

THE POSTMASTER OF TREBLINKA

A Historical Mystery Novella

Gabriel Farago

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First published 2022 © Gabriel Farago

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Arquà Petrarca, Veneto region near Padua: September 1923

Covered in sweat and trying in vain to go to sleep, Isabella tossed and turned restlessly in her bed. It had been an unusually hot day and the still, oppressive air hovered like a stifling blanket over the silent village. The refreshing evening breeze that usually blew in from the Adriatic to the east had failed to arrive, to cool the parched land dreaming of autumn and longing for elusive rain.

Suddenly, she heard strange music drifting across the fields from the village below. The mesmerising beat of drums and jangle of tambourines was soon joined by the seductive sound of violins and the mournful cry of a duduk, conjuring up fleeting images of distant lands and whirling dervishes honouring their god.

Isabella got out of bed and walked out onto the balcony overlooking the manicured gardens of the stately villa that had been the home of the Alberti family – prominent landed gentry of the district – for centuries. It was cooler outside, but the marble floor was still warm, making the soles of her bare feet tingle. As she looked across the fields, she could see a fire burning just outside the village and dark shapes moving to the spellbinding rhythm of the drums, sending crazy shadows dancing along the walls of the little cemetery.

The gypsies. Of course! she thought and quickly got dressed. A group of gypsies had arrived with their horse-drawn wagons the day before and set up camp just outside the village. They came every year as a welcome addition to the workforce to help with the harvest, which had been part of village life for a long time.

Unable to resist the siren call of the music, Isabella tiptoed past her father's bedroom and then down the stairs to the silent corridor leading to the back door. There she paused, put on her shoes and opened the door. Taking a deep breath she looked around, and then quickly stepped outside.

Guided by the ghostly light of a full moon that seemed to suck the colour out of the sleeping landscape, Isabella hurried across the lush fields towards the village and followed the stirring music, making her blood boil and her cheeks glow with excitement and the lure of the unknown.

The colourful wagons had been arranged in a semicircle facing a fire. The musicians, all men, sat under a large tree in the shadows, while several young women were dancing around the fire – ignoring the children trying to do the same – watched by a group of old men smoking pipes and drinking homemade grappa.

Mesmerised by the spectacle, so different from village life ruled by the Church and age-

old, rigid traditions, Isabella stood behind a hedge – watching – not daring to come closer. She was straining her neck to see better, when she heard a voice from behind.

‘You don’t have to hide, you know,’ said the voice softly. ‘Visitors are always welcome.’

Isabella spun around, her heart missing a beat, and looked straight into the eyes of a young man standing in the shadows behind her. His eyes – dark and shiny – radiated kindness, but also danger, and seemed to look straight through her.

‘I am Django,’ said the young man, ‘and that’s my family over there.’

‘I’m Isabella, I live in the house up on the hill.’

‘I saw you crossing the fields,’ continued the young man, his soft voice melodious, with a seductive edge and unfamiliar accent hinting at a foreign origin. ‘So, what will it be? Are we just going to stand here and watch, or would you like to meet my family? I can assure you that they would be delighted to make your acquaintance.’

‘Let’s go and meet them,’ said Isabella, surprising herself with the answer.

Without saying another word, Django took Isabella by the hand and together they walked into the circle of light.

By the time Isabella tiptoed back to her room, it was well past three am. Lying on her bed – hot and sweaty after dancing with the women by the fire – she watched the shafts of moonlight reach through the open windows like fingers of a gentle giant.

Meeting Django and his exotic family appeared like a dream, and the stirring music like a strange wakeup call igniting unsettling feelings and desires in her she had never encountered before. Slowly, she ran the tips of her fingers along her right cheek where Django had briefly kissed her on the way back to the house. She could still feel the touch of his hot lips, and his muscular body pressing against hers before they parted on a promise to meet again the next night.

But most unsettling by far, were the words of the old woman who had read her palm: ‘You will have two sons,’ she heard the woman say, her rasping voice sounding otherworldly. ‘One of them will rise to high office, the other ...’ Instead of completing the sentence, the woman had stared at her with sad eyes and let go of her hand, the look in those eyes sending a cold shiver of fear racing down Isabella’s spine.

Isabella closed her eyes, trying in vain to banish the unnerving encounter with the old woman, and tried to go to sleep, but the haunting look of sadness in the old woman’s eyes wouldn’t go away. Only when Isabella turned her mind to Django, the most handsome young man she had ever seen in her young life, did the disturbing image begin to recede.

The gypsies stayed in the village for three weeks. Isabella and Django met almost every day. Sometimes in the fields – brushing against each other as they helped with the harvest and exchanging secret looks of longing and desire – sometimes in the shade under a tree while sharing a meal break with the others. However, most precious of all was their time together late at night when they met at their secret place in the bushes behind the house, to make love until the first rays of the morning sun melted the darkness and Isabella had to return to her room before the household stirred, and the squawking peacocks in the garden announced the beginning of a new day.

****** End of Chapter Excerpt ******

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