

The Storyteller

THE BLUE MARE

'Be sure to take your cloak, little one, for fear of catching cold.'

'I have it on my arm.'

'Take your wooden shoes.'

'They are hanging around my neck.'

'Take your whip, for fear of the prowling wolves.'

'Mother, it is tied to my wrist, and is as fast as one of my fingers.'

'Good-night, my son.'

'Good-night, mother.'

Every evening when Jean-Marie Benic, of the shore country, started out with his mares his mother never failed to give him these injunctions. She was a widow with five sons, of whom he was the last. The farm, sheltered by a belt of woods, which the winds tossed about, was only separated by these woods from the beaches where the waves foamed and thundered and leaped during three seasons of the year. The farm was called the Granary, and it might have been said that it was very ill-named, for grain grew but poorly in those salt fields. The only fine harvest there was that of the buckwheat, which grew luxuriantly, raising up its red stalks and its snowy blossoms, where the bees gathered their honey. Besides this, there was a great deal of broom, a great deal of furze, and some marshes and waste lands, where all sorts of useless weeds were sown by the wind and harvested by the winter's frost. But the meadows were superb, thickly planted with vigorous grass, which gave a second and a third crop of hay, without counting five months of pasturage. They were moist fields, it is needless to say; meadows which were surrounded by wooded hillsides and crossed by a little brook scarcely as big as your finger in summer, which spread out into a sheet of water and formed a lake after the rains of autumn.

In those fields the six mares, which were the pride and wealth of the Granary, lived in freedom from the end of June until the middle of November. It was impossible to see finer mares in all the shore country, which, however, is famous for its breed of horses. A tall man did not come up to their shoulders. Their trot equalled the gallop of many other horses. As to their coats, although they were somewhat varied, it approached slate color, and there was one three-year-old filly, Jean-Marie Benic's favorite, whose coat was really blue, with a star in the middle of her forehead. The horse dealers all said, 'Are you going to sell your filly, Mistress Benic?'

'No, no, good people; you will not have her.'

'Then the Emperor will take her.'

'He is too far off.'

'The Emperor is never far off, Mistress Benic. He needs men. He knows, at Paris, your mare's age, her name, her coat. Trust me and sell her.'

She refused, for she was sure that they would not take away Nielle, her beautiful blue filly, who already began to draw the plough, and could trot for three hours without resting. To be sure, she knew that the Emperor took men and sent them to the war; one of her sons was upon the banks of the Rhine; another upon the Spanish frontier. Every day she heard them talk of battles won, of cities taken, of cantons carried off, of thanksgiving, massacres, and booty. At the bottom of her heart she wished an end of these victories, which cost the lives of thousands, and which left the most fortunate without help, with fields too big for them, with crops which perished for lack of hands to harvest them; but she did not believe that the Emperor knew about Nielle's beauty, nor about her speed, nor about her blue coat and the white star upon her forehead.

'Good-night to you, my boy,' she said. 'Go carefully, and beware of the wolf.'

And Jean-Marie, mounted upon the oldest of the mares, went off whistling to pass the night in the meadows. He loved this. He had built himself a cabin of boughs upon a slope backed by a wood, from which he could see nearly all the meadow; and there, covered by an old cloak, with his dog, Fincars, at his feet, he slept a sleep broken by the slightest noise. The night wrapped him up in darkness and fog, but even then he recognised the presence of his horses and the place where they pastured by their neighing and by the slow rhythmic sound of their pawing. When the wind was cold he led them into a willow cove, the leaves of which never moved, save in the days of tempest. Whatever the weather might be, he made three rounds before sunrise, so that his mares should not rest lying upon their sides in grass wet with the rain or the dew. A whinnying

awakened him, or a bird's cry, or the stamping of the animals, who gathered together at the approach of danger; and, all alone, he would go out of the cabin, switching his whip in a peculiar way which frightened the wolves and reassured the mares. They ran to him as soon as they saw him, and he stroked them. The blue filly sometimes placed her head upon the young fellow's shoulder, and he fondled her, saying, 'Upon my word of honor, Nielle, you shall always stay at the Granary; you are too beautiful for the war.'

He deceived himself. The time for this separation came very soon. An order was published commanding that all horses and mares four years old should be brought to the city to be examined by a commission of officers. Nielle was a few weeks more than four years old. The last days of March, drenched by rains and by tempests of snow and hail, rendered the roads almost impassable. For a whole week desolation reigned at the widow's home, the Granary. Her three remaining sons surrounded her one evening, by the light of the candle, and discussed what ought to be done. The two elder sons, already growing gray, advised hiding Nielle in the deep wood without any opening which surrounded the farm. The younger son had nothing to say. Still, upon the evening of the day appointed for the conscription of the horses, his mother said to him: 'Young one, you do not say anything, but you must have some notion.'

'I have, indeed, but it is a notion quite different from my brothers.'

'Tell me what it is, young one.'

'Mother, I am too much afraid of making you cry.'

'Poor young one,' said his mother, kissing him. 'Those who cry are not the most unhappy; the most unhappy are those who do not love each other.'

'Well, then, mother, I think that we cannot hide Nielle for a long time in the woods: she will be found, and perhaps my elder brother will go to prison. It will be better to give her to the Emperor, who needs her. And as my turn to do service will soon come, it is my opinion that Nielle and I might better go together. I will watch over her. I will take care of her.'

'My boy, you talk foolishly. A common soldier will never mount the blue mare. She will be given to an officer, and I shall lose everything—my son and my Nielle.'

'Let me go; I have considered everything at night while I was guarding my animals. Some day you will see Nielle come back again with Jean-Marie Benic, who will have chevrons on his sleeves. I feel that I am a soldier, and I swear to you, from having led her against the wolves, that Nielle, too, is courageous.'

He spoke so firmly and decidedly that the widow, without having the courage to say yes, did not think it wise to say no. She wept, as Jean-Marie had foreseen that she would do, and she stayed for a long time seated upon the bench in the large room of the Granary giving advice to her son, and repeating several times the same advice, but each time with more love and more tears. As to the brothers, who had good hearts in spite of their rough looks, they watched their mother and younger brother for more than half an hour without saying a word, and went to bed, leaving upon the table their two bowls of cider quite full.

The next morning before daybreak, Jean-Marie Benic went into the stable to untie Nielle, and, jumping upon the beautiful mare's back, pressing her with his heels, he took her to the meadow for the last time.

'I want you to eat once more our grass,' he said. 'And I want to see again the place where I have so often guarded you, and to say farewell to it.'

No one had risen, even at this farm, where the cock was not generally the first to rise. The low country was white with mist, and the woods, at the two ends of the meadow, looked as if seen through a veil of gauze. Jean-Marie, who had put neither bridle nor halter upon his mare, led her beside the brook where the mint and the clover sprouted as high as his knee, and, letting the animal browse, he looked with emotion at the fine meadow grass which he would not mow or stack for several years, and those dark woods, like smoke wreaths in the mist, which would have lost their leaves several times and have grown and sprouted before his return; and behind the woods his memory pictured all the farm which he had never left, the fields where the oats sown by his own hand already rose above the earth and waved in the wind from the sea; the fallow fields, the moors, the clump of pines upon the dune, the paths around the meadows, deserted and covered with spiders' webs.

'Eat your fill, Nielle,' he said, 'for you will have no more mint or clover in the Emperor's army.'

This was a pretext not to start yet. He thought he was staying for the mare's sake, when in truth his heart failed him. As the sun rose and the tops of the oaks became rosy on the crests of the hills, Jean-Marie