get a fortune for it. . . 'It was clear that her self-control was weakening and that she was on the point of physical collapse. 'Tonight,' she burst out finally, 'you must come tonight!'

No sooner had she left the room than the old criminal's body was convulsed by a fit of coughing: he spat blood into an old tin can. The great Sheikh, the 'Thief of Thieves', was also an old and sick man, and every day the time drew nearer when some young pretender to his power would stick a dagger in his stomach. A lifelong addiction to 39 gambling had left him as poor as he had been when, decades ago, he had started out in this line of work as a mere pickpocket's apprentice: in the extraordinary commission he had accepted from the money lender's daughter he saw his opportunity of amassing enough wealth, at a stroke, to leave the valley and acquire the luxury of a respectable death which would leave his stomach intact.

As for the Prophet's hair, well, neither he nor his blind wife had ever had much to say for prophets - that was one thing they had in common with the moneylender's clan. It would not do, however, to reveal the nature of this, his last crime, to his four sons: to his consternation, they had all grown up into hopelessly devout fellows, who even spoke absurdly of making the pilgrimage to Mecca some day. 'But how will you go?' their father would laugh at them, because, with the absolutist love of a parent, he had made sure they were all provided with a lifelong source of high income by crippling them at birth, so that, as they dragged themselves around the city, they earned excellent money in the begging business. The children, then, could look after themselves; he and his wife would be off with the jewel-boxes of the moneylender's women. It was a timely chance indeed that had brought the beautiful bruised girl into his corner of the town.

That night, the large house on the shore of the lake lay blindly waiting, with silence lapping at its walls. A burglar's night: clouds in the sky and mists on the winter water. Hashim the moneylender was asleep, the only member of his family to whom sleep had come that night. In another room, his son Atta lay deep in the coils of his coma with a blood-clot forming on his brain, watched over by a mother who had let down her long greying hair to show her grief, a mother who placed

warm compresses on his head with gestures redolent of impotence. In yet a third bedroom Huma waited, fully dressed, amidst the jewel-heavy caskets of her desperation. At last a bulbul sang softly from the garden below her window and, creeping downstairs, she opened a door to the bird, on whose face there was a scar in the shape of the Arabic letter 'S'. Noiseless now, the bird flew up the stairs behind her. At the head of the staircase they parted, moving in opposite directions along the corridor of their conspiracy without a glance at one another.

Entering the moneylender's room with professional ease, the burglar, Sin, discovered that Huma's predictions had been wholly accurate. Hashim lay sprawled diagonally across his bed, the pillow untenanted by his head, the prize easily accessible. Step by padded step, Sin moved towards the goal. It was at this point that young Atta, without any warning, his vocal cords prompted by God knows what pressure of the clot upon his brain, sat bolt upright in his bed, giving his mother the fright of her life, and screamed at the top of his voice-'Thief! Thief! Thief!'

It seems probable that his poor mind had been dwelling, in these last moments, upon his own father, but it is impossible to be certain, because having uttered these three emphatic words the young man fell back on his pillow and died. At once his mother set up a screeching and a wailing and a keening and a howling so ear-splittingly intense as to complete the work which Atta's cry had begun- that is, her laments penetrated the walls of her husband's bedroom and brought Hashim wide awake.

Sheikh Sin was just deciding whether to dive beneath the bed or brain the moneylender good and proper when Hashim grabbed the tiger-striped swordstick which always stood propped up in a corner beside his bed, and rushed from the room without so much as noticing the burglar who stood on the opposite side of the bed in the darkness. Sin stooped quickly and removed the phial containing the Prophet's hair from its hiding-place.

Meanwhile Hashim had erupted into the corridor, having unsheathed the sword inside his stick; he was waving the blade about dementedly with his right hand and shaking the stick with his left. Now a shadow came rushing towards him through the midnight darkness of the passageway and, in his somnolent anger, the moneylender thrust his sword fatally through its heart. Turning up the light, he found that he had murdered his daughter, and under the dire influence of this accident he found himself so persecuted by remorse that he turned the sword upon himself, fell upon it and so extinguished his life. His wife, the sole surviving member of the family, was driven mad by the general carnage and had to be committed to an asylum for the insane by her brother, the city's Commissioner of Police.

Sheikh Sin had quickly understood that the plan had gone awry: abandoning the dream of the jewel-boxes when he was but a few yards from its fulfilment, he climbed out of Hashim's window and made his escape during the awful events described above. Reaching home before dawn, he woke his wife and confessed his failure: it would be necessary, he said, for him to vanish for a while. Her blind eyes never opened until he had gone.

The noise in the Hashim household had roused their servants and even awakened the night-watchman, who had been fast asleep as usual on his charpoy by the gate; the police were alerted and the Commissioner himself informed. When he heard of Huma's death, the mournful officer opened and read the sealed letter which his niece had given him, and instantly led a large detachment of armed men into the light-repellent gullies of the most wretched and disreputable part of the city. The tongue of a malicious cat-burglar named Huma's fellow conspirator; the finger of an ambitious bank-robber pointed at the house in which he lay concealed; and although Sin managed to crawl through a hatch in the attic and attempt a roof-top escape, a bullet from the Commissioner's own rifle penetrated his stomach and brought him crashing messily to the ground at the feet of the enraged uncle. From the dead man's ragged pockets rolled a phial of tinted glass, cased in filigree silver.

The recovery of the Prophet's hair was announced at once on All-India Radio. One month later, the valley's holiest men assembled at the Hazratbal mosque and formally authenticated the relic. It sits to this day in a closely guarded vault by the shores of the loveliest of lakes in the heart of the valley which is closer than any other place on earth to Paradise. But before its story can properly be concluded, it is necessary to record that when the four sons of the dead Sheikh awoke on that morning of his death, having unwittingly spent a few minutes under the same roof as the holy hair, they found that a miracle had occurred, that they were all sound of limb and strong of wind, as whole as they might have been if their father had not thought to smash their legs in the first hours of their lives. They were, all four of them, very properly furious, because this miracle had reduced their earning powers by 75 per cent, at the most conservative estimate: so they were ruined men. Only the Sheikh's widow had some reason for feeling grateful, because although her husband was dead she had regained her sight, so that it was possible for her to spend her last days gazing once more upon the beauties of the valley of Kashmir.