F. J. Bergmann - The White Foal

At that time, I lived with my grandmother in the Camargue, the marshy delta where the Rhône river widens and opens into the Mediterranean sea. My parents, whom I could almost no longer remember, were dead. They had left no inheritance, but in truth, Grand-mère, who was skilled with remedies, was not in any need. It was whispered in the marketplace that she was a sorceress—but well-liked by the local folk who owed their health or lives to her.

Grand-mère did not make me work very much. With the wisdom of great age, she let me roam, carefree, on the marsh and its waters, along the shores. She said, “There will be time, when you are older, to learn your duties. But now, now is the golden summer of your childhood.”

The water was my life. Grand-mère had taught me to swim right away.

“A good sorceress is always prepared for any eventuality,” she assured me.

She gave me a little boat, just for me. In my coracle, I navigated the marshes, ponds and lagoons, to the deepest currents of the river and along the seacoast.

But what I wanted more than anything was one of the wild horses of the Camargue. Storm-gray or white as clouds without rain, I watched them from far off, silhouetted against the horizon, passing like pale shadows through the reeds, or swimming across the deep waters. They were also in the marketplace: mastered, mounted, harnessed, tamed, broken. What I desired was not that, but that one of the wild foals would befriend me, of its own free will.

I had tried to pursue them on foot or in my coracle, but galloping or swimming, the horses were too fast—I was never able to so much as touch the end of a tail. They seemed made of magic, atmospheric, in the same way as the rose-colored flamingoes and the herons that flew off in a great rustle of wings no matter how silently I approached them.

One afternoon, I had wandered a great distance along the beach, without a care—but Grand-mère had shown me a species of little spotted shell, of great value for her medicines, and I wanted to please her. I had found two of the shells; sunset was not far away. Returning to where I had drawn up my boat, I saw a small white shape, almost silvery, stretched out on the sand. *A drowned foal—oh, no!* I thought, and I began running toward it.

Weeping, I knelt at its side. But it still breathed. Its eyes opened. Blue eyes, eyes of azure, like the sea, like the sky.

All the other horses I had ever seen had brown eyes.

I had not recovered from my surprise when the little colt spoke to me in a soft, childlike voice.

“I am dying from the heat of the sun. Please, I beg you, pull me into the cool sea.”

This was the companion of my dreams, but for an instant or two I remained immoblie.

“Have pity on me; I am burning!”

I began tugging him toward the water. Gods, he was heavy.… But I persevered; the tide was rising and finally a wave caught and lifted him, and he curled his long legs under him. He nosed me gently with his soft muzzle, catching my eyes in his blue gaze.

“Mount on my back; we will swim away and be friends forever.”

He seemed to swell, as if he were growing larger moment by moment, floating at his ease. Under the waves, I could see the glint of scales beginning along his haunches: no longer legs, but a tail like a fish.

“I will take you to your parents.”

I knew his last promise was no lie. I also recognized his attempt to bewitch me. I looked away and took care not to meet those blue eyes with my own again. I dragged my boat further up into the dunes, where the tide could not reach it, and went the long way home, on foot through the marshes—I would have to be very cautious at the edge of the sea from now on, but Grandmère would use her arts see to my safety.

Someday, I hope a very long time from now, when I finally want to die, I will find the white colt once more.

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