

THE ABOMINABLE WEREHORSE

Written by Giuditta Campello

Illustrated by Markéta Brecherová

THE LEGEND OF THE WEREHORSE

Peace Valley.

Few people remember it now, but until the last century it had a different name: Were Valley. Back then, a terrifying legend circulated amongst the farmers: the legend of the werehorse. There was a farm in Were Valley. The farmer and his family kept laying hens and dairy cows and had a vegetable garden. With all the work to be done, and all the people coming to buy produce, the farm was teeming with voices, sounds and noises during the day. When evening fell, so did the silence. The farmer bolted the doors, closed the gates and went to sleep. The farm was isolated. The roads were dark. No one ventured out there after sunset. This was partly because the moorland surrounding the farm was often shrouded in thick fog.

But one evening, the Neri family had nothing to eat. The children were crying and their mother, in desperation, sent the eldest to ask for eggs and milk at the farm in Were Valley, which was two kilometres away but was the nearest.

Aldo was thirteen and it wasn't the first time he'd gone out at night, only on the other occasions he'd done so in secret, climbing out of the window.

He set off boldly. Even in the fog, it was easy for him to reach the farm. He knew the moorland paths well, having had so many adventures there.

He took the eggs and milk from the sleepy farmer and set off on his way back.

It was child's play. Aldo was so relaxed that he was whistling.

Fiii-uuuu...

Clap clap clap!

The sound of hooves? A horse?

It must have run away from the farm, Aldo told himself. It sounded close. Aldo thought he could take it back to the farmer. Maybe he'd get a reward.

Clap clap.

A black silhouette emerged from the fog behind him.

The silhouette of a horse.

"Come here, big boy!" Aldo called out.

There was no need to tell it, because the horse was heading straight for him. And it had a vaguely menacing gait.

Come to think of it, they didn't have any horses at the farm.

Suddenly, a gap opened in the cloudy sky and the full moon lit up the beast's muzzle. The eyes! They were... white. After a second of dismay, Aldo ran away.

And the horse ran after him.

Clop clop clop clop!

It was fast. It was faster!

Aldo felt doomed. Then an idea suddenly struck him.

With a leap, he hid in a heather bush by the side of the road. Now he could only hope the monster hadn't seen him.

And so it was. The horse carried on straight ahead. From his hiding place, Aldo saw the hooves and had to cover his mouth to stop himself from screaming. They were covered in blood!

The boy stayed still, silent, his heart pounding, until that infernal clop-clop faded into the silence of the night. Then he emerged from the bush and ran home.

In the days that followed, Aldo Neri told everyone what he had seen. They all agreed it was a shocking story. But no one really believed him. And so the legend of the werehorse was born. Legend?

THAT'S HOW IT IS TODAY

Let's return to the present day. Peace Valley was a peaceful place, just as its name suggested. The old farm was no more; in its place stood Mr Gigi's riding school.

As well as looking after his own horses, Mr Gigi also looked after other people's. For example, Arci, the most intelligent, calm and affectionate horse that had ever passed through his stables.

He had arrived as a foal and grown up under the care and love of Gigi and his boys. Which children?

Bea, aged ten, Gigi's niece. She lived in the neighbouring village, but often went to visit her uncle and sometimes stayed overnight at the riding school.

Lubna, aged fourteen. She helped Mr Gigi look after the horses and was training to become a riding instructor (it was her dream). Every day, after school, she would cycle to the riding school.

Leo and Manuel were sixteen years old – that is, sixteen divided by two, which makes eight years each. They were classmates, sat next to each other in class, best friends, inseparable. Leo's mum had signed him up for Mr Gigi's riding lessons. So Manuel had begged his mum to sign him up for Mr Gigi's riding lessons too. And so it was done. All four of them, plus Gigi, were so fond of Arci...

"Come back here this instant!" Bea shouted impatiently, waving her pink brush. The horse she was trying to brush ran off, kicking, to nibble on a yellow flower. It was a bay horse, with a brown coat and a black mane. Just like Arci. Was it Arci? He didn't usually kick and let Bea brush him willingly. Was he in a bad mood?

"Berto! Come here, I said!"

Ah, there he was – It wasn't Arci. It was Berto. They looked exactly alike. But only physically. Berto was restless and skittish. Good-natured, certainly, but restless and skittish. The complete opposite of Arci.

Arci was a laid-back sort. Sometimes Mr Gigi would look at him with concern, and the reason for his concern was Gerolamo Gropponi, Arci's odious owner.

Gigi knew he didn't care for him; he'd never even stroked him (Arci, I mean, not Mr Gigi, who, incidentally, wouldn't have appreciated a stroke from that rough character at all). But Gropponi was always keen to emphasise that the horse belonged to him and couldn't wait for it to be ready so he could take it away.

Ready for what? For racing, of course! Gropponi would have wrung every last drop of sweat from him to win as many races as possible. To make as much money as possible. Ah, money! That's what he really loved and was happy to stroke!

It was a Friday in October when the call arrived at the Valle Pace riding school that Mr Gigi wished he'd never received.

IS THERE ANYTHING TO BE DONE?

"Yes? Hello?" replied Mr Gigi.

"It's Gropponi. Get the horse ready. I'm coming to collect it tomorrow."

Gigi was taken aback. He'd expected at least a bit more notice.

"Wh... which horse?"

"Listen, try not to squawk and don't ask stupid questions. MY horse. Darcy or whatever the hell his name is."

"His name is Arci," Gigi snapped (could that bloke not even remember his own horse's name?) and added: "But he's not ready yet."

"He is! Is he or isn't he five years old? I can do the maths myself, stable boy."

Gigi tried to stall: "It's better to wait until he's six. The horse will be more developed, more mature."

"More mature? What is that? A pear? Don't talk nonsense! I've got no time to waste. The horse is ready, and if he isn't, he'd better be by tomorrow morning."

"But..."

Click.

Gerolamo Gropponi had hung up.

Mr Gigi slumped back into his chair and couldn't help letting out a sigh.

"Are you feeling unwell, Uncle?" asked Bea, who had come into the office to fetch the exercise sheet for Berto (under the illusion that she could get him to do them, but that little girl was at least as stubborn as the horse).

"No, no, it's all right," lied Gigi.

But Bea was onto him: "Was that Gropponi on the phone?"

"Yes," muttered Gigi.

"About Arci?"

"Yes."

Bea swallowed.

"When's he coming to pick him up?"

"Tomorrow."

"TOMORROW?!? But he can't!"

"He can, unfortunately; the horse is his."

"Can't you do anything? There must be a way to stop him!"

Gigi shook his head.

Bea flung Berto's exercise sheet into the air and stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind her. She was furious. FURIOUS! Deep down, she knew it wasn't her uncle's fault, but at that moment she was angry with him too. There was nothing she could do about it, was there? Well, she'd sort it out then!

How? She didn't know.

It wasn't as if Lubna wanted to eavesdrop. That wasn't her style. She was a quiet, discreet girl. That was another reason why Arci was her favourite. They shared a certain affinity of character that had allowed her to forge a bond of deep trust with him.

It wasn't that she wanted to eavesdrop on Lubna, no, but at that moment she was painting the fence in front of the office window white and, in any case, even if she hadn't been there, she would have heard Bea's screams from all over the riding school.