

The play opens at night in a lady's bedchamber in a small Bulgarian town in 1885, the year of the Serbo-Bulgarian war. On the balcony, standing and staring at the romantic beauty of the night, "intensely conscious that her own youth and beauty are a part of it," is young Raina Petkoff. Just inside, conspicuously visible, is a box of chocolate creams, which will play an important part later in this act and which will ultimately become a symbol of the type of war which Shaw will satirize. Raina's mother, Catherine Petkoff, is a woman who could easily pass for a splendid specimen of the wife of a mountain fanner, but is determined to be a Viennese lady. As the play begins, Catherine is excited over the news that the Bulgarian forces have just won a splendid battle at Slivnitsa against the Serbians, and the "hero of the hour, the idol of the regiment" who led them to victory is Raina's fiance, Sergius Saranoff. They are interrupted by the entry of Louka, a handsome and proud peasant girl, who announces that the Serbs have been routed and have scattered throughout the town and that some of the fugitives have been chased into the neighborhood. But the room is furnished with only cheap bits of Viennese things; the other pieces of furniture come from the Turkish Ottoman Empire, reflecting the long occupation by the Turks of the Balkan peninsula. She describes how Sergius boldly led a cavalry charge into the midst of the Serbs, scattering them in all directions. She wonders if heroes such as Sergius esteem such heroic ideas because they have read too much Byron and Pushkin.