

Rada - A Drama of War in One Act

Alfred Noyes

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RADA

A DRAMA OF WAR IN ONE ACT

BY
ALFRED NOYES

Author of "The Wine Press," "Tales of the Mermaid Tavern," Etc.

1913

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

RADA, _wife of the village doctor_.

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SUBKA, _her daughter, aged twelve_.
ARRAM } _two hostile soldiers quartered_
MICHAEL } _in her house, in time of war_.
NANKO, _a half-witted schoolmaster_.

Several soldiers.

THE SCENE is in the Balkans, in a village which has just been taken by the enemy, on Christmas Eve.

RADA

SCENE--_A guest-chamber, the typical living-room of a prosperous village doctor in the Balkans. On the left, a small window and an entrance door. On the right, a door leading into a bedroom. At the back, an open fire of logs is burning brightly. Over the fireplace is the eikonostasis, with three richly coloured and gilded eikons, the central one of the Madonna. The light, which is never allowed to go out, is burning before it. The room is lit at present only by this, the fire-light, and two candles in brass candlesticks on a black wooden table under the window. Rows of porcelain plates round the walls gleam fitfully. On either side of the eikonostasis is a large chibouk, with inlaid bowl and amber mouth-piece. There is a divan with scarlet rugs flung across it to the right of the fire; and there are several skins and rugs on the floor.

Two Roumanian soldiers_, ARRAM_ and _MICHAEL, are seated at the table, drinking_.

RADA, _a dark handsome woman, sits weeping with her head bowed in her hands, on the divan_.

NANKO, _the idiot, sits on the floor, rubbing his hands, snapping his fingers, chuckling to himself, and staring into the fire_.

ARRAM

Look here, my girl, where's the use of snivelling? You ought to think yourself damned lucky to be alive.

RADA

O my God! My God!

MICHAEL

This is war, this is! And you can't expect war to be all cakes and cream.

[_They laugh and drink_.]

ARRAM

You ought to think yourself damned lucky to be alive, and have two men quartered on you instead of one. If your husband and the rest of the villagers hadn't made such a disturbance, _they_ might have been alive, too.

NANKO

Exactly! Exactly! I used to be a schoolmaster, you know, in the old days; and, if you knew what I know, you'd understand, my dear, it's entirely a question of the survival of the fittest! The survival of the fittest! That's what it is.

ARRAM

Wouldn't they have done the same to us, if they'd had the chance? We've got women and children at home snivelling and saying, "O my God, O my God," just like you. Don't you trouble about God. What can _He_ do when both sides go down on their marrow-bones? He can't make both sides win, can He?

RADA

O God! God! God!

MICHAEL

[_Getting up and standing in front of her_.]

Look here. We've had enough of this music. We've been cutting throats all day, and now we want to unbuckle a bit. There'll be hell to pay when the other boys come back. A pretty wild-goose chase you've sent them on, too, with your tale about the old Jew's money-bags. What was the game? You seemed mighty anxious to wheedle us all out of the house; and you'd never get out of the village alive to-night. Listen to that!

[_There is an uproar outside, a shot, and a woman's scream, followed by the terrified cry of a child_: "Ah! Ah! Father!"]

ARRAM

The men are mad with zaki and blood and--other things. There's no holding them in, even from the children. What chance would there be for a fine-looking wench like yourself?

MICHAEL

Don't tell me you were going out into that?

[_He points in the direction of the uproar_.]

Something to hide on the spot, eh? Well, now you've got the others out of the way, we're going to have a look. What's in there?

[_He points to the little door on the left_.]

RADA

[_Rising to her feet slowly, steadying herself with one hand against the wall, and fixing her eyes on his face_.]

This is war, isn't it? If I choose to revenge myself on those I hate--listen to me. I suppose you--want money. And I can tell you where to find it.

ARRAM

Another wild-goose chase to the other end of the valley?

RADA

No. In the old mill-house. Not a hundred yards away. Money, money enough to make us all rich. But [_a cunning expression comes into her face_] if I tell you where to find it, you must come back and give me my share.

MICHAEL

[_Staring at her_.]

Another pack of lies! What are you up to, eh?

ARRAM

It's been too much for her nerves. Don't worry her, or she'll go out of her mind, and then there'll be nobody to get us our supper.

NANKO

That _would_ be selfish, Rada. You know it's Christmas Eve. Nobody ought to think of unpleasant things on Christmas Eve. I don't think it's right to spoil people's pleasure on Christmas Eve. What have you done with the Christmas tree, Rada?

ARRAM

And who's to blame? That's what I want to know. You don't blame _us_, do you? Why, as likely as not, we shall be fighting on _your_ side against somebody else before next Christmas.

MICHAEL

What have you got in there?

[_He points to the door on the left again and advances toward it._]

RADA

[_Hurriedly and as if misunderstanding him, opens a cupboard between him and the door._]

Food! Food! Food for hungry men! Food enough for a wolf-pack. Come on, help yourselves!

MICHAEL

Holy St. Peter, what a larder! Look at this, Arram. Here's a dinner for forty men.

RADA

[_Laughing wildly._]

Better take your pick before the others come. It's our Christmas dinner.

[_She thrusts dishes into _MICHAEL'S_ hands and begins loading the table with food._]

NANKO

If you happen to have any crystallized plums there, Rada, you might give me one.

ARRAM

Lord, what a sight for hungry soldiers! We're in luck's way. Here, fetch me a bowl of water! I'm hungry; but there are times when you can't enjoy food without washing your hands.

[RADA _hesitates, then goes out of the room._ ARRAM _holds out a ring to_ MICHAEL.]

Her husband's ring. I got it off his finger
When he went down. He lay there on his back
Howling like a wolf, with his belly blown out.
I put him out of his misery. Look at my hands.
Ugh! I want to wash.

[NANKO _rises and peers at them._]

NANKO

Ah, but they're red.
Red, aren't they? And there's red on your coat, too.

[He fingers it curiously.]

I suppose that's blood, eh? People are such cowards.
Many of them never seem to understand
That man's a fighting animal. They're afraid,
Dreadfully afraid of the sight of blood.
I think it's a beautiful colour, beautiful!
You know, in the Old Testament, they used
To splash it on the door-posts.

ARRAM

[Pushing him off.]
Go and sit down,
You crazy old devil!

[RADA _enters with a bowl of water, sets it on a bench and returns to her place_. ARRAM _washes his hands_.]

MICHAEL

My hands want washing, too.
O Lord, you've turned the water into wine!
Fetch me some fresh.

[RADA _approaches, stares at the bowl and moves back, swaying a little, as if faint_.]

ARRAM

[Roughly]
I'll empty it. Give it to me.
[He goes out.]

NANKO

The Old Testament, you know, is full of it.
Who is this, it says, _that cometh from Edom
In dyed garments from Bozrah_? It was blood
That dyed their garments. And in _Revelations_
Blood came out of the wine-press, till it splashed
The bridles of the horses; and the seas
Were all turned into blood. Doesn't that show
That man's a fighting animal?

MICHAEL

[Goes to the door on the right and tries to open it.]
What's in here?

RADA

[Thrusting herself between him and the door.]
No! No! Don't go in there! Don't go in there!

MICHAEL

So that's the treasury, is it? Loot? More loot?
What is it? The family stocking?

[ARRAM _enters with the bowl and sets it down.
Then goes to the table and begins eating_.]

NANKO

O, no! no!

The stocking is in the chimney-corner, see!
[_He shakes the empty stocking that hangs in the fireplace.]
All ready for Santa Claus. It's a new custom.
They do it in Germany. The children, there,
Believe that Santa Claus comes down the chimney.
The doctor studied in Germany, you know.

MICHAEL

O, ho! So that's the trouble! A little girl,
Rada, a little girl? Well, Santa Claus
Must wash his hands. We mustn't frighten her.

RADA

It is my little girl. She's twelve years old.
Don't wake her. She has slept all through this night.
Help me to save her. I'll do anything for you,
Anything! Only help me to get her away
Safely. I'll pray for you every night of my life.
I'll----

[_The door opens behind her, and_ SUBKA, in her night-dress, steals into
the room.]

SUBKA

Ah, I knew it couldn't be Santa Claus.

ARRAM

What? Don't you know me? I came down the chimney.

SUBKA

I don't see any soot upon your face.
[_She goes nearer.]
Nor on your clothes. That's red paint, isn't it?

ARRAM

Can't help it. Santa Claus--that is my name.
What's yours?

SUBKA

Mine? Subka!

ARRAM

I've a little girl
At home called Subka! Just about your age.

SUBKA

You didn't come down the chimney.
[_To_ MICHAEL.]
He didn't, did he?
[_She runs to the stocking and examines it.]
There's nothing in the stocking.

ARRAM

Ah, Subka,
That remains to be seen; that remains to be seen.

SUBKA

[_Pointing to_ MICHAEL.]
Well, who is that?

ARRAM

The man that carries my bag.

SUBKA

[_With a sudden note of fear in her voice._]

Mother, where's Father?

RADA

[_Putting her arm round her._]

He will soon be here.

It's all right, darling.

SUBKA

Has the gramophone come?

RADA

Yes, darling, long ago.

SUBKA

You never told me.

NANKO

That was a secret, Subka, a great secret.

SUBKA

I thought, perhaps, you were getting the Christmas tree ready.

Can't we? Father won't mind.

NANKO

[_Putting the Christmas tree out from the corner._]

Ah, here it is.

Now that's a good idea. It's Christmas Eve.

We'll get it ready.

ARRAM

Here, put it on the table.

NANKO

What shall we hang on it?

MICHAEL

What do you think

Of that, now?

[_He hangs a revolver on the tree._]

SUBKA

[_Clapping her hands._]

O! O! What a great big pistol!

That'll be Father's present! And now what else?

What else?

ARRAM

Well, Subka, what do you say to a ring?

How prettily it hangs upon the bough!

See, Subka!

SUBKA

Why, it's just like Father's ring!

ARRAM

[_ Striking a light._]

And now we'll light the candles.

NANKO

[_ Clapping his hands and dancing._]

Yes that's right!

Light all the little candles on the tree!

O, doesn't the pistol shine, doesn't the ring Glitter!

SUBKA

But O, it _is_ like Father's ring.

He had a little piece of Mother's hair

Plaited inside it, just like that. It _is_

My father's ring!

RADA

No. There are many others

Just like it, Subka,--hundreds, hundreds of others.

MICHAEL

And now, what's in that package over there?

SUBKA

The gramophone! O, that's the gramophone!

That's Father's Christmas present to us all.

NANKO

O, what a wonderful man the doctor was.

Nobody else, in these parts, would have thought

Of buying a gramophone. Let's open it!

SUBKA

Yes! Yes! And we'll give Father a surprise.

It shall be playing a tune when he comes in.

[ARRAM _opens the package_. NANKO _capers round, rubbing his hands._]

NANKO

O, this will be a merry Christmas Eve.

There now--just see how this kind gentleman

Has opened the package for us. Doesn't it show

The value of training, military training?

That's what we want. It benefits the health.

Sets a man up. Look at old Peter's legs,

He's a disgrace to the nation, a disgrace!

Nobody shoots him, either. So he spoils

Everything; for you know, you must admit,

Subka, that war means natural selection,

Survival of the fittest, don't you see?

For instance, _I_ survive, and _you_ survive;

Don't we? So Peter shouldn't spoil it all.

They say that all the tall young men in France

Were killed in the Napoleonic wars,

So that most Frenchmen at the present day

Are short and fat. Isn't that funny, Subka?

[_ She laughs._]

Which shows us that tall men are not required

To-day. So nobody knows. Perhaps thin legs
Like Peter's may be useful after all
In aeroplanes or something. Every ounce
Makes a great difference there. Nobody knows.
It's natural selection, after all.
Survival of the fittest! Don't you see?
Ah, now the gramophone's ready. Make it play
"Proud Nikephor Determined!"

MICHAEL

[Taking out a record.]
Why, look here!
Here is the tune for Christmas Eve.

ARRAM

[While he speaks he looks to outer door, and draws a curtain over the
window.]
Don't do it!
Don't start it playing if you want to keep
This Christmas party to ourselves, my boy.
The men are mad with drink and--other things.
Look here, Michael, what are we going to do
About this youngster, eh?

MICHAEL

Better keep quiet
Till morning. When the men have slept it off
They'll stand a better chance of slipping away.

NANKO

O, what a pity, Subka! I did think
That we should have some music. Well--I know!
Tell us the Christmas piece you learned in school.
That's right! Stand there! No! Stand up on the bench.
Your mother tells me that you won the prize
For learning it so beautifully, Subka.
That's right. These good kind gentlemen shall hear
Your Christmas piece.

SUBKA

It's about the first Christmas.
[Her hands behind her as if in school, she obeys him.]
She laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.
And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping
watch over their flock by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord
shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, "Fear not: for behold, I bring you good
tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is
Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you: ye shall find the babe wrapped in
swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

[_There is silence for a moment, then the sound of a pistol shot, a scream, and a roar of drunken laughter without, followed by a furious pounding on the outer door._]

ARRAM

Here, Michael, what the devil are we to do
About this child?

[_He calls through the door._]

Clear out of this! The house
Is full! We want to sleep.

[_There is a louder shout outside, and the pounding is resumed._]

Bundle the child
Into that room, woman, at once!

[RADA _snatches the revolver from the Christmas tree and hurries_ SUBKA
_into the room on the right, just as the outer door bursts open and a
troop of drunken soldiers appear on the threshold, shouting and furious
with drink._]

FIRST SOLDIER

Come on!
They're in that room. I saw them! The only skirts
Left in the village. Come, it's Christmas Eve,
Comrades. You've had your fun.

ARRAM

Clear out of this,
We want to sleep.

SECOND SOLDIER

Well, hand the women over.

MICHAEL

There are no women here.

FIRST SOLDIER

You bloody wolf,
I saw them!

NANKO

Come! Come! Come! It's Christmas Eve.

SECOND SOLDIER

Well--if there are no women--where's the harm
In letting us poor soldiers take a squint
Thro' yonder door. My God, we'll do it, too.
Come on, my boys!
[_They make a rush towards the room._]

NANKO

Be careful! Or you'll smash
The Christmas tree! You'll smash the gramophone!

[_A soldier tries the door on the right. Suddenly it is opened from

within_ and RADA _appears on the threshold with the revolver in her hand.]

FIRST SOLDIER

Liars! Liars!

RADA

There is one woman here,
One woman and a child----
And war they tell me is a noble thing;
It is the mother of heroic deeds,
The nurse of honour, manhood.

SECOND SOLDIER

Christ, a speech!

RADA

Yes, and your training benefits your health.

NANKO

[_Who is crouching over the fire again._]
Certainly, Rada! Military training!
Life is a battle.

RADA

You hear, drunk as you are,
Up to your necks in blood, you hear this fool,
This poor old fool, piping his dreary cry;
And through his lips, and through his softening brain,
You and the men that buy you, statesmen, kings,
Teach the poor sheep of the world that war is good.
Go! Take your manhood out of this. Or else----
[_She threatens to shoot._]
I have one bullet for the child, and five
To share between you and myself!

FIRST SOLDIER

O, Christ,
A speech!
[_They fall back before the revolver as she raises it._]

RADA

If you have children of your own,
Listen to me ... The child is twelve years old.
She has never had one hard word spoken to her
In all her life.

FIRST SOLDIER

Nor shall she now, by God!
Where is she? Bring her out!

SECOND SOLDIER

Twelve years of age!
That's ripe enough for marriage to a soldier.
[_They laugh._]

FIRST SOLDIER

She can't shoot! Look at the way she's holding it!
Duck down and make a rush for it! Come on!

[Several of them make a rush_, RADA _steps back and shuts the door in their faces.]

SECOND SOLDIER

Locked out, by God! We'll have to break it down.

MICHAEL

She'll keep her word. You'll never get 'em alive.

ARRAM

Never. I know that kind. You'd better clear out!

FIRST SOLDIER

Come on! We'll burst the door.

[They put their shoulders to the door and it begins to give_. ARRAM _makes a sign to_ MICHAEL, _urging him to interfere. A revolver shot is heard within. The men pause, and there is another shot.]

ARRAM

By God, she's done it!

[There is a booming of distant artillery.]

MICHAEL

Hear that! The enemy!

Making a night attack!

[There is a loud bugle call without.]

ARRAM

There goes the bugle!

[They all rush out, except_ NANKO, _who looks out into the night after them, then closes the outer door, takes a crystallized plum from the table, crosses the room and stares at the floor, near the door on the right.]

NANKO

[Calls aloud.]

Rada, these plums are excellent. Don't you see

Life is a battle! Survival of the fittest!

Something red again. Trickling under the door?

Blood, I suppose. Well, I don't think it's right

To spoil a person's pleasure on Christmas Eve.

I wonder how the gramophone does work?

He said the tune that he was putting in

Was just the thing for Christmas Eve. I wonder,

I wonder what it was.

[He picks up the box from which the record was taken and reads the title.]

"_A Christmas Carol

Sung by the monks of St. Peter's monastery

At midnight mass, on Christmas Eve_--ADESTE, FIDELES!"

Fancy that! How wonderful!

A Christmas carol on the gramophone!

So all the future ages will be sure

To know exactly what religion was.

To think we cannot hear it! Well, no matter,

These plums _are_ excellent. Everybody's gone.

To think _I_ was the fittest, after all!
Come, Rada, you're pretending!
[_He accidentally starts the gramophone working and jumps back, a little
alarmed. He runs to the door and knocks._]
Rada! Rada!
I've started it! Subka! Subka! Do you hear?
The gramophone's working!
[_He stoops down and looks at the floor again. The artillery booms like a
thunder peal in the distance. Then the gramophone drowns it with the deep
voices of the monks, a great chorus, singing_ ADESTE, FIDELES! NANKO _dips
his finger in something on the floor and stares at it. A look of horror
comes into his face. He stands with his mouth open, listening._]
It's true!

CAST
of the first performance at the Christmas (1913)
Festival of THE MACDOWELL CLUB
OF NEW YORK CITY

RADA

A Drama in One Act by Alfred Noyes

(A Christmas Tragedy of the Balkans, being a
plea for "Peace on earth, good will toward men.")

* * * * *

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

RADA, _wife of the vilage doctor_, Miss Mirzah Cheslir

SUBKA, _her daughter, aged twelve_, Miss Lenore Phelps

ARRAM, } _two hostile soldiers quartered_ Mr. Henry Hull
MICHAEL,} _on her house in time of war_ Mr. Wright Kramer

NANKO, _a half-witted schoolmaster_, Mr. Charles White Whittlesey

FIRST SOLDIER Mr. Charles Douville Coburn

SECOND SOLDIER Mr. Harold Herts

{..... Mr. Charles F. Peters
OTHER SOLDIERS {..... Mr. Harold Butterfield
{..... Mr. W. G. Belew

* * * * *

SCENE: The living-room of a country doctor in the Balkans, in a village
which has just been taken by the enemy.

TIME: Christmas Eve.

Stage Director, Miss Mary Shaw

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