

The Path of Alija Đerzelez

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SUMMARY

Alija Đerzelez was remembered in folklore as a famous warrior. Andrić approaches this character from an intimate, private perspective from which he sees him as a man who is very lonely in his glory, among all the people who admire him as a warrior. These ordinary men will start mocking him as soon as that warrior shows the private, intimate side of his personality. They are mocking him because he revealed to them his weakness, his absolute vulnerability of a lonely man. They can finally enjoy feeling themselves as superior to this warrior on that, intimate, private field. Andrić is talking about that side of this character, since the writer knows that every warrior must reveal his weakness as soon as he finds himself in a position of an ordinary man. Andrić speaks about this warrior's futile search for love, for a woman whose beauty will be worthy of his fame, according to his own understandings. In that non-warrior world, Đerzelez does not manage to find his place. The rules of that world are unknown and foreign to him, and his journey towards the unattainable goal of victory over his own loneliness must continue. It is the curse and fate of warriors.

РТС | РАДИО

*Radio Televizija Srbije – Radio Television of
Serbia*

*Radio Beograd - Radio Belgrade
Dramski program - Drama department*

Ivo Andrić

THE PATH OF ALIJA DJERZELEZ

SCENE 1

Music.

DjERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

By the customs house of Višegrad, at the Turkish khan, a host of passengers. The whole of khan smelled of horse stables and roasted mutton... Men had been slaughtering rams all day long at the bottom end of the courtyard... All sorts of folk got stranded there on their journey... Suljaga Dizdar, two Franciscans travelling from Kreševo to Stamboul, a Greek Orthodox monk, a Serbian merchant from Pljevlja, some beys from the lowlands near the Sava River, a knife peddler from Foča and... three Venetians from Sarajevo... accompanying a beautiful young woman... emissaries of the Venetian Republic taking the land route to Porto. I was among the last ones to arrive there. On a white horse. I was greeted by silence... plenty of awe... and respect.

SCENE 2

Murmur of guests at the khan.

DjERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

I drank, ate, sang and gambled at the khan... I drank, ordered around... sang... without stopping.

MAN FROM FOTCHA:

Is that him? Djerzelez Ali?

SULJAGA:

The one everyone has heard of, but only few people saw him! A mighty hero! The mightiest!

DjERZELEZ:

My dear Suli-aga, I spent my youth riding and fighting back and forth from Travnik and Stamboul.

MAN FROM FOTCHA:

Do tell us – What's it like down there, near Skoplje and Peć?

DjERZELEZ:

My dear friend, all the khans, bedestens, caravanserais, shops and warehouses, water fountains, sebils, clock towers and tombstones in this world are the same...

SULJAGA:

You don't seem very chatty tonight, but some appetizers will surely cheer you up! Come on! Come on! Give us cheese and brandy! Not every day do we get to welcome Djerzelez!

DjERZELEZ:

I say we play cards!

SULJAGA:

Listen! I'd never dare go up against you in a fight, but you better not invite me to play cards with you, because I'll make quick work of you...

THE MAN FROM FOTCHA:

Watch it, Djerzelez! Suljaga is preparing some trickery for you .

DjERZELEZ:

We shall see about that! Suljaga, cards on the table!!! Quickly!

SULJAGA:

Coming right up.

The voice of a singer, in the background of the khan.

DjERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

That Bogdan fella, the Aromanian... so young and the way he sings... he's tugging at my soul... I'll breathe my last... I'll die out of this overwhelming strength... out of this weakness...

DjERZELEZ:

Stop pushing my knee already, will you, Fochak!

MAN FROM FOTCHA (*whispering*):

Shut up and look over there, down by the chamber...

SULJAGA (*whispering*):

He is joking with you, my Djerzelez.

MAN FROM FOTCHA:

The Venetian woman! Accompanied... She's been here for three days now... She goes nowhere without her escort...

DjERZELEZ:

Did you see this beauty?

MAN FROM FOTCHA:

Sure I did! Now's the time to get her!

SULJAGA:

Why don't you go get her? Such a hero like yourself and just sitting there?

DjERZELEZ:

I will go, I tell you!

SULJAGA:

She sent you a word... hey, Djerzelez... This Kaur woman sent you a word that she's been waiting for you the entire day.

DjERZELEZ:

Djerzelez is... ready!

SULJAGA:

Adjust your dolman! It's all wrinkled. You can't face the Kaur woman looking like that. She's no inn-keeper from Metaljka or some harlot from Sarajevo! She's a lady, my friend!

MAN FROM FOTCHA:

You two, aren't you getting ahead of yourselves, huh? Why, may I ask, couldn't I also go get the Kaur woman?

DjERZELEZ:

Nah! No way!

MAN FROM FOTCHA:

The first one to get to the girl shall win the girl!
No way, not even if you had wings, you fool!

SULJAGA:

Then you should race to get her! We'll put an apple some distance away and whoever gets the apple first shall win the girl!

DjERZELEZ:

Put the apple up! Put the apple up, I tell you!

End of the song that was playing in the background at the khan.

SCENE 3

Courtyard of the khan, people talking, then also the sound of dogs barking

MAN FROM FOTCHA and SULJAGA (***their shouts are melded with Djerzelez's inner monologue***):

Come now, Djerzelez! Fly now, Djerzelez, fly like a falcon! Well done, you jackass!

DjERZELEZ (***inner monologue***):

They put up a red apple hanging by a thread from a swing pole and tightened a string in between. Some people wagered on me, others on the man from Fotcha. We rushed... I was possessed by furious strength... Soft bare ground... Breath of fresh air... I am running as if my feet don't touch the ground. It seems to me I can sense the man from Fotcha behind me... the thumping of his feet. When I reached the swing pole, I tried grabbing the apple with my hand. I couldn't reach it by the first time around... I had to jump... Then I grabbed it and pulled it down... together with the thread. When I turned around, I could see that the man from Fotcha wasn't there... He only pretended to run, stomping his feet the whole time.

DjERZELEZ:

What is this? Some kind of ridicule? Are you mocking me?

***Sound of men laughing and shouting in the background suddenly stops.
Background music.***

DjERZELEZ (***inner monologue***):

Everyone was gone... They disappeared in the woods... Not a single living soul was there. Only a white scarf was left in the grass.

Forgotten... Flames consumed me. I desired the Kaur woman... To see her... To possess her... To settle this matter once and for all... Or to kill and smash... Everything. Then suddenly I saw... my eyes were hazy... I glimpsed at the top of the stairway... a wide green dress... and a white veil... I reached my arms towards her... I was about to run up to her in two leaps... but then the green dress swayed... and vanished behind the door... I could hear the key turning inside the lock.

DjERZELEZ:

You bitch... Never again will I gaze anything that's woman...

DjERZELEZ (***inner monologue***):

Then I started demolishing... I banged and banged against all doors, but it was if they were all cursed... padlocked... (***pause***) I took out my nervous white horse. I rode out from the courtyard. Then from a short distance... I saw... at the very corner of the khan... the reveal of her window... Shut... Cold like... like a woman's gaze... like... a human heart. This scene provoked a new surge of all my wrath and misery... I felt the urge to kill! To kill anyone! I'll go see those ravaged roads! I'll go see those swamped bridges that keep me from crossing! Let me just see them! Just to see them...

SCENE 4

Transition to different music.

DjERZELEZ (***inner monologue***):

I crossed the river at Uvac. I spurred my horse so hard that ostlers from Priboj had to apply fresh manure on the animal's hooves... and wash them with a male child's urine. I dared not to look my horse in the eye. I promised to give the biggest golden coin to whomever heals his wounds and restores his old trot. I couldn't eat. I found food repulsive. I sat at the table... I smoked a lot... but the food disgusted me. When my horse had healed, I took to the narrow pathways on foot to reach the road. The night

was dark and cold and the sky was studded with stars. Once on the road, I caught up with a monk.

SCENE 5

On the road. Sounds of nocturnal birds.

DjERZELEZ:

Do tell me, priest, did you ever come across such a thing in your books that it is against your laws if a girl of your faith admires a Turkish man?

MONK:

My good bey, our dear God has created all kinds of colourful flowers, as well as peoples of various religions, but he has orchestrated it so that everyone should pray to God according to their own laws and that everyone should admire and wed people of their own faith.

DjERZELEZ:

Is that so?

MONK:

Yes.

DjERZELEZ:

So, tell me... Why don't your women cover themselves?

MONK:

I don't know, bey-effendi. That is the way of our people, I guess. Search me. Silly women's business. We, monks, have no knowledge of it. We have no wives. That is why we do not know.

DjERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

It seemed to me that he had spoken the truth... It irritated me, so I said nothing more of it.

SCENE 6

Music.

DjERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

The monk and I both stayed at the same khan. In the morning, I was roused by the sound of voices, laughter and singing. Gipsy women were washing themselves down by the water mills, splashing each other with water and whipping with willow twigs. It was Saint George's Day. Men were playing drums and big tambourines. I went to the coffee room and I saw the two Morić brothers there. Their father was famous for his wealth and his piety. He died while he was away on pilgrimage. The two of them, on the other hand... idlers and wastrels, violent and shameful, notorious. I look at them. All inside me is calm. The pain had dissipated...

DJERZELEZ:

...and my anger got cold. They are like children to me. Every man who has never laid eyes on the thin Vlach woman in a wide dress made of green velvet, her tiny head above the furry collar, is like a child to me. The two Morić brothers are persuading me into coming with them to a Gipsy carnival. I felt I was indeed getting bored again, so I joined them.

Pause. Transition to different background music.

DjERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

And there, at the carnival, I saw Zemka... climbing into a swing. Slender, with green eyes and white, fairer skin than any other Gipsy woman. They say that no one managed to tame her. She spreads her arms like wings, holding on firmly to the ropes of the swing and swinging higher and higher. Her face is pale, her eyes shut... She flies over the hilltop line, shaping a silhouette of herself on the horizon. Her şhalvars billow around her, they are wreathing in a thousand folds, they are fluttering and whipping the sky. I followed her every swing with my eyes. When she soars up and left a shape of herself on the sky... and when she comes back down crashing in the depth. I feel a pang of sweet anxiety and of scary trepidation that are consuming me, as if... as if it is me up on that swing! And as if this flight would last for an eternity.

ZEMKA (*inner monologue*):

There, at the highest point... I want to open my eyes and see! I want to see! The ploughed field and the river at the foot of the hill. I want to see it and be afraid! I want to be afraid!

DjERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

Zemka seems tired. Her swings are less and less vigorous. She continues to sway... only by the weight of her own body, less and less... until her feet grazed the turf. She jumped down from the swing... enthralled and smiling.

ZEMKA (*inner monologue*):

Djerzelez's eyes are on fire... His face is shiny, too. He can't even bring his drink to his mouth... But he's hunting me with his eyes. Yes, he is.

ZEMKA:

Look at him... His feet can barely support him!

DJERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

I am overcome with some kind of weakness... and I feel light, but I can't get up... Chills raises up from under my loins... one minute it's hot... the other it's cold...

Music. Vocal background music.

DJERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

I strain my eyes to discern Zemka's face in the darkness of the night that came... while everything was moving and swirling before my eyes. I am running as fast as my legs would carry me. I am chasing her. Just when I think that I am gaining on her, she suddenly turns left...

In a haze and through echoes and delay, Zemka's cries are melded with Djerzelez's shouts.

DJERZELEZ:

Zemka!

ZEMKA:

Catch me!

DJERZELEZ:

Zemka! Zemka! You torture my soul!

ZEMKA:

Tuck your shirt in! You are all giddy!

DjERZELEZ:
Wait you, my torturer !

ZEMKA:
No!

DjERZELEZ:
Wait, I'm telling you!

ZEMKA :
Catch me! Catch me! Catch me! Catch me! Hey! Djerzelez fell ill! Come now! Come now! You can't catch me! Never! Never! You can't catch me! You can't catch me!

DjERZELEZ:
Stop pelting me, Zemka! Get over here!

ZEMKA:
Never! Never! Never!

DjERZELEZ:
You, my torturer!

ZEMKA:
Haa... You firm land, you hold him up! 'Goodbye' to reason!

DjERZELEZ (*from a distance*):
Zemka! Zemka! Stop running! Stop pelting me!

ZEMKA:
You can't catch me! Never! Never! You can't catch me! Never! Never! Ha... You land, you hold him up! Come on! Come on! 'Goodbye' to reason! Never!

SCENE 7

Vocal background music, then music, then transition to vocal background music again. DjERZELEZ (inner monologue):

I rushed... and set off down the high, high slope... towards the brook. I was landing on my feet at first, but the slope was becoming more and more steep. I lost my balance and rolled down like a log all the way down and into the brook. I could feel wet stones and mud under my hands. It was dark. I scooped some water with my fingers, and then I started cooling my hands and forehead... After a while, I felt a chill... I tried to climb out of the brook... I held on to grass and bushes with my hands and pushed up with my knees. It was like a in a dream. After a lengthy and strenuous effort, I climbed up to the plain. It was dark. Not a living soul was there. I dropped down to my knees and leaned on my hands. I could hear the dogs growling and chewing on leftover bones.

I sat there for a while. I remembered how I had laid in bed feeble and in pain after I had been wounded badly when I was serenading Nuri-bey's daughter under her window. I remember, I remember... Now everything is gone. The carnival. Zemka's face. I could not collect myself. I wanted to fight someone. To ask about what just happened. But clouds were rolling in. And it was late at night. There was no one there. No one to ask. No one to pick a fight with. No one...

SCENA 8

Hodja chanting in the background, then follows music transition.

DjERZELEZ (inner monologue):

I arrived in Sarajevo on the eve of Ramadan. Early autumn rains and winds left Sarajevo streets clean and bright again. Cobwebs are floating in the air like fine silk. Stores are bursting with fruit and coffee rooms are jammed with people and open all night.

Acrid and stifling odour of butter and burnt sugar is wafting from many inns. At orchards far away, overripe pears are falling loudly on the ground. I feel a mighty strength that accumulates in every man right before autumn. All places are beckoning and many joys await me! The people and the days to come are full of promises...

One early evening on my way to the Bakarević house, I stopped in front of a house on the street corner near one tombstone – one side of the gate to the yard half-opened and there appeared a girl in bright şalvars and red woollen vest. Young and ripe as grape. I looked at her for a moment, I

smiled, and then I spread my arms out and headed towards her. She saw me. I could see her flinch and then I heard nothing more but a crash. She disappeared behind the broad white surface of the outer gate... I could hear the lock creaking and the drawbar grinding.

That day, during supper, I ate, but the food gave me no pleasure. At the halva shop, across the road from her home, I told everything that happened to my old acquaintance, Arnaut. He, too, had seen the girl in the white house on the corner and was now wasting his days here, at the halva shop, hoping to catch a glimpse of her again. When my friend heard about what I had to tell him, he rejoiced. His eyes livened up and burst with flame.

SCENE 9

At the halva shop. Quiet murmur in the background.

ARNAUT:

My dear Đerzelez. She is like a jeribasma pear, smooth and soft. A woman from Latin world is indeed more ravishing than any other woman. She is Katinka, daughter of Andrija Poljaš.

DjERZELEZ:

Katinka..!

ARNAUT:

She is unhappy because of her beauty. She can never go out. On religious holidays, they take her at daybreak to an early mass in the Latin Quarter. Even then, they wrap up her in huge shawls.

DjERZELEZ:

So, that means she seldom ventures into the courtyard...?

ARNAUT:

She doesn't go out. Very seldom.

DjERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

I also always see Katinka's house with doors padlocked. And windows shut.

DjERZELEZ:

But there is something brazen about her, Arnaut!

ARNAUT:

Aye. There is ... Askeri soldiers and local lads rut and prowl around their house, completely obsessed with her.

DjERZELEZ:

Katinka!

SCENE 10

DjERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

I myself do not know how many days have gone by before old Ivka Giguša, procurress from Bistrik, arrived and promised to see what could be done, but saying not to hope because the girl is kept in strict seclusion. She did investigate how to reach the girl... But Katinka was taken away to be hidden, before daybreak. And so,... the girl with pale and lean face and luxuriant hair, and with an sumptuous lush body, had left this house days ago. I turned around and stepped into the street as if I was blind... I cannot have that Vlach wench. I can never have her! I cannot kill anyone or smash anything! It is just as well that the road along Miljacka is so plain and long. If only it would never end! Then I shouldn't have to make any turns...

SCENE 11

Music

DjERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

I stopped at Hiseti... and swerved. I entered a small courtyard with high gates. The staircase groaned and creaked beneath my feet... worn out by the many visitors. In a tiny bright room, under dim light, there were curtains made of thin white cotton cloth with silk threads. There sat Yekaterina, as if she were waiting, with her placid eyes and her white hands...

This Yekaterina is the daughter of a doctor who once came here from Odesa. He wore a fez and people called him Veli-bey... but right before he died, he called in a priest and died a Christian. His daughter, Yekaterina, impoverished and alone, first wanted to go to a women's convent in Russia, but then a Grek kavaz persuaded her to stay... After he left her, she moved to this tiny house in Hiseti. One or two girls for sale live in each of these houses, under the state's supervision. The entire town know them

by their first names. Yekaterina is short, bulky, quiet... She either sleeps or knits cushion covers by day, and welcomes wealthy patrons at night.

Inside Yekaterina's house.

DJERZELEZ:

Yekaterina, I've come to see you.

YEKATERINA:

Good. Good. Welcome. Have a seat. Let me help you. Let me untuck your shirt.

DJERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

I lean my face against the thin cloth of her şhalvars.

YEKATERINA:

What a lot of the world you've seen... Yes, you have.

ĐERZELEZ:

What a lot of the world I've seen, Yekaterina. How far I've wandered!

Music.

DJERZELEZ (*inner monologue*):

Yekaterina's tiny hand never stops caressing me... deftly and skillfully, up and down the spine. I forced myself to close my eyes. I wanted to prolong this moment, free of thought and desire...

DJERZELEZ:

...This hand I feel upon myself, is it the hand of a woman? The Venetian woman wrapped in fur and velvet whose body, slender and aristocratic, I can't even imagine? The Gipsy woman Zemka, brazen and devious little beast? Or Katinka, a fruit that ripens in the shades? No. It is the hand of Yekaterina. Just Yekaterina. Yekaterina is the only one a man can reach easily and directly!

Why is the path to a woman so tortuous and mystifying? Why am I unable to traverse it, with all my fame and strength, when so many men worse than me did it? So many – yet only I am this one, left to hold out my arms forever, like in a dream. What is it that women are looking for? And what

are those women that cannot be reached, the same way God cannot be reached? As if I should rest... As if I should go on a journey...

THE END