



Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The White Prince

By RONAL KAYSER

'A weird story of the World War, when the Serbian army stormed the Turkish castle of Marko—and a legendary Serb hero

IN THE first days of November, 1912, the Serbian army under General Mishitch gathered in a dark cloud at the foot of the Mount of Prilep. The Balkan sun streamed a cold, snowy light upon the mountainside and painted in somber grays and browns the rugged walls of the Castle of Marko. From the grim old fortress, Turkish siege-cannon and mitrailleuses frowned down the slope. The red Turkish flag with its insolent crescent and star gleamed defiantly overhead.

Away to the rear of the Serbs a cannon barked—a shrill whistle rent the air—and a fountain of smoke and dust spouted in front of the castle.

Chedo, the color-bearer, knelt in the front row of the waiting army, clutching the polished smooth staff of the battle flag in his curved, cold-stiffened fingers. He was a youth of twenty, with the blunt features, tawny complexion and flashing black eyes of his race. The grumble of the cannon curved a quick, fierce smile

upon his lips. He looked, left and right, at the palely shining bayonets of his companions, and dark flames of hatred spurted in his eyes as he stared again up the naked brown slope.

Leaping to his feet, Chedo waved the red, blue and white barred flag furiously, and shook his fist at the Turks. A cheer went up around him. They were eager for the gamble with death, these men. But the blunt edge of a saber crossed Chedo's shoulder.

The youth whirled around. "Yes, sir!" he exclaimed, and saluted.

Captain Aganovitch's face showed a thin, agony line of white teeth.

"Down, you puppy!" he snarled. And then: "Remember, not a step until I give the order!"

A second roar and a third came from the rear. Chedo sank down upon his knees again. Over his shoulder he watched the officer pace back through the troops.

"They're going to knock the castle to pieces first, I guess," he said.

Next to him old Mourok, the *gouslar*, spat and muttered into his gray beard. "That's no way," he growled. "The Turks can't face bayonets—cold steel turns their blood to water!"

It was old Mourok who, squatted by the campfires at night, strummed the *gousle* and to its mournful strains chanted the heroic poems of the Serbs. He sang of the hero, the Prince Kraljevitch Marko, and the piebald horse, Sharatz, the gift of a woodland *veele*. Marko and Sharatz—a dragon seated upon a dragon! For no man could whip Marko in fair fight, as no horse could distance the piebald. Old Mourok sang of the exploits and many fights of the pair; and he sang, too, of how neither had ever died—but of how Prince Marko had crept away into a cave near this castle at Prilep and there slept, from year to year awakening to see whether his sword had yet come out of that rock into which he had plunged it to the very hilt. There Sharatz munched his portion of hay, which must now be nearly devoured; from there, the two would some day arise to drive the Turk for ever from Serbia's soil.

Chedo thought of these things, but there was no room for idle legends in Captain Aganovitch's head as the officer marched toward the rear of the lines. He listened instead to the full-throated roar of the Serbian cannon. They had bigger guns and more of them—it was only a question of holding the troops in check until the cannon had completed their task. Aganovitch knew that his men were frantic with hatred of their ancient foes, and intoxicated with recent victory. Under his breath he cursed that young fool, Chedo.

The men could so easily be incited to a premature, disorganized attack! And then—slaughter—defeat—disaster!

A wild yell from the front brought the captain spinning around. He saw the first dark lines sweeping up the hill like an angry wave sparkling with bayonet points.

Aganovitch broke into a run, his eyes glued on the advancing speck of color which was Chedo's flag. But now the whole regiment was swarming around him.

"Back!" he screamed. "Back! I command you!"

Deaf to his cries, the soldiers ran on like maddened wolves straight toward the castle. The captain whipped out his saber and began striking with the backside in every direction.

"Back! Down! Halt! You fools, you curs!"

It was no use trying to give orders. He ran after his men, shouting and pleading. "Come back! I beg you—it's certain death—you will be blown to bits!"

A thunder of field pieces from the castle drowned his words. Aganovitch felt the earth tremble as a great thrust of fire and smoke leaped from the hilltop. The Serbs darted on into that crackle of hell-fire. The captain saw them fall by the dozens.

The hill had come all alive with racing brown figures, leaping over their comrades' dead bodies, running on, tumbling and falling. Captain Aganovitch squeezed shut his eyes to close out that field of horror. His blood ran cold, his hands trembled, and molten waves of despair seethed within his brainpan.

The Serb artillery had ceased firing in order not to butcher their own men. At the foot of the hill, clumps of dismayed and bewildered officers were gathering—then marching up the slope to die with their men.

Captain Aganovitch removed his pis-

tol from his holster and stepped woodenly toward the castle.

CHEDO led this wild and suicidal attack. Kneeling under the flag, looking back over his shoulder at the retiring officer, he heard a muffled cry burst from old Mourok's bearded lips. Turning his head, Chedo saw a thing passing belief on the hillside, slightly to his left, and outlined against the black, rugged rise of the ground.

It was like a mist, cloudy and insubstantial and diffuse, but unlike a mist in shining with a peculiar living luminescence. Straining his eyes, Chedo could make out a bulking figure enwrapped in the ethereal stuff.

He gasped; this was certainly no ordinary morning vapor. . . . Clutching the flag's staff, he struggled against a wave of superstitious terror. He jerked his eyes away to Mourok, who had flung himself upon his knees also.

"What——?"

"God knows!" And the old man crossed himself.

Chedo forced himself to look again at the apparition. Now the mist, swiftly dissolving, gave to his startled gaze the vision of a gigantic man seated upon a piebald horse. The horse struck his hoofs upon the earth, and glittering sparks leaped upward and the ground quaked. A livid blue flame played before the beast's nostrils. There was a jeweled saddle upon him, bound about his belly with seven belts.

"It is the end of the world!" some man in the ranks babbled.

The giant shifted slightly in the saddle, so that his great, black-bearded face looked squarely upon the Serbian army. It was a face full of power, and haughty as the face of a king might be. He wore a suit of armor that shone with the glint

of precious gems; he had girt about his shoulders a loose cloak of purest white. His hair, falling free from under the casque, was long and thick as a woman's. He stared along the crouching line of the army until at last his eyes met Chedo's own, and there they dwelt; and it seemed to Chedo that the eyes of the man were like twin open furnaces burning with an intolerable brightness.

The young man quaked with a cold ague. Then the flaming eyes, as it were, streamed their feverish warmth into his own sockets, his brain, his blood. Chedo staggered from the line a pace forward, crying drunkenly through his dry husk of a mouth:

"Marko! Prince!"

The giant raised a mighty arm athwart the sky. In his clenched fingers shone a battle-club of steel and silver and gold. Thrice the mace shook in a gesture of wrath and blood-lust in the morning sun. Then the giant spoke, and his cry rang like a brazen alarum down the field:

"Forward!"

The piebald wheeled and with a great leap went up the slope. The Serbs, at first in twos and threes, and then all together, ran after. And first ran Chedo, so close that gravel and pebble from the steed's hoofs arched up and smote him in the face. He raced on, waving the flag, and shouting as though to tear out his lungs:

"Marko! Kraljevitch Marko! Prince!"

There was a fierce gladness in his heart.

Running, screaming, delirious with excitement, the troops swarmed up the hill. Then the Turk batteries spoke; and the slope became a thing of sheeted flame and steely hail and blood. Staggering, blinded, Chedo leaped forward again, and the others followed—followed the white

rider into the smoke. Shells whined and rained, bursts of rifle fire thinned the advancing ranks to ragged patches, riddled men pitched and fell. And other men came running into their places.

"*Allah il Allah!*"—Chedo could hear the shouts of the Turks. He was very close to the walls now. Something like a blow struck hard into his groin; then he felt the warm blood of his life pass in a gush over his thigh. He reeled on, holding the flag very straight over his head.

"Prince!" he cried exultantly. "Kraljevitch!"

He staggered and fell at the foot of the castle wall. He stood up and fell again, leaning the flag against the masonry there as his fingers slipped over the stones. The Serbs were scrambling all around and past him.

All at once Chedo realized that the piebald horse had come to halt beside him. He looked up wonderingly, and he saw something soft and tender in the eyes of the White Prince, he saw the bearded lips part a little and smile. A great arm sheathed in glittering mail reached down from the saddle and took the flag. The piebald horse reared very high, so high that the seven belts seemed leagues over Chedo's head. And the White Prince thrust the flag's staff into a crevice atop the wall.

Chedo's eyes swam with a blind weariness. When he looked again, he saw the red, blue and white barred cloth snap bravely against the heavens.

CAPTAIN AGANOVITCH gulped amazedly at the colors on the castle wall. He saw also that the Turks were fleeing in a mad riot of panic-stricken disorder. . . . It was impossible! A bayonet charge routing a fortified enemy! However . . .

The Turks were flying for their lives. The captain stared across the slope. After that first blast, the Serbs had suffered hardly a loss.

He walked up to the castle wall.

"Well and bravely done!" he said. Then, recalling his outraged authority, he uttered harshly. "Nevertheless, Chedo, I told you—not until I gave the order."

Chedo's lips twisted into a painful smile. "But, sir, when Kraljevitch Marko commands—" His eyes filmed, he coughed, and said no more.

* * * * *

Author's note:

The attack at Prilep may be regarded as the best authenticated story of its kind, since thousands of soldiers told the story and that within a few hours of the event. Harold Temperly, writing in the *Contemporary Review* of August, 1916, explodes the Angels at Mons story, but says of this: "We must accept the genuineness of the Serb witnesses' evidence." General Mishitch's own story of the attack, as told within a fortnight of the occurrence, may be found in the *International Psychic Gazette* of May, 1918. There is an account of the incident also in W. M. Petrovitch's *New and Old Tales and Legends of the Serbians*. To this source I am indebted for a description of the legendary prince; for in writing the story I have fictionalized it to the extent of presenting through Chedo the experience as it occurred—or seemed to occur—to any of the foot soldiers in the attack. We have it upon good authority that listeners heard wounded men discussing the miracle in the hospital *that night*, a space of time too short to permit of the diffusion of such a legend as grew up about the defense at Mons.

