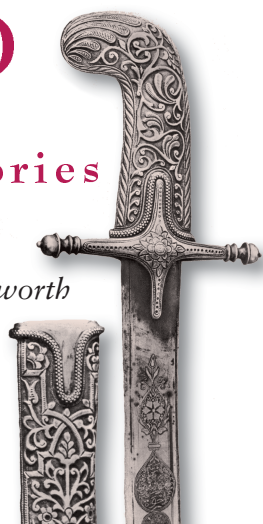


Ivo Andrić

THE DAMNED YARD

and other stories

Edited by Celia Hawkesworth



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THE DAMNED YARD

Ivo ANDRIĆ was born in Travnik, Bosnia on 9th October 1892, attended schools in Višegrad and Sarajevo, and studied at the Universities of Zagreb, Vienna, Krakow and Graz. He was imprisoned for 3 years during World War I for his involvement in the Young Bosnia Movement which was implicated in the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand in Sarajevo. A diplomat from 1919–41, he served in Rome, Geneva, Madrid, Bucharest, Trieste, Graz and Belgrade, ending his career as Minister in Berlin on the eve of World War II. Although richly influenced by his foreign travels, most of Andrić's fiction is set in his native Bosnia. He wrote 6 volumes of short stories and 5 novels, including *Na Drini ćuprija* (The Bridge on the Drina), *Travnička hronika* (The Days of the Consuls) and *Gospodjica* (The Woman from Sarajevo), as well as poetry and reflective prose. His great contribution to twentieth-century European writing was recognised in 1961 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in March 1975, and his Belgrade funeral was attended by 10,000 people.

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*For Dušan Puvačić,
and all our friends in Bosnia*

INTRODUCTION

This selection of Andrić's short stories and the novella *The Damned Yard* highlights a number of recurrent themes from his work. Their primary setting is Bosnia, where Andrić spent the formative years of his life: he was born in Travnik on 9th October 1892, he spent his childhood in Višegrad, near the border with Serbia, and his secondary school years in Sarajevo. Travnik, which was the seat of Ottoman power in Bosnia, is the setting of Andrić's novel, *The Days of the Consuls* (previously published as *Bosnian Story*), while Višegrad provides the context for numerous short stories and the novel *The Bridge on the Drina*. While Andrić's work includes some timeless stories and some set in a neutral post-Second World War urban context, much of it is set in Bosnia and is closely dependent on this setting.

A leitmotiv of Andrić's work is the material nature of human experience: wary of abstraction, he roots his stories in a specific geographical and historical context which has the effect both of qualifying the statement and, more importantly, of stressing the fact that all universal truths that may be abstracted from human experience are lived through in a

specific context. Andrić suggests that there are recurrent patterns of behaviour and a number of essential truths, which form the core of legend and myth, to be rediscovered in new forms by succeeding generations.

This approach may be seen illustrated in 'The Bridge on the Žepa', where the Grand Vizier who has the bridge built leaves it to stand on its own, without further comment, as a complete statement: 'Seen from the side, the bold span of its white arch ... took the traveller by surprise like a strange thought, gone astray and caught among the crags, in the wilderness.' The 'thought' is not articulated, but what is communicated by the stone bridge are such abstract concepts as: harmony, beauty, reconciliation, the surmounting of obstacles. In 'The Damned Yard', the rivalry between the two contenders for the Ottoman throne at the heart of the work is described as 'the age-old story of two brothers' and the way in which the younger brother, Cem, is thwarted and manipulated by forces beyond his control is echoed in a different form in the story of Kamil.

'The Damned Yard' represents a concentrated statement of some of Andrić's central themes: the survival of the imagination in face of the all-engulfing encroachment of time, the notion that stories of all kinds should be heard for every story is 'true', the endurance of essential patterns of experience in new forms in different ages, the arbitrary nature of power and social organisation, and above all the notion of the imagination as providing a means of escape from constraint.

Imprisoned at the outbreak of the First World War for his involvement in the Young Bosnia Movement which was implicated in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, Andrić returned to the prison as a setting

for several stories. In essence, however, the prison emerges as simply a more intense and obvious form of the various kinds and degrees of constraint to which all human beings are subject. And it is the experience of constraint that creates the impulse to escape. For the inmates of the Damned Yard, the only means of escape is through the telling of stories.

The novella is, then, above all a story about story-telling: the kinds of stories people tell, the way they tell them and the reasons for their telling them. There is a hierarchy among the story-tellers of the Damned Yard: some talk to dramatise and glorify their own lives, some to gain vicarious excitement by talking of the more colourful lives of others. Such narrators may be seen as representing the function of popular literature. The more serious story-tellers, Fra Petar and Kamil, are 'professionals'. Kamil is a biographer or historian whose capacity to enter into the life of his chosen subject dominates his sense of self, while Fra Petar is the archetypal self-effacing, reliable, balanced narrator who lets history speak for itself without comment or intervention. He is the artist who brings a special indefinable quality to his story-telling, a distinct and unrepeatable 'style'. Nevertheless, Andrić the ultimate narrator seems to suggest, all these different kinds of narration should be listened to, for there is something to be learned from everyone and we would know far less about human life if we selected solely according to our personal taste and affinity.

The business of story-telling is the subject also of the volume of short stories published after Andrić's death. *The House on its Own*. Two of them are included here, 'Alipasha' and 'A Story', together with the introduction to the volume which offers a concentrated statement of the strategy of the artist in creating in himself the ideal conditions in which a

story may 'tell' itself. The device used to link the various stories in this volume is that they are all the tales of individuals who 'visit' the narrator and draw his attention to themselves in various ways: some are importunate and demanding, some unobtrusive, but all have something to say and should be heeded, each in his own way.

Story-telling is the theme also of 'The Story of the Vizier's Elephant', presented as an illustration of the Bosnian love of story-telling and particularly of stories which are clearly 'untrue' but which nevertheless convey much about the truth of the human condition. The focus of this story is the experience of living under occupation and the abuse, humiliation and severely limited choice of action this entails. This is the essential experience of the South Slavs, under 500 years of foreign rule, expressed in their rich oral tradition as the choice between 'pure' tragic heroism, i.e. martyrdom, or compromise, 'comic survival', embodied in the defiant but ambiguous hero, Marko the Prince. This stark choice is clearly revealed to the character Aljo in this story, as he finds escape from the constraints of occupation through his imagination, in the same way as do the oral singer and the inmates of the Damned Yard.

The kind of 'truth' that can be conveyed by symbols such as the bridge, legend and myth, is distinct from 'fact' and more enduring. 'Fact', indeed, has no reality, unless it is confirmed by others. This proposition is illustrated by the story 'The Climbers' where 'reality' depends on how it is perceived. The power of language is here vividly apparent. The main character, Lekso, performed a remarkable feat in climbing onto the dome of the church, but unless others can be found to say that he did, it is as though he had not done it. In 'The Bridge on the Žepa' the altered perspective of the Grand Vizier's fall

from power enables him similarly to understand the power of language for good or evil and therefore to avoid the possibility of misinterpretation or misuse by leaving his creation to ‘speak’ for itself.

Two other stories in this collection are concerned not so much with the experience they relate, but with the way it is ‘processed’. ‘In the Guest-House’ introduces the engaging character of the Franciscan, Brother Marko. The story is concerned with the potential for conflict between organised religions – here Christianity and Islam – and hints at the destructive power of bigotry. Its focus, however, is the clarity of vision with which the clumsy, awkward Marko cuts through such distortions of the religious impulse to a timeless absolute of communication with divinity. ‘Death in Sinan’s Tekke’ offers a mirror-image of this experience. In Marko’s case, learning the liturgy did not help him come nearer to his God, while standing in a muddy field planting out cabbages did. The derwish Alidede, on the other hand, led a deeply satisfying spiritual life which was a source of inspiration to many. And yet, at the end, he could not slip as easily as he had thought out of the material world. For all that he had tried to distil his existence into a pure essence of spirituality, at the end he was obliged to acknowledge that he owed his life to the laws of nature and to some extent to repay that debt

Andrić lived through the turbulent first half of the twentieth century, with its two world wars, and extremes of revolution and totalitarianism. The wisdom that informs his work is tempered from that brutal reality. It was in Bosnia that he experienced the destructive power of the arbitrary divisions between people and their potential for violent conflict. He witnessed the way in which neighbours who had hitherto lived

peacefully side by side could turn overnight into deadly enemies and whole communities be wiped out by the irrational power of communal hatred.

At its best, such a mixed society offers the most positive image of conciliation and cooperation: the sense of real peace through the reconciliation of difference communicated by the mixture of styles in the Sarajevo house from the introduction to *The House on its Own*. In many of Andrić's works it is this aspect of Bosnian society that dominates. In others, however, Bosnia stands as a stark image of the violent divisions between human beings. The story 'A Letter from 1920' reads painfully in 1992, the centenary of Andrić's birth, when the hatred stirred up between the different groups in the Yugoslav lands by power-seeking politicians and the media has brought so tragically violent an end to the experiment in consensus and cooperation represented by Yugoslavia, the country which Andrić himself helped bring into being. The success with which the politicians were able to pursue their campaign of division and mutual antagonism depended to a very large extent on the power of language to create a reality people are ready to believe in without reference to fact. The 'truth' of myth as an expression of communal perception and aspiration was a process Andrić understood with singular clarity. It is just this kind of mythic 'truth' that is the material of his art.

In one of his other stories featuring Brother Marko, Andrić uses the image of a coin portraying a saint in a state of beatitude, of which Marko is suddenly reminded as he watches the face of a Turk in the firelight: it seems to him the personification of evil. The narrow edge between the two faces of the coin suggests the thin dividing line between good and evil. If language *may* bring evil, the truly disinterested concen-

tration of the artist described in the introduction to the *House on its Own* works always on the side of good. The Grand Vizier Jusuf's motto, 'In silence is safety' is echoed in the unambiguous commitment of the craftsmen portrayed in the 'Bridge on the Žepa' and 'The Climbers' and in the balanced patience of Fra Petar's narration.

It is precisely this kind of timeless wisdom to which Andrić aspires in his work. In this endeavour, his clear-sighted acknowledgement of the human capacity for evil gives his voice authority and, in the catastrophic conflict afflicting his native Bosnia in his centenary year, a new urgency.

Celia Hawkesworth

NOTE ON THE PRONUNCIATION OF SERBO-CROATIAN NAMES

With the exception of some Turkish words and names (e.g. Cem, the younger son of Sultan Beyazit II, whose story is told in *The Damned Yard*), Serbo-Croatian spellings have been retained. The language may be written in either the Cyrillic or the Latin alphabet. The Latin alphabet includes a number of unfamiliar letters listed below. Serbo-Croat is strictly phonetic, with one letter representing one sound. The stress normally falls on the first syllable.

C, c	–	ts, as in cats
Č, č	–	ch, as in church
Ć, ć	–	tj, close to č, but softer i.e. t in future
Dž, dž	–	j, as in just
Đ, đ	–	dj, close to dž, but softer i.e. d in verdure
J, j	–	y, as in yellow (<i>Jugoslaviya</i>)
Š, š	–	sh, as in ship
Ž, ž	–	zh, as in treasure