



Ashik-Kerib.

A TURKISH TALE FOR
CHILDREN.

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(TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
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but a noble heart and the gift of song. He used to play on his balaika and sing of the deeds of the ancient heroes of Turkistan, and went to weddings to entertain the rich and the fortunate. At one of these weddings he saw Magul-Megeri, and they fell in love with each other. Little hope had poor Ashik-Kerib of obtaining her hand, and he became sad and gloomy as the winter sky.

Now, one day he happened to be lying in a garden under a vineyard, and he fell asleep. Just then it chanced that Magul-Megeri passed that way with her friends, one of whom recognised the sleeping Ashik, and, letting the others go on, she went up to him and sang:—

“Why dost thou sleep under the vineyard?
Arise, thou foolish one! thy Gazel is passing.”

He instantly awakened and the girl darted away. But Magul-Megeri had heard the singing and scolded her friend, who answered:—

“If you had known to whom I sang, you would have thanked me. It was your Ashik-Kerib.”

“Lead me to him,” said Magul-Megeri, and they returned to the vineyard.

On seeing his melancholy, Magul-Megeri began to ask him the cause of his sadness, and to console him.

“How can I help being sad?” Ashik-Kerib



LONG time ago there lived in the town of Tiflis a wealthy Turk. Much gold had Allah given him; but more precious than his gold was his only daughter, Magul-Megeri.

Beautiful are the stars in the heavens, but behind them live the angels, and they are more beautiful still; and Magul-Megeri was the most beautiful and the best of the girls of Tiflis.

There lived also in Tiflis poor Ashik-Kerib. The Prophet had given him nothing

replied. "I love you, and you can never be mine."

"Ask my hand of my father," she said, "and he will provide the wedding, and will give me so much money that there will be enough for both of us."

"It may be that Ayak-Aga will refuse his daughter nothing," Ashik answered; "but who knows whether you will not reproach me afterwards for having nothing and being indebted to you for everything? No, my dear Magul-Megeri, I have made a vow that I will go forth into the world to travel for seven years and amass a fortune, or to perish in distant wildernesses. If you will agree to this, then at the end of that period you shall be mine."

She agreed to his proposal, but added that if he did not return on the appointed day seven years hence, she would consent to become the wife of Kurshud-Bek, who had been courting her for a long time.

So Ashik-Kerib went to his mother, asked for her blessing, kissed his little sister, hung his knapsack over his shoulder, took his wanderer's staff in his hand, and left the town of Tiflis. But he had not gone far before he was overtaken by a horseman, in whom he recognised Kurshud-Bek.

"God speed you!" cried Kurshud. "Wherever you may go, I am your companion."

Ashik was not pleased with his new comrade, but he felt there was nothing to be done. For a long time they continued their way together, till at last they came to a river. There was neither bridge nor ford.

"Swim over in front of me," said Kurshud-Bek, "and I will follow you."

Ashik threw off his clothes and swam across. When he had reached the opposite bank and looked back, lo and behold! what a direful misfortune had befallen him! Oh! Omnipotent Allah! Kurshud-Bek had taken his clothes and galloped back to Tiflis, leaving nothing behind him but a cloud of dust, which wound itself after him like a serpent along the smooth ground.

On arriving at Tiflis the Bek took Ashik's clothes to his aged mother and said:—

"Your son is drowned in a deep river. Here are his clothes!"

In unspeakable grief the mother fell upon the clothes of her beloved son and wept hot tears over them. She then took them and carried them to his affianced bride, Magul-Megeri, and said:—

"My son is drowned! Kurshud-Bek has brought me his clothes. You are free!"

But Magul-Megeri only smiled and replied:—

"Believe him not; Kurshud-Bek has invented all this. Nobody shall be my husband before the seven years are passed."

She then took down her balaika and began composurely to sing the favourite song of poor Ashik-Kerib.

In the meantime the wanderer arrived bare-foot and naked in a village. Here good people clothed and fed him; in recompense for which he sang them the most beautiful songs. Thus he wandered from village to village and from town to town, and his fame spread far and wide. At last he came to Khalaf. According to his custom, he went into a coffee-house, asked for a balaika, and commenced to sing.

At that time there lived at Khalaf a Pasha who was very fond of good singing. Many singers had been brought to him, but not one had pleased him. His servants were tired out with running about the town to find singers. But it so happened that they chanced to pass the coffee-house while Ashik was singing, and to hear his melodious voice.

"Come with us," they shouted, "to the high and mighty Pasha; or you will answer for it with your head!"

But Ashik-Kerib said:—

"I am a free man, a traveller from the town of Tiflis. I go where I list, and sing when I choose, and your Pasha is not my master."

Nevertheless, they seized him and carried him to the Pasha.

"Sing!" said the Pasha, and he sang. He sang the praises of his dear Magul-Megeri; and his song so pleased the proud Pasha, that he retained poor Ashik-Kerib in his service. Silver and gold were now showered on him. He was resplendent with costly raiment. Happily and joyfully did Ashik-Kerib live, and he grew very rich. Whether he forgot his Magul-Megeri or not, I know not; but the period for his return was approaching. The last year was rapidly drawing to an end, and yet he made no preparations for his departure.

The beautiful Magul-Megeri grew despondent. Now, a merchant was just then about to leave Tiflis with a caravan of forty camels and eighty slaves. So she called the merchant to her and gave him a gold dish, saying:—

"Take this dish, and, in whatever town you may arrive, exhibit it in your shop, and announce far and wide that he who will claim to be the owner of my dish, and who sup-

ports his claim by satisfactory proof, shall receive it, besides its weight in gold."

The merchant went on his way and did as he was told, and exhibited the dish wherever he went, but nobody appeared to claim its ownership. He had sold nearly all his merchandise,



"TAKE THIS DISH."

and arrived with the remainder at Khalaf. Here also he made everywhere the announcement Magul-Megeri had commissioned him to make.

On hearing the announcement Ashik-Kerib ran straight to the caravanserai, and saw the gold dish in the shop of the Tiflis merchant.

"That is mine!" he said, and clutched it in his hand.

"It is indeed yours," replied the merchant. "I have recognised you, Ashik-Kerib. Go quickly to Tiflis. Your Magul-Megeri told me to inform you that the appointed period has nearly elapsed, and that if you do not return on the day fixed she will marry another."

In despair Ashik-Kerib put his hands to his head. Only three days yet remained to the fatal time. However, he mounted a horse, took with him a wallet filled with pieces of gold, and galloped away as fast as

he could without sparing the horse. Finally the worn-out animal fell down lifeless on Mount Arzinian, which is between Arzinian and Arzerum. What was he to do? Arzinian was two months' journey from Tiflis, and he had but two days left.

"Omnipotent Allah!" he exclaimed, "if thou wilt not help me, there is nothing on this earth for me to live for!" and saying these words he was about to throw himself off a high peak of the mountain.

Suddenly he saw a man below on a white horse, and heard a loud voice saying:—

"Young man, what do you want?"

"I want to die," said Ashik.

"If that is the case come down, and I will kill you."

Ashik got down as best he could.

"Follow me," said the horseman, sternly.

"How can I follow you?" Ashik replied. "Your horse is as fleet as the wind, and I am, besides, carrying this heavy wallet."

"Quite true. Hang your wallet on my saddle and then follow me."

But Ashik-Kerib could not keep up with the rider, however hard he tried to run.

"Why do you not keep up with me?" asked the horseman.

"How can I keep up with you? Your horse is quicker than thought, and I am already worn out."

"Quite true. Get up behind me, and tell me the whole truth. Where do you want to get to?"

"If I could only get to Arzerum to-night I should be contented."

"Close your eyes, then."

Ashik closed his eyes. "Now open them." Ashik opened his eyes and saw in the distance before him the white walls and the glittering minarets of Arzerum.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I have made a mistake. I had intended to say that I wanted to go to Kars."

"Aha! Did I not tell you to tell me the

whole truth? Close your eyes again; now open them."

Ashik could not believe himself, but there he was in Kars. He fell on his knees and said:—

"Oh! sir! forgive, I pray you, your servant, Ashik-Kerib; but you know that when a man begins lying in the morning, he continues to lie



"I AM ALREADY WORN OUT."

throughout the day. Where I really want to go to is Tiflis."

"Oh, you deceitful one!" said the horseman, angrily. "Well, never mind, I will forgive you. Close your eyes. Now, then, open them," he added, in about the space of a minute.

Ashik shouted for joy. They were at the gates of Tiflis. After thanking the horseman heartily, and having removed his wallet, Ashik-Kerib said:—

"Sir, your bounty is great, and great is the favour you have bestowed upon me; but grant me one more. If I should now relate that I got from Arzinian to Tiflis in a single day, nobody will believe me. Give me some proof."

The horseman smiled.

"Bend down," he said, "and take a handful of earth from under the horse's hoof and put it in your girdle; and if anyone should refuse to believe your words, let a blind woman be brought before you who has been blind seven years, put the earth on her eyes, and she will regain her sight."

Ashik stooped down and took a handful of earth from under the white horse's hoof, but

as soon as he lifted up his head again both horse and rider had disappeared. Then he was convinced in his soul that the horseman was no other than St. George.

It was late at night before Ashik-Kerib found his way to his house. With a trembling hand he knocked at the door and shouted:—

"Mother, mother! open the door. I am God's guest. I am cold and hungry. For the sake of your distant wandering son, let me in."

The weak voice of the old woman replied:—

"In the houses of the rich and powerful you will find a night's lodging. There is a wedding in the town. Go thither. There you will spend the night joyously."

"Mother," he replied, "I have no acquaintances here, and therefore I repeat my prayer to you. For the sake of your distant wandering son, let me in!"

Then his sister said: "Mother, I will get up and open the door for him."

"You wicked girl!" replied her mother. "You are always willing to receive young men and entertain them, for it is now seven years since I lost my sight through weeping."

But the daughter paid no attention to

these reproaches, but got up, opened the door, and let in Ashik-Kerib.

After exchanging the customary greetings he sat down, and with secret emotion commenced to look about him. His eyes lighted on the wall, where he saw hanging, in a dusty case, his melodious balaika. So he asked his mother: "What is that you have hanging on the wall?"

"You are curious," she answered; "you should be well satisfied that you get a crust of bread and are sent away in God's name to-morrow, and you should ask no questions."

"I have already told you," he replied, "that I am your own son and that this is my sister, and therefore I ask you to explain to me what that is hanging on the wall."

"That is a balaika, a balaika," said the old woman, who did not believe him.

"And what is a balaika?" he asked.

"A balaika," said the old woman, testily, "is a thing people play on and sing to."

Then Ashik - Kerib asked her to allow his sister to take it down and show it him, but the old woman answered:—

"That must not be. That is the balaika of my unfortunate son. It is now seven years that it hangs upon that wall, and no living hand has touched it."

But his sister rose up and took down the balaika and gave it him. Then he raised his eyes to Heaven and poured out the following prayer:—

"Oh! Almighty Allah! if I am to attain my wishes let my seven-stringed balaika be in as good tune as it was upon the day when I last played it." And he struck the brass cords—and the cords gave out harmonious sounds; and so he began to sing:—

"I'm but a poor wanderer, and my words are but poor;
But the great St. George helped me descend a steep peak.
Though I be but poor, though my words be but poor,
Know me again, mother! Know thy poor wanderer!"

At these words his mother burst into tears and asked him his name.

"Raschid!" (simple-hearted) he replied.

"Speak to me once, and then listen, Raschid," she said. "With your words you have cut my heart to pieces. Last night I dreamt that all my hair had grown white. It is now seven years that I am blind. Tell me, you who have his voice, when will my son come?"

And she repeated her question twice over, with tears in her eyes.

It was in vain that he told her he was her son; she would not believe him.

After a little time, he said:—

"Permit me, mother, to take the balaika and to go away. I heard there was a wedding in the neighbourhood; my sister will show me the way. I will go there and play and sing, and all I get I will bring back and divide with you."

But she only answered:

"I will not. Since my son has gone away, his balaika has not left the house."

But he swore he would not injure a single string. "And if I snap a single string, I will be answerable for it with my property."

The old woman felt his wallet, and, finding that it was full of coins, let him go. Having taken him to the rich man's house from whence the sounds of wedding festivities proceeded, his sister waited at the door to hear what would happen.

In that house lived Magul - Megeri, and on that night she was to

become the wife of Kurshud-Bek.

Kurshud-Bek was feasting with his friends and relations, but Magul-Megeri was behind a handsome curtain with her companions, and held a cup of poison in one hand and a dagger in the other. For she had sworn to die rather than rest her head upon the bridal bed of Kurshud-Bek. And suddenly she heard from behind the curtain that a stranger arrived and said:—



"HIS SISTER ROSE AND TOOK DOWN THE BALAIKA."



“THE OLD WOMAN FELT HIS WALLET.”

“Salaam, alaykum ! You are feasting and merry-making. Permit me, a poor wanderer, to sit down with you, and in return I will sing you a song.”

“Why not ?” Kurshud-Bek replied. “All singers and dancers are welcome, for this is a wedding. Sing something, minstrel, and I will give you a handful of gold. But what is your name, wanderer ?”

“Shindi-Gerursez” (you will soon know), was the answer.

“What a strange name,” said Kurshud-Bek, laughing. “I have never heard such a name before.”

“Before I was born the neighbours asked my mother whether her child would be a boy or a girl, and she told them, ‘You will soon know,’ and this is how I came to be called by that name,” and Ashik-Kerib took his balaika and began to sing :—

“In the town of Khalaf I drank the red wine,
But God gave me wings—in three days I flew here.”

Kurshud-Bek’s brother, who was a half-witted fellow, drew his dagger and shouted :—

“You lie ! How is it possible to arrive here from Khalaf in three days ?”

“Why do you wish to kill me ?” said Ashik. “Minstrels usually come from all the four quarters of the earth, and arrive together at one and the same place. Besides, I ask nothing of you : you may believe me or not.”

“Let him continue,” said the bridegroom, and so Ashik-Kerib resumed his song :—

“My morning prayer in the valley I said,
In the valley—of Arzinian,
In Arzerum town I prayed at noon.
At sunset at Kars my prayer I performed ;
My evening prayer at Tiflis.
Then God gave me wings, and I flew over here,
Of the white horse the victim, God grant I may be ;
It galloped as fast as a rope-dancer’s feet
From the hill to the valley, from valley to hill,
God granted to Ashik the wings of the wind.
To the wedding he’s flown of Magul-Megeri.”

Then Magul-Megeri recognised the voice, and threw her dagger and the poison away.

“That is how you keep your vow !” said her friend. “So you will consent to become to-night the wife of Kurshud-Bek ?”

“You have not recognised, but I have recognised, the voice that is dear to me,” Magul-Megeri replied, and seizing a pair of scissors she cut through the curtain. As she looked through she recognised, indeed, her Ashik-Kerib, and she threw herself on his neck with a scream, and both fell senseless to the ground.

The brother of Kurshud-Bek rushed at them with his dagger, and was about to kill them, but Kurshud-Bek stopped him, and said :—

“Calm yourself, and know that what is written on a man’s brow at his birth, that he will not escape.”

When Magul-Megeri returned to conscious-



"WHY DO YOU WISH TO KILL ME?"

ness she blushed for shame and hid behind the curtain.

"Now we can see that you are indeed Ashik-Kerib," said the bridegroom. "But tell us how you contrived to cover so great a distance in so short a time."

"In proof of my truthfulness," said Ashik, "my sword will cut through stone; and if I lie, may my throat be thinner than a hair. But, best of all, bring me a blind woman who has not seen the light of God for seven years, and I will restore her sight."

Ashik-Kerib's sister, who was standing outside behind the door and heard this speech, ran off at once to her mother.

"Mother!" she cried, "it is indeed my brother and indeed your son, Ashik-Kerib," and she took her mother by the hand and led her to the wedding-feast. Then Ashik took the handful of earth from under his girdle, wetted it in water, and smeared it over his mother's eyes, saying:—

"Let all people know how great and powerful is St. George!" and his mother regained her sight.

After that no one dared to doubt the truth of Ashik's words, and Kurshud-Bek handed over to him without a murmur the beautiful Magul-Megeri.