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A LOVE STORY

KURBAN SAID

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Ali and Nino



*W*E WERE a very mixed lot, we forty schoolboys who were having a Geography lesson one hot afternoon in the Imperial Russian Humanistic High School of Baku, Transcaucasia: thirty Mohammedans, four Armenians, two Poles, three Sectarians, and one Russian.

So far we had not given much thought to the extraordinary geographical position of our town, but now Professor Sanin was telling us in his flat and uninspired way: "The natural borders of Europe consist in the north of the North Polar Sea, in the west of the Atlantic Ocean, and in the south of the Mediterranean. The eastern border of Europe goes through the Russian Empire, along the Ural mountains, through the Caspian Sea, and through Transcaucasia. Some scholars look on the area south of the Caucasian mountains as belonging to Asia, while others, in view of Transcaucasia's cultural evolution, believe that this country should be considered part of Europe. It can therefore be said, my children, that it is partly your responsibility as

to whether our town should belong to progressive Europe or to reactionary Asia.”

The professor had a self-satisfied smile on his lips.

We sat silent for a little while, overwhelmed by such mountains of wisdom, and the load of responsibility so suddenly laid upon our shoulders.

Then Mehmed Haidar, who sat on the back bench, raised his hand and said: “Please, sir, we should rather stay in Asia.”

A burst of laughter. This was Mehmed Haidar’s second year in the third form. And it looked as if he might stay there for another year, if Baku kept belonging to Asia. For a ministerial decree allows the natives of Asiatic Russia to stay in any form as long as they like.

Professor Sanin, who was wearing the gold-embroidered uniform of a Russian High School teacher, frowned: “So, Mehmed Haidar, you want to remain an Asiatic? Can you give any reason for this decision?”

Mehmed Haidar stepped forward, blushed, but said nothing. His mouth was open, his brow furrowed, his eyes vacant. And while four Armenians, two Poles, three Sectarians and one Russian were highly delighted by his stupidity, I raised my hand and said: “Sir, I too would rather stay in Asia.”

“Ali Khan Shirvanshir! You too! All right, step forward.”

Professor Sanin pushed his lower lip out and silently cursed the fate that had banished him to the shores of the Caspian Sea. Then he cleared his throat and said pompously: “You at least can give us a reason?”

“Yes. I rather like Asia.”

"Oh you do, do you? Well, have you ever been in really backward countries, in Teheran, for instance?"

"Oh yes, last summer."

"There you are. And have you found there any of the great acquisitions of European culture, for instance motor-cars?"

"Oh yes, very great ones indeed. Holding thirty and more people. They don't go through the town, only from one place in the country to the other."

"These are called autobuses, and they are in use because there are no railways. This is reactionary. Sit down, Shirvan-shir."

I knew the thirty Asiatics were jubilant, they showed it by the way they looked at me. Professor Sanin kept angrily silent. He was supposed to make his pupils into good Europeans. Suddenly he asked: "Well—have any of you been to Berlin for instance?" It was not his day—the Secretarian Maikov raised his hand and said he had been to Berlin when he was a small boy. He remembered vividly a musty spooky Underground, a noisy railway and a ham sandwich his mother had prepared for him. We thirty Mohammedans were deeply indignant. Seyd Mustafa even asked to be allowed to leave the room, as the word "ham" made sick. And that was the end of our discussion about Baku and its geographical situation.

The bell rang. Relieved, Professor Sanin left the room. Forty pupils rushed out. It was the big break and there were three things one could do: run into the courtyard and start a fight with the pupils of the adjoining school, because they wore gold cockades and buttons on their school uniforms,

while we had to be content with silver ones, or talk amongst ourselves in a loud voice in Tartar, because the Russians could not understand it and it was therefore strictly forbidden — or cross the street quickly and slip into the Girl's Lyceum of the Holy Queen Tamar. This I decided to do. The girls strolled about in the garden, wearing chaste blue dress-uniforms and white aprons. My cousin Aishe waved to me. She was walking hand in hand with Nino Kipiani, and Nino Kipiani was the most beautiful girl in the world. When I told the girls of my geographical battle the most beautiful girl in the world looked down the most beautiful nose in the world and said: "Ali Khan, you are stupid. Thank God we are in Europe. If we were in Asia they would have made me wear the veil ages ago, and you couldn't see me." I gave in. Baku's undecided geographical situation allowed me to go on looking into the most beautiful eyes in the world. I left the girls and dejectedly played truant for the rest of the day. I looked at the camels, at the sea, thought of Europe and Asia, of Nino's lovely eyes and was sad. A beggar approached me, his face and hands rotten with disease. I gave him money, he made to kiss my hand, but I was frightened and snatched it away. Ten minutes later it occurred to me that this had been an insult, and for two hours I ran around looking for him, so I could put it right. But I could not find him, and went home with a bad conscience. All this had been five years ago.

During these years many things had happened. A new headmaster had arrived, who liked to grab our collars and shake us, because it was strictly forbidden to box the pupils' ears. Our religious instructor explained at great length how merciful Allah