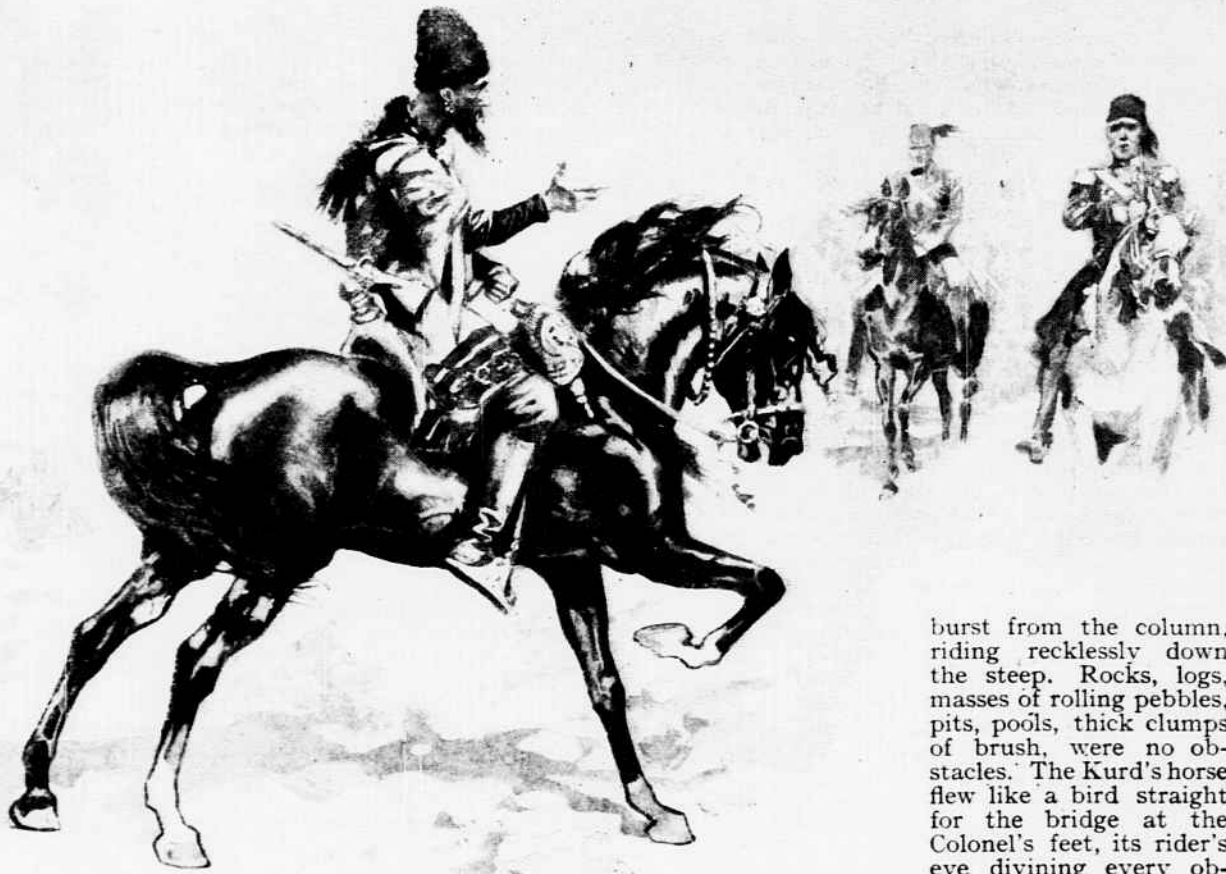


Riskullah's Arabian Mare

By HENRY OTIS DWIGHT

DRAWINGS BY KARL HASSMAN



"Oh, no; not that!" said Jack Benson hastily, as Robbins raised his hand to take from the wall a silver mounted dagger; then, seeming to make an effort, he added, "All right, George, bring it along; I may as well tell you about that too."

Among all the curios brought from Turkey by Benson, the dagger which Robbins now took from the wall most impressed one with individuality, the peculiar line of its curve from hilt to needle point speaking of a treasured purpose, sinister and even malignant.

"They call that a *khanjar*," explained Benson. "It is a rather unpleasant souvenir of Colonel Hassan Bey, the Provost Marshal of Trebizond, a pleasant, well meaning fellow who missed his way in the case of the Hamavend Chief Riskullah's sorrel mare. You know those robbers, the Hamavend Kurds, used to escape retribution by living in the saddle,—men, women, and children,—and by never camping on the place where they were at nightfall. At last the Turkish cavalry somehow managed to bag the whole tribe, bringing them down to the coast at Trebizond in 1891, while I was living there. And here begins the story of the beautiful mare that I never looked upon without thrills of delight."

Benson threw himself into an easy chair, as if to emphasize the interruption of his duties as showman. This is the story he told us:

One day the Governor General ordered the Provost Marshal Hassan Bey to take two troops of cavalry to Jevizluk on the main road to Baiburt. "There," he said, "you will meet the Hamavend Kurds, who are coming from Baiburt under escort by the Meirimen road as less frequented. You go ostensibly to do honor to the Chief Riskullah in my name, thus covering our wish to reinforce the escort, so as to get the Hamavends safely past the caravans on the road and through the streets of this city. These robbers have been kept quiet and docile on the journey by being told that the Sultan longs to see so valiant a people and their Chief. Foster this idea as if you originated it. Treat these beasts as if you were their father; but let not the smallest child get away! I commit you to God."

The Provost Marshal's cavalymen were lounging in the shade of a little grove just this side of Jevizluk, near the bridge where the Meirimen road comes in on the left, when word came that the convoy had been sighted. Through a break in the ilex bushes Hassan Bey looked down across the snarling river upon the sweep of rough lowlands with the steep hills beyond which rise into a tangled heap of mountains. The convoy was about half a mile away, a long black line crawling like a snake along the ridges selected for the great loop by which the road comes down to the bridge.

Suddenly Hassan Bey, opening his eyes wide, ejaculated, "*Hai babam hai!*" or some other Turkish equivalent for "The deuce!" One of the Kurds had

men broke from the column to stop the Kurd, but only one of them seemed at all equal to the task. The reckless among the others were thrown or rolled over with their horses, and the cautious forgot their objective through studying details of the way there. As for the Provost Marshal, watching all these doings as from a watch tower, he soon stopped cursing the bungling cavalymen to applaud the sagacious alertness of the fugitive's horse.

When the Kurd had crossed the bridge, only the short hill overhanging the river separated him from the highway to Baiburt and freedom. He turned in his saddle to look behind him. Seeing only a single cavalryman following, he drew his revolver as his horse cantered lightly up the slope. Then a gentle whinny from his horse warned him to pay attention to what was in front. What was in front was Hassan Bey's line of cavalry, twenty paces away, and the Provost Marshal in glittering uniform waiting with a bland smile to receive him.

Riskullah was too sly an old fox to change color at a surprise. Checking his mare, he coolly put up the telltale revolver, and in a voice as steady as if this meeting had been his object he gave the commonplace salutation, "Peace be with you!"

Hassan Bey, being master of the situation and of the Kurd, and also of himself, in a cordial tone made the usual reply, "With you be peace!" He looked curiously at the man whose bold scheme chance had thwarted. The Kurd was tall, spare, and black bearded, having a Jewish nose, clear and piercing black eyes, and a proud bearing worthy of one who carries in the silver case about his neck a pedigree covering twenty generations of masterful control of men. Riskullah needed no introduction. The Colonel, halting by a gesture the one pursuer, who was now lumbering up the hill on his heavy Hungarian horse, let deference appear in his manner as he said to the Kurd, "I gladly welcome, sir, one as fond as I am of fast riding."

"Thanks," replied Riskullah without hesitation that would betray the disappointment in his heart. "I like the exercise, and am glad that the liking has brought me all the sooner into your presence."

"His Excellency Nasik Pasha, the Governor General of this Province," said Hassan Bey, "has charged me with the pleasant duty of welcoming you in his name and serving in any way the comfort of so distinguished a visitor. You have only to command, and it shall be done, if willing hands can do it."

"I had not hoped," replied Riskullah, "that His Excellency would confer so great an honor upon me, an honor doubly affecting when communicated through so highly qualified an officer."

The Turk in his trim European dress, his bright buttons, and his gold lace, and the rough Kurd in his travel stained robes of antediluvian pattern, were peers in diplomatic wiles. Not so Riskullah's mare, whose restiveness frankly and protestingly emphasized her master's sudden change of purpose. Has-

san Bey's eyes were fixed on her as she daintily tossed her delicate feet in impatient prancing. The tremendous exertion of her flight to the river had left no stain upon the velvet of her golden bay coat, and although the flashing eye, expressive as a girl's, and the champing of the bit told of excitement, the Kurd's caressing hand allayed it.

"Pardon me," said Hassan Bey, "if I brave the evil eye by speaking of the grace and beauty of your mare. I never saw such sure footing on such ground. She actually disdains difficulties when you direct."

"Yes," answered Riskullah, "she knows, like other members of my family, when to be patient and when to strive with the might. Her guide both in endurance and in speed is my wish."

Hassan Bey was warmed by the quiet assurance of the Kurd's trust which looked upon the mare as a loyal friend. He envied the man the possession as a half taught laborer envies a millionaire a possession which he himself could use far more worthily, and he found it pleasant to let his imagination play with the thought of what he would do with that mare if he owned her.

By the time that the long cavalcade from the Meirimen road arrived Hassan Bey's genial friendliness had impressed

Riskullah. The two men sat on their horses while the convoy trailed slowly by, looking very like an Indian tribe in migration, with its equipment of tents, bedding, kettles, and tent poles. Full two hundred and fifty persons were crowded between the lines of Turkish cavalry, and of these one hundred and fifty, at least, were gaunt, swarthy, scowling women and haggard, fretful children. Their faces visibly brightened on seeing Riskullah; but after the tribe had passed, while the Colonel and the Chief were deftly working their way along the edges of the cavalcade to reach the head of the column, some of the ragged, unkempt women sitting their horses like men began to wail. "Ai-e-e-e! Riskullah Bey is going away again!"

"The women and children are tired," said Riskullah, "and frightened at the bigness of the world. The very babies have grown wrinkled during this journey. None of the children could now smile, even to gain a purse of gold. My people are not fit for the Sultan to see; he would think them village cattle." The crisis of the Kurd's fate was near; a grappling iron in Trebizond might help him out of the gilded prisons in Constantinople known as the Sultan's guest houses; his voice trembled, though not only from pity, as he added, "Pity the children, and get permission for them to stay at Trebizond until I come back."

Hassan Bey, brooding over the fact that he had no Arabian mare, saw in this plea a suggestion. If the women and children were too tired to go on, the tribe would stay in Trebizond too, and of course the horses. The temptation came to him in the form of a beam of light, to hail the circumstance that the mare separated from her master might fall into any hands cunning enough to hold her. He smiled on Riskullah, saying, "I will certainly tell your wishes to the Governor General." Then as he glanced at the women who were making the wail; he saw dangling from the saddle of one of them an American ice cream freezer, and he mischievously added, with a laugh, "I did not know that Hamavends use such articles."

The Chief followed the Colonel's gaze and laughed too, as he said, "Oh, that ice cream pail! I suppose some traveler left it at the camp." But with a proud toss of the head and a reddened cheek he added, "Some people think us robbers; but we are not. Our peasants, who are all Armenians or Nestorians, live on the Hamavend territories between Zahu and Lake Van. If marauders come, we defend them with our blood; if need arise, we give them seed or cattle for the plow; so of right we take from them provisions when we need them. We take toll too from strangers who enter our territory; but we never rob. Robbers strip and maim and kill; my people do not give anyone so much as a nosebleed. Do you know that our poor peasants are defenseless because we have been taken away? Marauders ravage their villages while we are junketing here. For those peasants' sake I beg you to see that we have permission to return home promptly after I have done homage to the Sultan and got safely back from Constantinople with my mare."

"You may leave all that to the mercy of the Sultan," said the Colonel loftily, for he liked not this harping on the questions of the future. "When we reach Trebizond, and before you go to your rooms at the stone khan, I shall guide you to the Governor General for your call of courtesy. He will tell you that he has peremptory orders to do everything for the comfort of you and yours. So much for to-day; for to-morrow trust suffices."

Seeing that the Kurd had no idea of being separated from the mare when he went to Constantino-