

## All Because Of My Hair

"You good for nothing fellow!" one slap.

"You naughty boy!" another slap. "You rascal!" a shower of slaps. I could see stars dancing at midday! The portraits of Kabir, Ghalib and Einstein hanging on the wall started swinging. I lost count of the slaps raining down on my clean shaven head and face. I wondered if I really deserved them. I was in class VIII and a boarder in a Delhi school. I was a good singer and there were hardly any school functions at which I did not recite a poem or sing a song.

For days and weeks now, we had been preparing for an important function. A very prominent figure was to preside, and so excitement ran high. The classrooms were cleaned and decorated, and charts and photographs fixed. Everybody was busy.

A poem was to be recited in honour of the distinguished guest. And who else but I could be asked to recite it?

I didn't tell you that my hair was rather long in those days. Sometimes my parents would be angry with me on that account. But when I was

sent to the hostel, I thought I would have the freedom of growing my hair as long as I wanted.

The situation, I realised very soon, was worse at the hostel. The warden, a venerable old fellow, was stricter than my parents. He was an artist by profession and quite unnaturally insisted on everything being neat and clean and in perfect order. So, very soon, my hair became the bone of contention between us.

Every Sunday, an old barber whom we called 'Khalifa' came to the hostel. So the whole morning I spent playing hide-and-seek with the warden. However, every fourth or fifth week I'd be caught and handed over to *Khalifa*. He himself shuddered at the mere mention of my name because I was really troublesome. His hands quivered when he touched my head.

The Sunday before the function the warden warned me repeatedly that I would be severely punished if I didn't have a hair-cut.

That was just too bad, because I wanted to appear on stage with my crowning glory untrimmed.

But I couldn't escape the warden's clutches and was duly sent to *Khalifa*. The dreaded moment had come. I had to decide there and then whether to submit to his threats or revolt.

The devil must have egged me on. I was de-

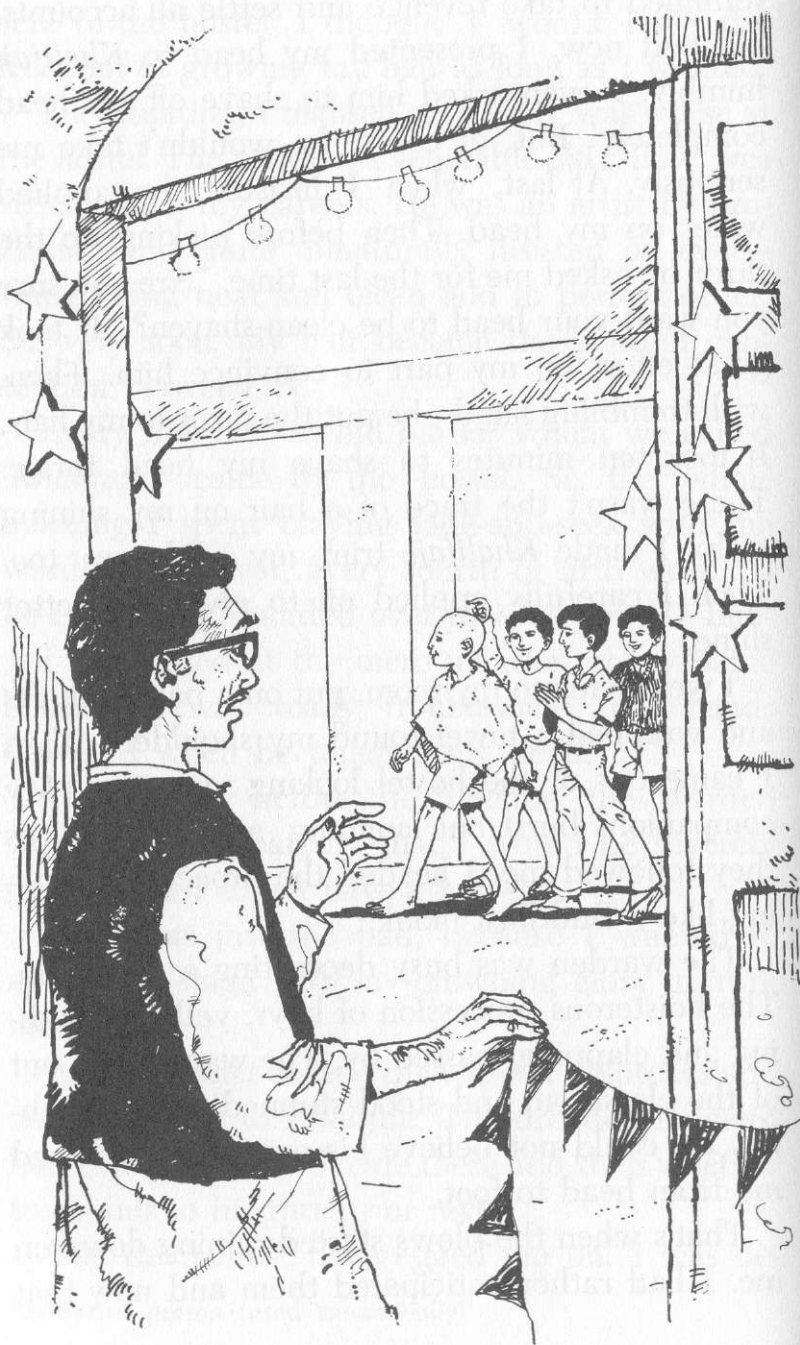
°Powerful person (used sarcastically)

terminated to take revenge and settle all accounts, old and new. I presented my head to *Khalifaji* humbly. I even asked him to shave off my head completely! But, of course he wouldn't take me seriously. At last, when I insisted, he applied water on my head. Then before picking up the razor he asked me for the last time. "Are you sure you want your head to be clean-shaven?" It took great effort on my part to convince him. Then, with trembling hands, he put the razor to my hair. It took ten minutes to shave my head thrice. There wasn't the trace of a hair on my shining scalp, I made *Khalifaji* trim my eyebrows too. Then I carefully applied oil to give it a better shine.

I went back to my room, put on a pair of shorts and wrapped a towel round my shoulders. Then I came out of the hostel looking victorious. My companions burst out laughing and clapped as they followed me. I headed the procession, looking like a Buddhist monk.

The warden was busy decorating a classroom. The boisterous procession of boys, yelling, laughing and clapping, passed by. The warden ran out of the classroom and stood stunned as he watched. He could not believe his eyes. He examined me from head to foot.

That's when the blows started raining down on me. I had rather anticipated them and now that



I think of it—deserved them too.

I was of course not permitted to appear on stage the next day. But worse still I had to remain with my monk-like appearance for many months. After that nobody ever asked me to have a haircut again, and today I am the sole master of my head and hair!

