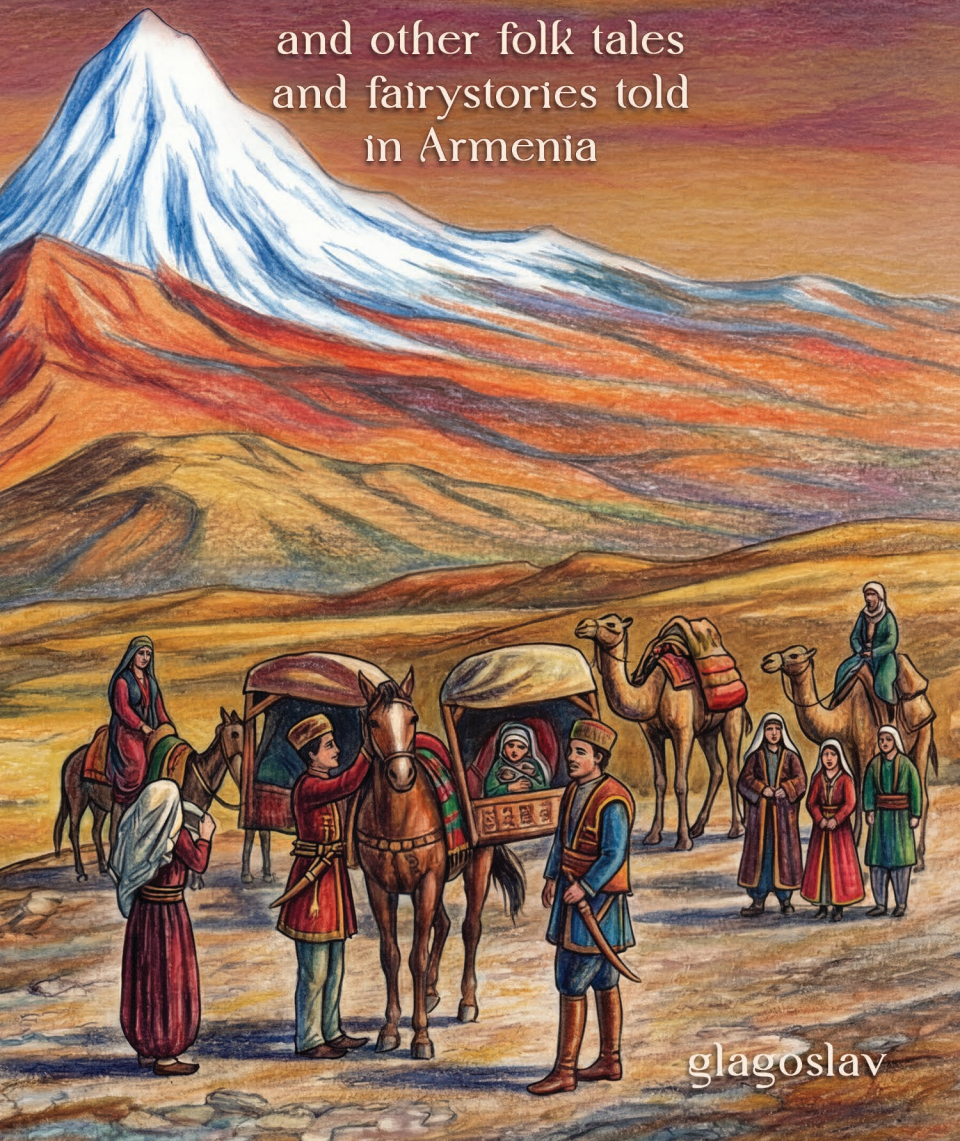
A. G. Seklemian

The Golden Maiden

and other folk tales and fairystories told in Armenia



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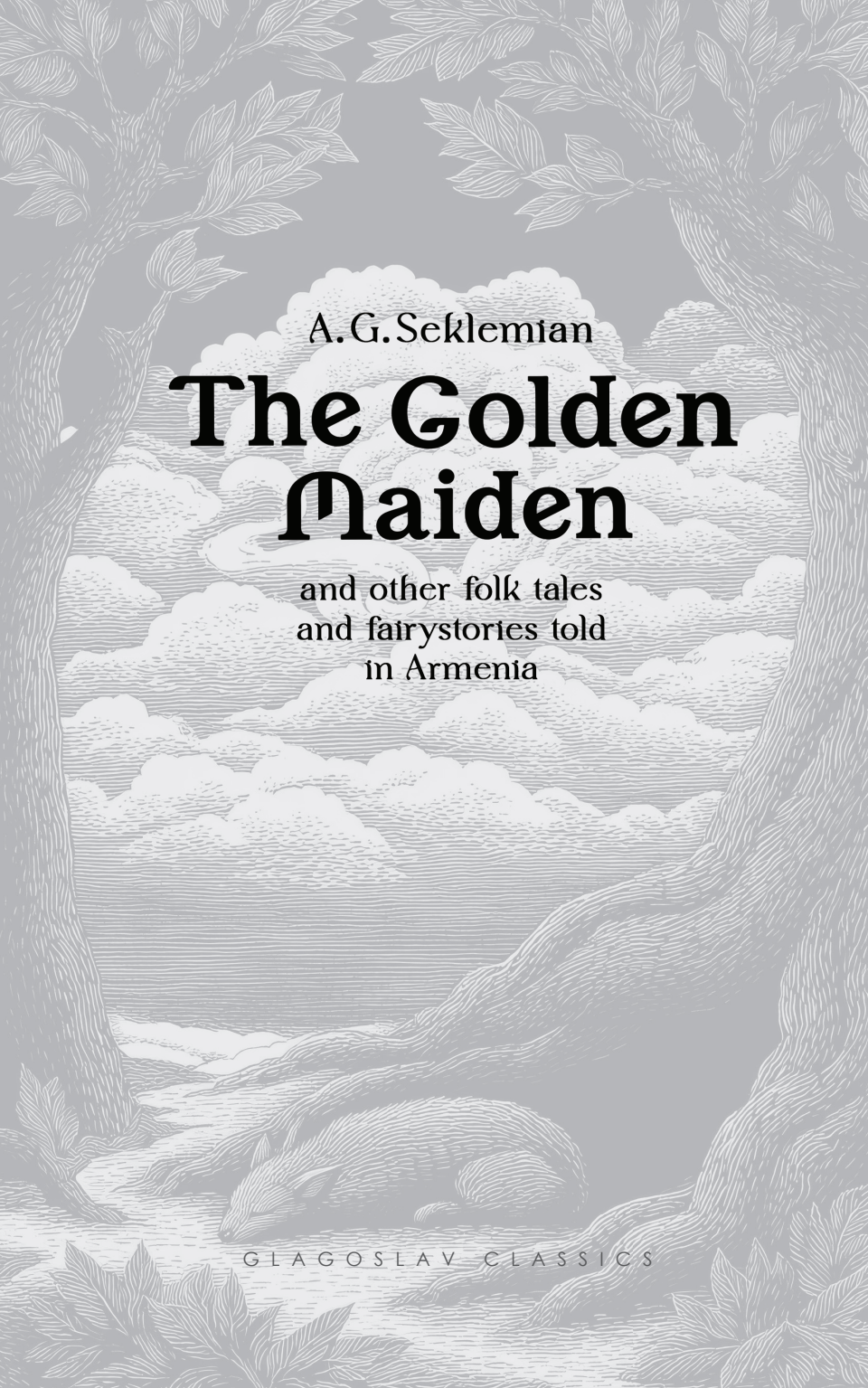
A. G. Seklemian
The Golden Maiden
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GLAGOSLAV CLASSICS

Contents

Whispers from an Ancient Land: Stepping into Seklemian's Armenian Tales

To open the pages of A. G. Seklemian's *The Golden Maiden and other folk tales and fairy stories told in Armenia* in this year of 2025 is to do more than simply access a collection of charming narratives. It is to accept an invitation, extended over a century ago, to step through a portal into a world both enchantingly alien and strikingly familiar. These are tales gathered from the "mouths of the people," as Seklemian himself attested, at a time when the very air of their homeland was thick with ancient memory and foreshadowing change. Today, in our hyper-connected, often bewilderingly complex present, these stories arrive not as quaint relics, but as vibrant testaments to the enduring power of human imagination, the tenacity of cultural identity, and the quiet heroism of those who sought to preserve such treasures against the encroaching shadows.

The original 1898 edition of this collection carried an insightful introduction by Alice Stone Blackwell, a notable American suffragist, humanitarian, and translator of Armenian poetry. Her words, penned at the close of the 19th century, already underscored the unique value of what lay within. She quoted a "distinguished English student of folk-lore" who lamented that Armenia, despite offering a "rich and hitherto almost untouched field," had largely baffled European collectors due to the formidable nature of its language – Lord Byron famously, if perhaps a little dramatically, dubbed its alphabet

"a very Waterloo." Blackwell rightly pointed out that previous collections, such as those by Bishop Garegin Srvandztiants (Sirwantzdiants), or the work begun by Ohannes Chatschumian, were largely inaccessible to the Anglophone world. Professor Minas Tcheraz of King's College, London, was also diligently collecting tales in Constantinople, primarily from "the women of the common people," whose memories and imaginations, he noted, "still preserve all the legends bequeathed from the past." Yet, these too remained largely within specialist circles. Seklemian's achievement, therefore, was monumental: he was offering one of the first readily available, substantial compilations of Armenian folk narratives in the English language, a genuine service, as Blackwell put it, to "students of folk-lore who are unacquainted with the Oriental languages."

Why this particular emphasis on Armenian folklore? Blackwell, and indeed Seklemian through his very act of compilation, understood its exceptional character. Armenia, a land steeped in millennia of history, stands as one of the cradles of ancient civilisation, a contemporary of Assyria and Babylon. Its people, tracing their lineage, according to their own tradition, to Togarmah, grandson of Japhet, who supposedly settled there after Noah's Ark alighted on Mount Ararat, have occupied this mountainous crossroads between East and West since time immemorial. Herodotus spoke of them; Xenophon, in his *Anabasis*, described their customs in ways that resonated with village life even in Seklemian's day. Biblical mentions in Kings, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah further attest to their ancient presence. The monumental inscriptions at Persepolis and Behistun bear witness to "Armina" as a significant entity within the Achaemenid Empire. This sheer antiquity, coupled with what Blackwell termed a "singular tenacity of its own ideas and traditions," infuses Armenian folklore with a profound depth.

This tenacity is not mere romantic notion; it is a historical reality forged in the crucible of geography and faith. Ar-

menia, the "bridge between Europe and Asia," often found itself a battleground, absorbing the shock of countless invasions. For centuries, as Blackwell evocatively phrased it, the Armenians "kept the bridge," defending the gates of Europe against waves of incursions, before their own political independence, enjoyed under various dynasties for nearly three millennia and evidenced by the haunting ruins of cities like Ani, was eventually subsumed. Yet, through Persian, Arab, Mongol, and finally Ottoman Turkish domination, the Armenian identity persisted. This remarkable "race-survival," as 19th-century observers might term it (we would perhaps speak today of cultural endurance), was attributed by many, including Blackwell, to strong family structures and, significantly, to the early and profound adoption of Christianity.

Tradition holds that the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew first brought the Gospel to Armenia. Historically, King Tiridates III, under the influence of St. Gregory the Illuminator, declared Christianity the state religion around 301 AD, making the Armenian Apostolic Church the world's first national Christian church. This deeply ingrained faith became both a wellspring of cultural identity and a focal point for persecution, first from Zoroastrian Persians and later, for many centuries, from Islamic powers. The Armenians, often isolated beyond the frontiers of mainstream Christendom, clung fiercely to their distinct theological traditions, refusing assimilation into either Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox spheres despite the potential for greater protection. This steadfastness in faith mirrored a broader cultural resilience.

It is precisely this interplay of ancient pagan inheritances and deeply rooted Christian belief that lends Armenian folklore such a unique texture. As Blackwell detailed with anthropological precision, many pre-Christian rites were not eradicated but rather "baptized" with Christian significance. Consider the festival in February, ostensibly commemorating

the presentation of Christ in the Temple: young men build bonfires of aromatic shrubs in churchyards, around which villagers dance and leap, carrying home embers for luck – a clear echo of devotion to Mihr, the ancient god of fire. Or the summer festival marking the subsiding of Noah's Deluge (a potent local legend, given Ararat's looming presence), where a joyous, communal drenching with water takes place, followed by the release of doves. "Fortune Day," celebrated forty days after Easter (Ascension Day), involves young girls silently collecting water from seven springs under starlight, into which villagers drop personal tokens. A blindfolded child then draws these items while verses are sung, predicting the owner's fate – a ceremony far older than its Christian overlay.

These are not mere quaint customs; they are living threads connecting the present to a distant, almost mythical past, woven into the very fabric of daily life, especially in the remote mountain villages where Seklemian likely gathered many of his tales – perhaps in Erzroom, as Blackwell suggests Tcheraz did in Constantinople. The historical consciousness of the people was, and remains, acute. The "Holy War" of the 5th century, culminating in the Battle of Avarayr (AD 451), where Vartan Mamigonian and his forces, though defeated by the Sasanian Persians attempting to impose Zoroastrianism, fought with such ferocity that the Persians ultimately abandoned their efforts at forced conversion, is a cornerstone of Armenian identity. Eghishe, a contemporary historian, recorded a Persian high priest admitting, "These people have put on Christianity not like a garment, but like their flesh and blood." For centuries, Vartan's name was toasted, his image wreathed in red flowers. Folk belief even held that a unique red flower grew only on the Avarayr plain, sprung from the martyrs' blood, and that nightingales there sang "Vartan, Vartan!"

This sense of a landscape imbued with story, where forests, springs, and mountains possess spirits, is palpable in Seklemian's collection. For the Armenian peasant, as Blackwell noted,

"all nature is full of stories." It is this world – rich, layered, and profoundly spiritual – that Seklemian sought to capture. His work, therefore, arrived at a critical juncture. The late 19th century was a period of increasing persecution for Armenians within the Ottoman Empire, culminating in the horrific Hamidian Massacres of 1894-1896, just a few years before *The Golden Maiden* was published in Cleveland, Ohio, where Seklemian, by then an émigré pastor, had settled.

Viewed from our 2025 vantage point, knowing the unspeakable horrors of the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923) that were yet to unfold, Seklemian's collection takes on an almost sacred quality. These stories, gathered from a world that was about to be systematically decimated, its people murdered and dispersed, its cultural heartlands emptied, become more than folklore; they become acts of remembrance, testaments to a civilization that refused to be extinguished. Seklemian, whether he fully foresaw the extent of the coming catastrophe or not, was engaged in a profound act of cultural salvage. He was ensuring that the voices, the laughter, the fears, and the wisdom encoded in these ancient narratives would survive, even if their tellers did not.

Many Western observers of the time, as cited by Blackwell – figures like the French poet Lamartine ("the Swiss of the East"), the scholar Dulaurier, American missionaries ("the Anglo-Saxons of Eastern Turkey"), the esteemed British historian James Bryce (author of *The American Commonwealth*), and the intrepid English traveller Isabella Bird Bishop – consistently remarked on the Armenians' intellectual capacity, their energy, enterprise, and resilience. Bryce noted their "capacity for intellectual and moral progress... beyond that of all their neighbors," while Bishop praised them as "the most capable, energetic, enterprising and pushing race in Western Asia." While the language of such assessments can feel dated to our modern ears, often tinged with the colonial gaze of the era, the underlying recognition of

Armenian dynamism and potential was widespread. Lord Byron, with characteristic insight, observed that "it would perhaps be difficult to find in the annals of a nation less crime than in those of this people, whose virtues are those of peace, and whose vices are the result of the oppression it has undergone." These qualities – intellect, industry, faith, and an unbreakable spirit – are the very bedrock from which such rich folklore springs.

What, then, awaits the reader within these pages? You will encounter tales of cunning tricksters and brave youngest sons, of enchanted animals and formidable giants (the *devs*), of luminous maidens like the titular "Golden Maiden," and of perilous quests that test the limits of courage and wit. Dragons (*vishaps*) guard treasures, magical objects offer aid, and justice, though often delayed, usually triumphs. Yet, woven through these universal fairy-tale archetypes are threads distinctly Armenian: the stark beauty of the Anatolian highlands, the deep reverence for family and faith, the echoes of historical struggles, and a resilient humour that often shines through even in the darkest of circumstances. Seklemian's translations, while products of their time, aim for clarity and accessibility, seeking to convey the spirit and narrative drive of the originals to an English-speaking audience.

Reading these tales today is an act of connection. It connects us to A. G. Seklemian, the diligent pastor-scholar who understood the preciousness of his heritage. It connects us to the unnamed storytellers, the grandmothers and village elders whose voices echo across the generations. It connects us to the Armenian people, whose history is a profound lesson in survival and the enduring power of culture. And, on a more personal level, it connects us to that universal human need for narrative – for stories that explain the world, that offer solace, that ignite the imagination, and that remind us of who we are.

Alice Stone Blackwell concluded her 1898 introduction by noting that Armenia, a "land of unsolved riddles," would

eventually, when peace allowed, yield rich treasures for scholars. She congratulated Seklemian and his publishers on their "valuable contribution to the world of folk-lore." More than a century later, her words still resonate. This collection remains a vital contribution, perhaps even more so now, as we strive to understand and honour the diverse tapestries of human experience.

So, turn the page. Let the devious Keko, the brave prince, or the resourceful maiden lead you into a landscape of wonder. Listen to the whispers from an ancient land, carried to us by A. G. Seklemian, a quiet hero of cultural memory. The journey you are about to embark upon is not just into the realm of fairy tale, but into the heart of a resilient and extraordinary people.

The story-teller to his audience

If I were telling my stories to an audience composed of Armenians, as I told them years ago, I would begin without any preliminary remarks or introduction. But since the audience is made up of people who are comparatively unacquainted with my native land and its traditions, naturally they will like to know who the story-teller is, where he got his narratives, and by whom and how his tales were first told.

About twenty years ago I was a boy living in a village on the heights of the Taurus Mountains in Cilicia, or Lesser Armenia, not far from the Mediterranean Sea. Like boys and girls all over the world, I was very fond of stories; but there were no story-books or other reading matter with which I and other children of my age could gratify our eager desire for stories. But better than these were the aged folks who told us all the interesting stories which our inquisitive childhood required. I had two grandmothers and half a dozen aunts, all unlettered country people, who took great delight in a rich store of folk-lore and fairy tales, and who told me the most entertaining and delightful stories that I have ever heard. In every village home there were one or two such old people, who entertained the youth of their respective homes. During the long winter evenings we boys and girls gathered together around the village hearth to listen to the old man or aged woman rehearsing tales of fairies, giants, genii, dragons, knights, winged beauties, captive maidens, and other thousand and one mysterious beings. I need not say how, with utmost interest, our youthful minds used to follow the details of these vivid and picturesque sto-

ries, drinking in every word with the greatest avidity. This was true not only of children but of grown-up people also, whose principal pastime, during the long and tedious winter nights, was the rehearsing of folk-tales and fairy stories, or listening to others as they told them.

These circumstances gave me opportunity and power to commit to memory a great number of tales and rehearse them whenever there was a favorable occasion. By this means I improved and increased my store of tales so much that I became quite a noted story-teller in our village, at a time when I was but a mere lad. Subsequently, both during my college course in Aintab, Cilicia, and during the period when I was a teacher in Erzroom, of Armenia proper, I had the opportunity to travel a great deal and to study the life and manners of the Armenians in their primitive homes. I found the same fairy stories and folk-tales current everywhere, with such slight differences only as the people made when appropriating the tales to their own surroundings and to their fund of knowledge. At that time it occurred to my mind that it would be a good plan to make a collection of these tales in order to make use of them some day, and so I kept notes of the tales just as they were told by the common, unlettered country people.

Bishop Sirwantzdiants, an Armenian clergyman, also made a collection of Armenian folk-tales, taking them from the mouth of the people just as they were told. He published his collection in two separate books. The first, "Manana" (Manna), was printed in Constantinople in 1876 by the Dindessian Printing-press (since closed), and the second, "Hamov-Hodov" (Delicious and Fragrant), was printed in Constantinople in 1884 by the Bagdadlian Printing-press.

My personal notes of Armenian tales and these two books of Bishop Sirwantzdiants have furnished the material of the present volume. As the Bishop and myself made our collections independently in different districts of Armenia, our texts naturally differed from each other in some points. But the

two being substantially the same, in putting the stories into English I have followed the one which I thought to be the most original, taking all the circumstances into consideration. Let me here emphasize the point again that all the stories that appear in the present volume were taken down directly from the lips of the ignorant, unlettered peasantry of Armenia, literally without any embellishment or addition whatever, except in the case of rude and unbecoming expressions which had to undergo some slight change.

How those unlettered, ignorant people came into possession of these stories, and what the value of such tales is to the student of antiquity and ethnology, are questions which I will not venture to answer. I wish, however, to make a few statements which have been suggested to me by the study of the Armenian folk-tales and fairy stories.

The history of the Armenians is greatly mixed up with mythology and tradition, as is the case with the history of all ancient nations. Many of the legends given in the written history of Armenia bear a marked similarity to the folk-tales of the present day. The peculiar geography of Armenia must have had a great deal to do with the formation of these tales. High, inaccessible mountain ranges have divided the country into such distinct divisions that the inhabitants of one section have, even in the present time, very strange ideas with regard to the people of the other section, attributing to one another magic, witchcraft and other superhuman powers and practices. This, of course, was still more so in olden times, when the population of the country had not yet been fused together into one nation. That was probably the time when most of these tales were formed.

S. Baring-Gould supposes that many of the fairy tales current among all nations took their beginning at a time when a conquering people of one race lived among the conquered people of an entirely different race. Thus "two distinct races dwelt in close proximity, not comprehending each other,

each suspicious of and dreading the other, and each investing the other with superhuman powers or knowledge." [See "Fairy Tales from Grimm" Preface, pp. xvi. and xxi.] There are many instances in Armenian history which confirm this supposition, so that in the case of such tales or portion of tales as are purely Armenian, we may suppose that the process of fusion of two ancient races, one the conquering and the other the conquered, has given birth to them. Although all the tales contained in this volume are taken directly from the lips of the Armenians, it will be noticed that some of them bear traces of Persian, Arabic and Turkish influence. This, of course, was naturally to be expected, as the Armenians have been ruled successively by these nations.

But one of the greatest factors in the formation of the distinctively Armenian tales was, no doubt, Mount Ararat. That majestic mountain, situated in the middle of an extensive plateau in the heart of Armenia, and seen from points distant a three or four days' journey, would naturally draw the attention of the people. The many mythological and historical facts attached to it; its hoary, inaccessible peak covered with everlasting snow; its towering heights piercing the sky; its high, steep precipices; its deep cañons; its underground caverns; its fierce storms, and the wild beasts and large birds living on its slopes—would naturally give birth to half-true and half-imaginary stories which gradually and by lapse of time would grow into legendary tales.

These are not the only folk-tales current among the Armenians; there are a great many more. We may be tempted to make another collection if this one proves acceptable.

Before closing these notes, I have to confess that my use of English is defective, owing to the fact that it is not my mother tongue. Consequently I owe a great deal to generous friends who have been so kind as to take up my manuscript and pass upon it before it was given to the press, smoothing the narrative without destroying the personality of the sto-

ry-teller. Among these generous friends I take pleasure in mentioning the names of Mr. W. H. Brett, Librarian of the Cleveland Public Library; Mr. Wallace W. Newell, Secretary of the American Folk-Lore Society; Miss Alice Stone Blackwell, the noted poetess and editor of the *Woman's Journal*, and my publishers.

Now, I do not see how to remunerate these friends for their valuable assistance to me unless I share with them the "three apples" which fall from Heaven at the end of each tale, and which I had to appropriate to myself as a genuine story-teller. This I gladly do. May they prove as pleasant to them, and the stories be as interesting to you, as has been the re-telling of them to me.

A. G. Seklemian.

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"*These stories are not of my own invention... they were collected by me from the mouths of the people.*" – A. G. Seklemian

Enter a world where the peaks of Mount Ararat touch the heavens and the valleys echo with the whispers of an ancient past. In this mesmerising collection, first published in 1898, A. G. Seklemian opens the heavy, iron-bound doors of Armenian folklore to reveal a landscape teeming with wonder, wit, and magic.

Here, you will encounter the *Devs*, giants of fearsome strength and dim intellect; the shimmering *Peris*, fairies of ethereal beauty; and the brave, often youngest, sons who set out to conquer destiny with nothing but courage and a clever turn of phrase. From the serpent-guarded treasures of the deep to the moon-faced beauty of the Golden Maiden herself, these tales transport the reader to the rugged crossroads of East and West.

But *The Golden Maiden* is more than a mere anthology of fairy tales. Compiled by Seklemian in the twilight of the nineteenth century, just decades before the catastrophic events that would forever alter the Armenian nation, this book stands as a defiant act of cultural preservation. It is a literary ark, carrying the vibrant, oral soul of a people safely across the waters of time.

Rich with the scent of the Orient and the timeless structures of the Brothers Grimm, yet possessed of a fierce, distinctive spirit, this volume is an essential treasure for lovers of mythology, students of history, and anyone who believes in the enduring power of a good story.

"*Armenia offers a rich and hitherto almost untouched field to the folk-lorist... Mr. Seklemian has rendered a real service by bringing these curious and interesting tales within reach.*" – Alice Stone Blackwell

A. G. Seklemian (1864–1920) was an Armenian scholar, pastor, and dedicated folklorist. Born in the Ottoman Empire, he emigrated to the United States in the late 19th century. Understanding the precarious position of his homeland, he dedicated himself to transcribing the oral traditions of his childhood, ensuring that the imagination of the Armenian people would survive for future generations.

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