

TRACE

Traditional Children's Stories for a common Future

Manda's Well

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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



The mist was lazily lifting off the ground and creeping up the slopes with a few grey wisps that trailed behind and swayed in the wind like a torn rag. The first sunrays cautiously peeked through broken clouds, lovingly touching the leaves of lonesome trees. Growing warmer and warmer, they glistened playfully upon the roofs of closely built tiny houses. Faint, sleepy voices of people soon turned into a hustle and bustle, and joyful screaming of children filled the yards. Women grabbed their jars and buckets, then hurried to a nearby water-well. Briefly exchanging good mornings, they filled them with water and dashed home.

Only a girl named Manda seemed in no hurry. She was the last to set off towards the well, taking tiny steps, stopping every now and then. Lifting her eyes up to Gradec and the city walls, she turned to the south and gazed at the stone road that was disappearing in the plain. Barely discerning a vague outline in the distance, she paused to shield her eyes from the bright sunlight and have a better view. Someone was coming down the road: a lonely rider on a tired horse. From the distance, she could tell the animal was exhausted by its heavy trudge and its low dropped head. When the horse reached her, the girl looked at the rider more closely. Exhaustion showed on his face too. Once glamorous vestment was now covered with a layer of dust, as a telling sign of long travelling; his sword that was laid down upon the saddle bore witness to numerous battles he had fought.

When the horseman bent down close to her, the girl shrank away, yet for some reason she felt her fear dissipate and decided not to run away.

‘What is your name, girl?’ asked the horseman in a hoarse voice.

‘Manda,’ she replied.

‘Mando, dušo, zagrabi mi vode!’ (Manda, honey, please scoop me some water from the well!)

In an instant Manda forgot all her fears and discomfort, and she reached for a scoop of cool water for the unknown knight who was plainly ready to drop. When the worn-out rider and his horse quenched thirst, the girl now emboldened, spoke:

‘Do you know what they say about this well? Whoever drinks its water will always stay close by.’

‘There’s nothing I’d like more than that,’ said the knight smiling at her, ‘for I have journeyed near and far, and nowhere have I seen a girl so beautiful, nor tasted water so sweet and cool.’

And so the knight settled at the foot of the hill on which the “Upper Town” Gradec was situated, and soon enough he wedded beautiful Manda. Many a time have they retold the story of their first encounter. Glowing with happiness, she would recall the way he approached her: ‘*Mando, dušo...!*’ (Manda, honey...!) So, in time, people named the well Manduševac.

He, on the other hand, used to talk about the place where Manda scooped (*zgrabila* in Croatian) water with such great fascination that the whole area around the well became known as *Zagrab* and later on Zagreb.

Many years have passed from that time, many stories sank into oblivion. The city walls around the old town Gradec crumbled down too, but Manda’s well, along with the names *Manduševac* and *Zagreb*, the white city live on to this day.

ⁱ In Croatian, *dušo* is a term of endearment as e.g. honey or sweetie. The base form of the verb *zgrabiti* used here is *grabiti*, meaning to scoop something.