

The Cheecha

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The Great Serbian Retreat happened during November and December 1915. German and Austro-Hungarian armies had crossed the Danube River in the north of Serbia, and two Bulgarian armies had crossed Serbia's eastern border during October. The virtually unopposed Bulgars had moved rapidly and they had blocked all routes south to Greece. The hard-pressed Serbian army had been overwhelmed and it risked being surrounded. Its only escape routes were to the south-west across the mountains of Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania.

The Serbian King and the remnants of his army formed a long column trudging slowly up the muddy slopes in cold, wet and windy weather. The Serbian government desperately ordered every Serbian boy over the age of twelve to join the retreating column. It knew that their enemies wanted to annihilate the Serbian nation; the boys might preserve it.

The column attracted many thousands of civilian refugees with their horses, pack-mules and ox-drawn wagons. They had already been ravaged by cholera and typhus and they were determined to avoid Austrian oppression. They hoped to reach the Adriatic Sea where their French and British allies would rescue them.

Irregular veteran Private Radomir was fifty-five years old. He was one of the old men, the Cheechas, who had been detailed to wield the artillery and delay the invading armies in any way they could so that the younger troops could escape. His youngest son, Stefan, was old enough to join the retreating column but his wife, Milica, did not want to leave behind her husband.

For several days, the sounds of artillery fire had been getting louder. It began inadvertently: a hardly perceptible rumble. Then it became a dull booming interference. Now it was blatant: percussive, explosive and frightful.

Radomir had already spoken to the other cheechas in his village. They had always been supple but fiercely independent; they solemnly accepted their duty and none of them remonstrated. They would fight mindlessly and savagely to their bloody deaths.

Now, he had to persuade his wife to abandon him. He was sitting at a table with her and his son Stefan. They were drinking black tea laced with honey. Milica had baked Tain bread: a mixture of white and rye flour and spiced with dry plum; she had prepared salty cheese with peppers to go with it.

Milica had made plans for all of them: "The Entente will save us. The French and the British have landed in Salonika. All we have to do is hide and wait, or we could flee southward and meet them."

Radomir ignored her: "The Bulgars have blocked the railway line. You will have to travel by road. You can do that. Pack as much food as you can carry and take some blankets."

She ignored him: "You must come with us. We cannot survive on our own."

Radomir agreed: "I suppose I could go as far as the column. This town will soon be evacuated anyway. There are better places to make a stand."

Milica encouraged him: "When we get there, you can report to the officers. They will probably want you to guard the column."

Radomir explained: "You know what you have to do. Join the other women and take care of Stefan."

Milica pleaded with him: "You do not need to stay here."

Radomir tried to joke about it: "Do not worry. I have spoken to the other men in the village. We have a few surprises for our unwanted guests. I shall catch you up later."

Radomir looked out through the window. The Austrians would soon be looting and burning the houses. They would be chopping down the fruit and seizing the livestock and poisoning the wells. Unimaginable atrocities would be perpetrated on any Serbs who remained there.

Milica was still persisting: "Winter is coming. Stefan will not survive the trek through the mountains. Winter is coming. He is not strong enough."

Radomir knew that she was right. Stefan was weak. He would have more chance of survival with his father's protection.

Artillery shells were now landing a mile away at the far end of the town. Radomir looked out of the window again. Several cheechas were hurrying along the street toward the front line. They had no uniforms but they were armed with old Berdan bolt-action rifles and quadrangular socket bayonets.

Civilians and wounded soldiers were shuffling in the opposite direction.

Radomir had fought in previous Balkan campaigns. He knew how terrible war could be. The Austrians had already sacked and demolished other villages that had resisted their advance. He did not want his family to witness that.

He instructed Milica: "Hurry. Gather your things and go. Try to reach the column. Don't stop. I shall find you later." Milica picked up her bags and walked to the door. Radomir called to her. She turned around. He gave her a photograph of him. He smiled: "Here. Do not forget me." She smiled too. They looked intently into each other's eyes for a few seconds and then she and Stefan were gone.

Radmimir tried to understand what was happening. He looked around the room at his meagre possessions. That room contained his life. His world had been reduced to that and soon it would vanish completely. A tear ran down his cheek. Death was lonely. He could end his life with a bullet in his back or with a bullet in his front. That was his only remaining choice. He tried to think about wholesome things: "Milica and Stefan must make it to the column. For their sake, I could hold the enemy for a few days or even for just a few hours." That meant something. For a moment, the memories distracted his mind: "What do I care for myself, what do I count for?" He picked up his rifle and stepped outside. He turned toward the cause of the roaring noises and he hurried forward.

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