

THE ZORYAN INSTITUTE

A RED CROSS QUEST AMONG THE KURDS

By Major Stephen Trowbridge

A true brother's love has that temper of persistence and determination which wins its way through every hinderance. Hagop, an Armenian boy of nineteen from Afion Kara Hissar, was working for the American Red Cross at Aleppo Headquarters. Again and again he plead with us to go out to a village north of Aleppo to rescue his sister Elizabeth. He and Elizabeth with their father and mother, had been driven in the deportations of August, 1915, from their home in western Asia Minor across the Taurus ranges and along the line of the Bagdad Railway toward the Euphrates. Near the village of Akhterin, thirty-two miles due north of Aleppo, the weary company of deportees was halted. Already many had perished on the way. Elizabeth was then thirteen; Hagop was sixteen. Their father and mother fell ill with some dreadful fever. The people said it was typhus. No doctor could be found and there was not even the shelter of a stable. The Kurds from Akhterin raided the Armenians' camping place and snatched all the valuables. A few days later both father and mother died and a Turkish official ordered Hagop away to Aleppo as a recruit for the Turkish army. From Aleppo he was sent to Habbus (Shechem) on the Palestine front. Elizabeth, a beautiful, slender girl, with ruddy cheeks, soft dark hair and long eyelashes, found herself unprotected. On the next Kurdish raid she was seized by a coarse, rough-handed man who made her bestride his donkey and travel to a village south of Akhterin. He knew that she was a lovely girl and offered to sell her to the chief. The chief's son already had two Mohammedan wives, but Elizabeth would be useful to them all as a slave girl. The chief eyed her and estimated her value. After a long dispute he paid over eleven Turkish gold pounds and two silver mejidiyehs (about \$57). This was considered a high price for a captive. She was taken into the women's apartments and was given the Moslem name Zeykia. Shortly after dark the first great tragedy of her life occurred.



Harvest time came and went. And two summers after that. She heard nothing from the outside world. Sometimes she was petted and fed with such dainties as a Kurdish village can produce. Often she was cursed and reviled and beaten. The treatment depended upon the whim of her master. He was a spare man with eyes full of cunning. She dreaded him and hated him from her very soul. But there was no escape. No Armenians ever came that way, and a certain Arab merchant who visited the chief from time to time talked to her about flight, only to deceive her in a brutal way, leaving another grim secret in her soul. The war seemed interminable. She wondered how many of her countrymen had survived the deportation marches. She heard from Kurdish boys who had been to the Akhterin railway station that the trains were crowded with Turkish troops going to Mesopotamia. "Then there must still be fighting," she thought.

One day the Kurds prepared to fall upon some Armenians who were staying at the station. The women were not allowed to take part in the attack, although Kurdish women have a reputation for fearlessness; but when the plunder was brought back in sacks and saddle-bags, "Zeykia" was allowed to join the women in overhauling the goods. Among the clothing, shawls and quilts her eye lit upon an Armenian prayer book which she deftly slipped into her girdle. In these days of captivity she had longed for the sight of a printed page. The Kurds not having any written language, ~~and~~ possess no books except Arabic Qurans in some rich chiefs' houses. In the American Mission School at Kara Hissar she had learned to read, and how precious a knowledge this now became! Whenever she found herself alone she would con over these pages. The noble sentences of the Gregorian litany and collects stirred her heart to faith in God. Once, while she was thus absorbed, her master came in at the doorway. She barely had time to tuck the book out of sight, but he detected the fact that she was doing or thinking something which she would not disclose to him. His narrow eyes searched her and then his hand reached for a stout stick. She was beaten until she fell in a faint. Still she took the risk and read the book when no one was near.



At last strange news came. British troops had captured Aleppo. The Turks were leaving this part of the country! The talk of the men folk as they gathered from the fields in the evening confirmed this. After several weeks there was a stir in the village, for an English column was approaching and was taking possession of the railway station. The thought came to Elizabeth that she might tell a British officer that she was a captive. Would he not be able to save her? Twice she attempted to run away. But each time she was pursued, caught and beaten. After the second attempt her master took down his Martini from the peg where it hung, and standing very close to her loaded five cartridges, saying between his teeth, "Every one of these shall plunge into your vitals, if you so much as move from this courtyard while the enemy is in this vicinity!"

Hagop could not tell the name of the village, but Toros, an orphan boy in Aleppo, had been captured at the same time with Elizabeth, and he thought that the village where she had been sold was from three to five miles in a southerly direction from Akhterin. *She might have been taken to another tribe.* She might not be living. But the clue was a fairly good one, and we resolved to go out in the Red Cross Red truck to search the country side.

Two young American officers, one of them with a six-shooter at his belt, took turns driving the Red. For the sake of a day out-of-doors we invited Dr. Maude Hall, Director of our Red Cross Refugee Hospital, Miss Hutton, the Superintendent Nurse, and a stenographer from the headquarters staff. All these had been working long hours and welcomed this chance for recreation. By the courtesy of a British captain in charge of the Aleppo Arab police, we were given as escort his own gendarme, an up-standing fellow and a Christian. Without the policeman we could not insist on entering any house in the search. The orphan boy Toros came with us to recognize the village, and Hagop could not stay behind, for it was his sister we should have to identify. We were thus a party of nine as we sped out on the *Musallimiyeh* carriage road, past



the great barracks and the Persian dervishes' shrine.

For thirteen miles we were on a macadamized highway and made good time. Then the carriage tracks followed an earth road from which trails forked out as we passed in the vicinity of the adobe villages. Finally Toros felt sure we must bear to the left, so we struck off on a broad caravan path. This led to the village of Hesin, and beyond that the way became very stony and irregular. The Red slipped over the stones and dodged the boulders, Lt. Winnett doing wonders at driving. The car designer in the factory never dreamed of such a test as this. By and by the trail almost lost itself in a sea of rocks, and we all climbed out. Down a ravine and up the other side Winnett drove the empty car, but the prospect from the ridge was an impossible one. We took counsel how best to proceed. It was decided that Snyder and the three women should remain with the car, while the rest of us should go on foot to search the villages. We could see the trees of one in the next valley. The objection to walking was the time it would take; but what else could we do?

It was eleven o'clock and the sun was waxing hot. We knew we were going in the general direction of Aldherin, but unfortunately we did not know the name of the smaller village in which Elizabeth had been last heard of. All Toros could remember was that three brothers were the chiefs in that village and that they were Kurds. These mud-built hamlets often lie off the caravan road, tucked away among the hills. We may even now have passed too far north, we thought to ourselves. Just then we came up with two Arab donkey drivers plodding along behind their animals. They had taken eggs to Aleppo and were coming back with soap. After the traveler's greeting, I asked their destination. One of them replied in Turkish, "We go to all the villages in this region for we are peddlars." This sounded a bit promising. So in an offhand way I asked about the villages south of Aldherin.

"Oh, there are any number of them," the Moslem replied, "Which one are you looking for?"



"There is one in which three brothers share the chieftainship," I said, and I reflected that possibly there might be more than one. But the reply was very definite:

"You are thinking of Ghoas, an hour this side of Akhterin, are you not?"

"Yes," I ventured, "and are you acquainted with the eldest of the brothers?"

"Abdul Qadir, you mean. Yes, I have sold him soap many a time. He is known as the sheikh, for he is the eldest. Are you going to break bread with him?"

"No," I said, "we shall not remain long at his house. But we shall see him. How far, by this rocky trail, do you reckon it will be?"

"Two hours," he replied laconically.

At last we had gleaned some valuable information. But here was a dilemma. If we walked on six miles, leaving the Ree so far behind, it would be late in the afternoon before we could reach the car again, even if we should find the right village and the right house without any lengthy wanderings. Again, there was some risk that the Ree might be raided. Two weeks previously the armed Kurds from this very district had attacked the railway station at Akhterin, had looted the freight house and emptied the pockets of the Armenian station-master.

We ascertained from ^{the} peddlers that by going back to Hesin we could drive out on an easterly road free from rocks. By a circuitous route this would bring us to Akhterin. All that was possible by car, they said. From Akhterin to Ghoas would be only two miles, and if necessary we could walk that.

"You will not need to," they said, "the path is through the wheat. Your car will fly past the harvesters."

Our good Ree gave us no tire trouble, in spite of the rough going, as we retraced the path. The sun was straight overhead when we approached the bee-hive houses of Akhterin. We veered round through the wheat fields. Sure enough, there were the harvesters, and we had passed them before they turned from their labor. Toros began to recognize the landscape and became animated. We sped by one village and on the next ridge I looked at Toros. Forty or fifty mud-brick, squarely built houses were clustered in the hollow.

"That is it! That is it!" he exclaimed. "I remember the look of the place. I was here two days before I escaped."

So we left the Ree and the same advance party struck in toward a group of Kurds sitting idly in the shade of a wall.

"Greeting to you," I said. "He will show us the threshold of Sheikh Abdul Qadir's house, if this is indeed the village of Ghosar?"

All rose and returned my salutation, and two sun-tanned plowmen led the way through the devious little street into the courtyard and guest room of the "Servant of the Powerful." The chief was a man of sixty, with a grizzled beard and wearing a heavy home-spun cloak. He was puzzled by our sudden entry. After a single word of salutation, I accosted him.

"Sheikh Abdul-Qadir, know of a surety that I and my officers and this policeman of the Arab force, come to notify you of the proclamation of Emir Faisal, Prince of the Arabs, and of the special orders of the British General, that all Armenian girls kept since the days of the deportations are to be set free. We have come to take Zeykia. Bring her now to this room, that her brother may recognize her, and that she may return at once with us."

"There is a Zeykia with us," muttered the chief, "but is this her brother? Besides, she will not leave us. She has remained with us of her own will." We had struck the right place.

By this time a large group of burly retainers had filled the entry way and both sides of the long, old-fashioned oriental guest room.

"These shall be the witnesses," I said, "and the girl shall declare her choice. Fetch her now from the harem and let this policeman Bedia and her brother Hagop proceed with your henchmen to bring her."

The men all looked sullen and ill-tempered. A Kurd can look the part of a villain without any great effort. I wondered whether any ruse would be attempted. It undoubtedly would have been, had more time been afforded. But we had declined



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coffee and cigarettes. There was the possibility that the Kurds might reach for their loaded rifles, slung over pegs in the wall. There were as many guns and revolvers on those pegs as you would find framed pictures in a New England parlor! But the villagers knew as well as we did that the British were in Aleppo.

We became aware of a movement of people in the courtyard. Through the carved wooden window bars I caught a glimpse of a slender girl leaning on Hagop's shoulder. The next moment the two came through the doorway, Hagop standing erect, face flushed and eyes bright. Elizabeth, indeed, it was, for she was sobbing with joy. She clung to his arm and for a moment kept her eyes on the ground as Kurdish brides are commanded to do. Her beautiful hair hung in seven or eight braids over her shoulders and on her head she wore a black silk scarf interwoven with silver thread. Her dress was of variegated heavy cotton cloth, like the coat Joseph's mother had made with her own hands.

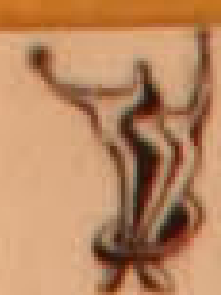
"Elizabeth," I said, "we have come from Aleppo with the necessary authority to set you free and to take you with us. We will give you a welcome and provide you shelter. Later you may be able to return to your own native town. Your brother has been longing to discover and release you. Will you come?"

In an unfaltering voice she replied, "I will come. May God reward you."

I notified the chief that the matter being decided we must take leave. Elizabeth said in Armenian (which the Kurds did not understand) "There are two other captive girls. Can we not take them also?"

I turned to Abdul Qadir. "Before we leave you must bring the other Armenian girls whom you have detained. They also are to go with us."

"We will send for them," he replied in a low voice. He seemed to be repressing anger in his heart. "The Emir's orders and the British commands are on my head (i.e., will be highly respected). But those women are settled here and will not leave us. You will not force them to go."



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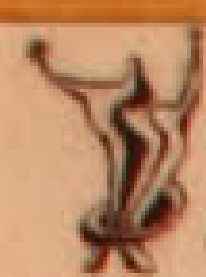
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"First of all bring them here," I said. And two servants were detailed for this.

In a few moments one woman appeared, and word came that the other was working in the fields at a considerable distance. To wait until she could be summoned would give time for a conspiracy. So it seemed best to deal quickly and be off without delay.

We found that the woman now before us was also named Elizabeth. Her home, she said, was in Nicomedia, on the Sea of Marmora. Every one of her family had died in the deportations. She was frightened in the presence of the score of Kurds, and at first stated that she would not leave. But in Armenian we assured her that in Aleppo she would be entirely safe, and we would take good care of her. Thereupon she plucked up her courage and said, "I will go with you."

As we passed out from the courtyard, several of the Kurdish women came forward and affectionately kissed Hagop's sister. Elizabeth told us afterwards that these women had been kind to her. But toward her master and the chief she cherished nothing but resentment. As she took leave of them she exclaimed defiantly, "God has delivered me out of your hands. I am quit of you forever."

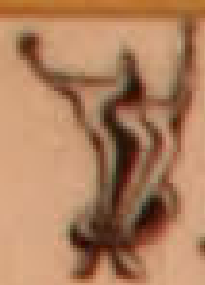
We did not waste any time in getting off, for the whole village was agog and the men were gathering in small groups. Within twenty minutes of our arrival at Ghos, the Red engine was purring again and we were darting over the broad path through the wheat fields.

When we were well on our way, a horseman was seen coming toward us from the city. As we passed him Elizabeth stood up suddenly and in a clear, penetrating voice cursed him and his parents and all his kin. He stopped, amazed.

"Why do you feel such hatred for that man? Who is he?" I asked.

"He? He is^s an Arab merchant from Aleppo. He used to come often to the house in Ghos. I could not tell you the things he did to me."

In her quiet, thrifty home in Kara Hissar she had never known what a curse was.



But now the vituperation came forth instantly as the expression of her feelings.

In the conversation a few minutes later some reference was made to the Cross. "The Cross!" she exclaimed, "I can speak about the Cross now without fear!" It is hard for us to imagine any household where it would be dangerous to mention this subject.

As the car rose on the crest of one of the limestone hills, the stately citadel of the thirteenth century stood in outline against the horizon. This was Elizabeth's first glimpse of Aleppo. The same evening she was received in the American Red Cross Refuge Home, where she took part in the housekeeping, sewing and embroidery until the day came when railway accommodations were secured. Then she started out with her brother to recover the homestead in Afion Kara Hissar.

Her forehead, both sides of her nose and her chin bear conspicuously the elaborate figures of the Kurdish indigo tattooing. Perhaps the doctor's skill will remove these marks of her humiliation without leaving very deep scars. Whatever the injury she has sustained, we may assure her of one supreme fact: that Christ is longing, out of the infinite riches of His love, to create in her a character of grace and tenderness and fidelity.

The British Army Administration is caring for 200 girls released from Moslem houses in Homs. In Ourfa the American Relief workers are sheltering forty maternity cases, all of them Armenian girls. The American Red Cross and the American Commission for Relief in the Near East have welcomed and have given employment to 625 in Aintab, 200 in Marash and 645 in Aleppo. But these are less than twenty per cent of the total in this region. Eighty per cent are not yet released. In the villages of the Serouj Plain alone --one small section of the country east of the Euphrates--there are 3000 Armenian small boys, girls and women still in Moslem houses.

Surely the chivalry of Great Britain and America will respond to right this great wrong. I may say with certainty that today this is more devoutly and intensely desired by thoughtful Armenians, men and women, than any political issues or any



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distribution of physical relief.

What would Elizabeth's future have been had not the Red Cross reached out a hand to set her free?