

PENGUIN BOOKS

E2378

THE GREEN MARE

美小说



Marcel Aymé

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Marcel Aymé, who was born in 1902 at Joigny in Burgundy, was the youngest of a blacksmith's six children. After his mother died he went at the age of two to live with a grandmother in the Jura and, after learning the three Rs and the local dialect, attended high school in a town nearby. He preferred, however, swimming and boating on the River Doubs to lessons. He recalls that his name was never on the list at prize-givings.

After military service he worked in a bank in Paris and then was successively labourer, film-extra, gipsy, life insurance agent, and journalist. He wrote his first novel in 1925 and since then has devoted himself to writing. Apart from two children's books, some short stories, and two plays (one of which was widely praised when produced in Paris), he has also published some eight novels, including: *The Secret Stream*, *The House of Men*, *The Second Face*, *Fanfare in Blemont*, and *The Fable and the Flesh*.

Cover drawing by David Gentleman

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CONVERSATION IN SICILY

ELIO VITTORINI

1651

'A son learns that his father, late in life, has left his mother, who lives in Sicily, and gone to Venice. The son leaves the North of Italy and travels south to visit his mother. He meets people in the train, he meets other people – a knife-grinder, the ghost of his brother who is dead in the cemetery and, of course, his mother in Sicily. He talks with them, they talk with him. Once he gets drunk. His father comes back.

'That is all that happens, yet one puts down this novel feeling that one has had an experience which is valid as life and as art. . . . Vittorini's hero sets out on his journey haunted by abstract furies – some sort of furies concerning the doomed human race. These abstract furies make him lose apparent interest in everything. . . . But in the end there is hope, the only hope for men and women which lies in the rediscovery of their humanity' – Stephen Spender

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TRUMAN CAPOTE

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MARCEL AYMÉ

外文书局

THE GREEN MARE

TRANSLATED BY NORMAN DENNY



PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex
AUSTRALIA: Penguin Books Pty Ltd, 762 Whitehorse Road,
Mitcham, Victoria

La Jument verte first published 1933
This translation published by The Bodley Head 1955
Published in Penguin Books 1961

Made and printed in Great Britain
by Hunt, Barnard & Co. Ltd
Aylesbury

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I

ONCE upon a time there was born in the village of Claquebue a green mare, not of that rancid green which accompanies decrepitude in white-coated horseflesh but of a pretty jade green. Upon seeing it Jules Haudouin believed neither his own eyes nor those of his wife.

'It's not possible,' he said. 'I could never be so lucky.'

A farmer and horse-coper, Haudouin had never reaped the rewards due to cunning, lies, and avarice. His cows died two at a time, his pigs by the half-dozen, and his corn sprouted in the sack. He was scarcely more fortunate with his children, having had to beget six in order to keep three. But children were less important. He wept copiously at the funeral, and when he got home wrung out his handkerchief and hung it on the line, being assured that in the natural course of events he would not be long in getting his wife with another. That is what is so convenient about children, and in this matter Haudouin did not greatly complain. He had three robust living sons and three daughters in the cemetery, which was pretty much what suited him.

A green mare was something entirely without precedent, and the fact that it should have been born in Claquebue was the more remarkable since Claquebue was a place where nothing ever happened. Even the village gossip was tedious. It was said, for example, that Maloret deflowered his own daughters; but since the tale had been current for a hundred years, and it was generally understood that this was the way the Malorets always treated their daughters, the matter was no longer one of interest. And then again the Republicans, of whom there were not more than half a dozen all told, would sometimes take advantage of a moonless night to sing *La*

Carmagnole under the *curé*'s windows, and to bellow, 'Down with the Empire!' But in fact nothing happened. So everyone was bored. And since time did not pass the old men did not die. There were twenty-eight centenarians in the *commune*, to say nothing of the old men between seventy and a hundred who comprised half the population. From time to time one of these would be quietly knocked on the head or otherwise disposed of, but since it would have been ill-mannered to inquire into such domestic adjustments, no notice could be taken, and the village, half-comatose, paralysed, benumbed, remained as dismal as a Sunday in Heaven.

The news of the Green Mare sped out of the stable, re-echoed between the river and the woods, encircled Claquebue three times, and span round and round the Place de la Mairie. Everyone set out at once for Jules Haudouin's house, some trotting or running, others limping or hobbling on crutches. There was fierce competition to be the first to arrive, and the old men, scarcely more rational than the women, mingled their whinnies with the clamour that spread over the countryside.

'Something has happened! Something has happened!'

The tumult reached its height in Haudouin's farmyard, where the people of Claquebue recovered all the vigorous malice of former days. While the oldest of them besought the *curé* to exorcise the Green Mare, the six Republicans shouted 'Down with the Empire!' in his very face. A riot started and the Mayor received a kick in the rump which caused a speech to rise instantly to his lips. The younger women complained of being pinched, the older ones of not being pinched, and the children bawled beneath repeated cuffs. At length Jules Haudouin appeared in the doorway of the stable. Laughing, his hands covered with blood, he confirmed:

'She's as green as an apple!'

A great gust of laughter swept over his audience, and then an old man was seen to beat the air with his hands and fall dead in his hundred-and-eighth year. At this the mirth became

prodigious, so that men gasped, holding their sides. Helped by a few well-placed kicks the centenarians began to die like flies.

‘There goes another! It’s old Rousselier! And look at that one over there!’

In less than half an hour seven centenarians, three nonagenarians, and one octogenarian had passed away, and a good many others were feeling indisposed. Still standing in the doorway of the stable Haudouin thought of his aged father, who ate enough for two, and he remarked to his wife that the ones to be pitied were not those who were taken but those who were left behind.

The *curé* was having his work cut out to minister to the dying. Being exhausted, he finally climbed on to a barrel to make himself heard above the merriment and said that they had had enough fun for one day and it was time for everyone to go home. The fortunate owner displayed his green mare both full face and in profile and the audience withdrew, deeply content to think that at last something had happened. His passage eased by the last rites, Haudouin’s father died towards the end of the evening and was interred two days later in company with fifteen fellow-citizens no less venerable. The funeral was an impressive one, and the *curé* profited by the occasion to remind his congregation that all flesh is as grass.

Meanwhile the renown of the Green Mare was spreading. From as far as Saint-Margelon, the chief town of the region, people bestirred themselves to come and marvel. Sundays saw an unbroken procession pass through the stables. Haudouin became a celebrity, his horse-trading business greatly improved, and to be on the safe side he took to going regularly to Mass. Claquebue preened itself in the possession of an exhibit which brought so many visitors, and its two cafés experienced a sudden rise in prosperity. As a result of this Haudouin decided to become a candidate at the municipal elections, and upon his threatening to sell his Green Mare the

two café proprietors thought it judicious to accord him a support which just turned the scale.

Not long after this a teacher at the Imperial College of Saint-Margelon, who was also a correspondent of the Académie des Sciences, came to see the Green Mare. He was dumb-founded and wrote a report to the Académie which caused one of its most illustrious members, his chest blazoned with decorations, to declare that the thing must be a fraud. 'I am seventy-six years old,' he said, 'and I have never read of the existence of a green mare: therefore a green mare cannot exist.' Another savant, scarcely less illustrious, replied that green mares had undoubtedly existed in the past, and that his learned colleague might find references to them in many of the most respected authors of antiquity if he would merely take the trouble to read between the lines. The dispute was a resounding one. Its echoes reached as far as the Court, causing the Emperor himself to inquire into the matter.

'A green mare?' he said. 'That must be as unusual as an honest minister!'

This was a joke. The ladies of the Court slapped their thighs and everyone praised the Sovereign's wit. The *bon mot* was repeated all over Paris, and when the Emperor paid a visit to the region of Saint-Margelon a newspaper referred in a subtitle to 'The Land of the Green Mare'.

The Emperor arrived at Saint-Margelon during the morning and by three o'clock had listened to fourteen speeches. Being somewhat drowsy by the time the official banquet was ended, he signed to the Prefect to join him in the conveniences and there proposed:

'How would it be if we went to have a look at this green mare? I should like, while I am here, to see how the harvest promises.'

Accordingly they bustled through the inauguration of a monument to a certain Captain Pont, who had lost his head at Sebastopol, and the Imperial coach set out upon the road to Claquebue. A fine warm spring lay over the countryside,

which had a reviving effect upon the Emperor. He was much taken with the mistress of the house, who had a pastoral charm and a period bosom. The people of Claquebue, massed along the village street, murmured in ecstasy that things never stopped happening. Another half-dozen of the old men died and were hidden in the ditch for the sake of appearances.

After an exchange of courtesies Haudouin brought the Green Mare out into the yard. The Emperor expressed his admiration and being moved by the colour green to bucolic reverie he added a few phrases regarding the simplicity of country customs, at the same time eyeing Mme Haudouin's corsage. In that farmyard heavy with the scent of dung she appeared to him a picture of robust grace, enriched with a hint of ready fecundity which quickened his pulses. And indeed she was still a good-looking farmer's wife who scarcely showed her forty years. The Prefect was a man of ambition, and since he was also served by a penetrating intelligence he readily perceived what was passing through his Sovereign's mind. Pretending to be fascinated by Haudouin's conversation, he drew him a little to one side, and in order to gain further time promised him a seat on the Regional Council at the next election. The Emperor in the meantime was addressing himself to Mme Haudouin, who in response to a suggestion thrown out so to speak at random, replied with the artlessness and modesty of the pure in heart:

'Sire, the moon is at the full.'

Baffled but nevertheless charmed by this evidence of her closeness to Nature, the Emperor resolved to reward her for having caught his fancy and accordingly endorsed the promise made by the Prefect to her husband. When he returned to his coach the people of Claquebue accorded him a magnificent ovation, subsequently lighting a large bonfire to which they consigned the rest of the old men. The site of this notable holocaust came to be known as the *Champ-Brûlé*, and the corn grew there exceptionally well.

Thenceforward Claquebue led a more healthy and vigorous

life. The men ploughed deeper furrows, the women spiced their cookery with a nicer judgement, the youths chased the girls, and each man prayed for the downfall of his neighbour. The Haudouin family set an example in all this which inspired widespread admiration. With a thrust of his shoulder, Haudouin drove the wall of his house as far as the road and installed a dining-room, equipped with a dinner-service and an extending table, which had the whole village gaping in astonishment. Since the Emperor's gaze had rested on her bosom his wife no longer milked cows but kept a maidservant and did lace-work instead. Haudouin, the official candidate, became a regional councillor and had no difficulty in also becoming Mayor of Claquebue. His business prospered greatly, and in consequence of the Imperial visit, the tale of which had spread throughout the region, he came to be regarded at the horse and cattle fairs as in some sort the official horse-coper. In matters under dispute he was appealed to as an arbitrator.

Alphonse, the eldest of the three Haudouin sons, derived no benefit from these changes since he had been conscripted for seven years military service. He was in a cavalry regiment, and little news was heard of him. The family looked to him to become a sergeant, but he had to re-enlist in order to do so. He said that the cavalry were not like the infantry, where anyone can win promotion.

Honoré, the second son, fell in love with Adelaide Mouchet, a thin girl with dark eyes who came of a family notorious for its poverty. Although Haudouin strongly opposed the match, Honoré stood firm, and the thunder of their disputes rattled the windows of Claquebue for two years. When he came of age Honoré married his Adelaide and went to live with her in a neighbouring village where he hired himself out as a day-labourer. He refused to return to his father's house until due apology had been made, and the good man was obliged to submit to this ignominy in order to spare himself the humiliation of seeing his son lead a life of squalor within half a league of Claquebue. Honoré then resumed his proper calling

of farmer and horse-trader under the paternal roof. He was an honest and lighthearted youth who knew his business but was as lacking in ambition as he was in guile: one might see at a glance that he would never become one of those horse-copers who breed green mares. His father was grieved by this but had nevertheless a weakness for the young man, who genuinely loved their trade. Mme Haudouin, on the other hand, preferred Alphonse, the sergeant, because of his uniform and his free-and-easy manners. She sent him five francs every Easter and at the Feast of Saint-Martin, concealing the fact from her husband.

Despite their personal predilections, Haudouin and his wife lavished an especial care upon their youngest son, Ferdinand. His father had sent him to the Imperial College at Saint-Margelon. Not wishing him to enter his own business, he hoped to make him a veterinary surgeon. Ferdinand in his sixteenth year was a taciturn, pertinacious youth with a long, bony face and a narrow, sugar-loaf skull. His instructors thought well of him, but he was not loved by his school-fellows, and it fell to him to be nicknamed 'rubber-bum', a chance which may suffice to cause a man for the rest of his life to hanker after public recognition, honours, and money.

On a certain spring morning there occurred at the Haudouins' house a notable event of which at the time no one appreciated the true significance. Mme Haudouin, while seated with her lace-work at the dining-room window, saw a young man enter the yard. He wore a floppy hat and he carried a painter's paraphernalia on his back.

'I happened to be passing,' he said, 'and so I thought I would ask permission to have a look at your green mare. I should like to see what I can make of her.'

The maidservant showed him the way to the stable. He chucked her under the chin, as was still customary in those days, and she giggled, reminding him that he had come to see the mare.

'It really is green,' said the painter, studying it.

Being exceptionally endowed with imaginative sensibility, he thought at first of painting it red, but Haudouin came along while he was still considering the matter.

‘If you want to paint my mare,’ he said with his customary good sense, ‘paint her green. Otherwise no one will recognize her.’

The mare was led out into the pasture and the painter set to work. But in the course of the afternoon Mme Haudouin, passing that way, espied a deserted easel. Investigating the matter further, she was shocked to find the painter helping the maidservant to her feet in the middle of a field of barley which was already grown high. She was justly incensed: the wretched girl ran risk enough of being put in the family way by the master of the house, without going to outsiders. The painter was sent about his business, his canvas was confiscated, and Mme Haudouin resolved to keep a close eye on the servant’s figure. The picture which was destined to perpetuate the memory of the Green Mare was hung above the chimney-piece in the dining-room, between the portrait of the Emperor and that of Canrobert.

Two years later the mare fell ill, wasted away for a month, and then died. Haudouin’s youngest son was not yet sufficiently instructed in the veterinary science to be able to name the malady that had carried it off. Haudouin scarcely regretted the loss, since the animal had become a nuisance to him. Sightseers had continued to invade his stable, and when one is in politics one cannot refuse to exhibit one’s green mare even to persons of the most trifling consequence.

While his youngest son pursued his studies Haudouin methodically added to his fortune. He lent money on mortgage to the local farmers as though he were doing them a service, in a bluff and hearty manner which caused them to overlook the usurious rates he charged. As he grew older he felt a desire to enjoy his riches, but laboriously, as he had acquired them. He wanted his pleasures to have a specific money value, and in the name of self-indulgence he added the