

## THE SOLD ROPE

"PAUL," whispered Grandpa in the low voice he used when children and wild animals were asleep. "Paul, boy . . ."

At the sound of Grandpa's voice the Phantom neighed shrilly. Misty scrambled to her feet, swayed, then slid awkwardly along the floor of the truck. With a hungry little bleat, she found her mother's side and began nursing.

Paul opened his eyes, then quickly shut them. If this were a dream, he wanted to spin it out and make it last until the end of time. He wished Grandpa's voice would fade away, but it kept pricking him awake.

"Come, boy. Grandma is nigh crazy with worry over ye. The big pine tree fell atop the house last night and the Atlantic Ocean wetted our dooryard. I just couldn't come for ye till now."

Paul pulled himself up. His muscles ached. He could feel the wide stripes made by the boards of the truck across his back. He looked down at his long expanse of bare legs and suddenly remembered that he was wearing nothing but Grandpa's jacket over his underwear. He grinned at Grandpa.

Grandpa winked back. "I see you scamped my belongings," he chuckled. "It's any port in a storm, eh, lad?" Then he thought of his message. "Grandma's mixed some goose grease with onion syrup fer ye. Yer apt to catch a terrible fever," he quoted Grandma, but all the while his eyes were fondling the dam and her colt. "She says ye've got to come home and go to bed."

Paul felt the stickiness of his hand where the Phantom had nuzzled it. His voice tensed. "I can't leave, Grandpa. Today's the sale! We got to buy the Phantom and Misty."

"Maureen kin tend to that whilst ye get some sleep. I don't know what in thunderation made me protect that little feller fer ye last night. I must be getting addled in my old age. Now help me get the pair of 'em outen the truck and back in the corral so you can buy 'em legal-like at the sale."

But there was no need for help. With the truck backed up close to the corral gate, the Phantom



flew down the ramp. She smelled the rain-washed grass. She was crazy to get to it. Misty followed, a silver fluff of a shadow.



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The pony penning grounds were waking up when Maureen rode in on Watch Eyes. Volunteer firemen were clearing the damage done by the storm. Trucks bearing licenses from Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Washington, D.C., were beginning to line up close to the colt pens. A few children, their faces still flushed with sleep, darted here and there, talking to themselves: "That little black pony. I could name him Black Beauty!" "I want the one with the white stockings!"

"How-do, Maureen," called Tom, who on ordinary days was an oysterer. "Yer up and about mighty early. Reckon yer sharpenin' your appetite for the big dinner this noon! Or mebbe ye come to buy my last two chances on the sorrel pony bein' given away Saturday." And with a great flourish he whipped the tickets out of his pocket.

Maureen could think of no answer. She was not interested in the sorrel pony, and she had forgotten all about the dinner to be served in the big dining hall on the grounds. She managed to smile at Tom and thank him politely. Then, feeling of the money pouch around her neck and the piece of rope over her shoulder, she stated her business quickly. "I came to see the fire chief," she said.

"Nowheres about. He's been and gone."



"Oh!"

"Anything I can do?"

"Reckon not."

"Wal, he'll be back afore ye can say Chincoteague Isle."

Tying Watch Eyes to a tree, Maureen wandered about the grounds, waiting for the chief. She stopped at the colt pens and noticed that several of the shaggy-coated youngsters already wore sold ropes around their necks. She noticed, too, that most of them were beginning to eat for themselves. Only a few were whimpering for their mothers.

"The fire chief was right," she thought. "They're learning to be grownups."

She felt good toward the whole wide world as she walked toward the big corral. She watched two stallions fighting — dancing on their hind legs, lashing out with their forelegs. A news photographer was getting a picture of them. Finally she climbed the fence and jumped inside the corral.

The wild ponies were refreshed by the rain. They thundered past and around her. They paid her no more attention than if she had been a small tree. She was nothing but an obstacle to avoid. She stood listening to the wild music of their hooves. She liked to feel the little gusts of wind made by

their flying bodies. She liked the sight of their manes and tails frisking with the wind.

The Pied Piper's band was on the far side of the corral. He was policing his family, keeping his mares in a bunch. Maureen saw Misty stretched out at her mother's feet.

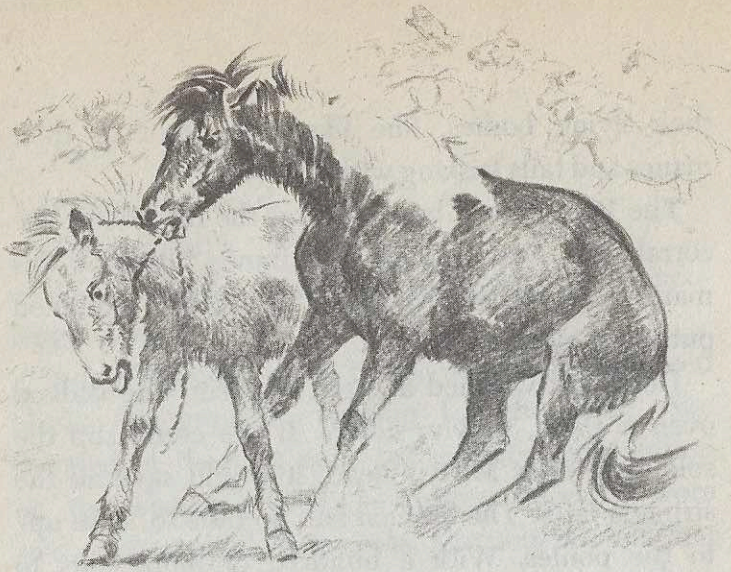
Her heart warmed at sight of them. She walked over to them, slowly, slowly. If she could slip the sold rope over Misty's head, it would save all the struggle later. The firemen had no time to "ease up" to the ponies. With a hundred or more colts to sell, they had to work fast. Often two men had to pick up a pony by its tail and its head in order to fasten a sold rope about its neck. Meanwhile the pony screamed and fought and struggled to get away.

"Probably it *doesn't* hurt," thought Maureen, "but I'd like to save Misty all that scared feeling."

Suddenly her eyes flew wide with horror. The Phantom was tugging at a rope tied around Misty's neck. A sold rope! "No! No! No!" Maureen shrieked. "Phantom!" she cried hysterically, "you're the only one who can unsell her. Try harder! Harder! Harder!"

Phantom was doing her best. With her big yellow teeth she was trying to sever the rope, but





Misty would pull away, thinking her mother was playing. She opened her little colt's mouth, biting back, neighing fiercely.

Maureen looked around helplessly. Just then she spied the fire chief coming toward the corral with Tom at his heels. She ran to them. "Misty's wearing a sold rope!" she cried. "Misty's been sold!" Then her voice failed her.

"Who's been sold?" asked the chief, puzzled.

"Who?" echoed Tom.

"Misty!" she choked, trying to swallow her tears.

The fire chief knotted his brows. "Now suppose you tell me who Misty is," he said kindly.

"Why, she's the Phantom's colt, and Paul and I

— we've been saving for months to buy the Phantom, and now we want both her and her colt. And we have a hundred and two dollars," she added breathlessly as she patted the money around her neck, "right here in Grandpa's tobacco pouch. And in four months more we can save up another hundred. I can go clamming, and I can catch soft-shell crabs, and Paul can shuck oysters, and Uncle Ralph will give us his night catch of fat-backs, and Paul and I can go up and down the streets calling, 'Fat-backs for sale, nice fresh fat-backs for sale!'"

"Well, why in thunder didn't you kids tell me!" exploded the fire chief. Then his voice quieted. "I'm sorry, Maureen. I didn't know. Why, less than an hour ago a man by the name of Foster came through on his way to Norfolk. Had business there, he said, and couldn't get back until after the sale. I asked Tom here to show him around, and he took a fancy to the filly's markings."

"He bought Misty?"

"Paid fifty dollars down," nodded the chief. "Insisted on buying the Phantom too, just so the colt'll get a good start in life." He took a deep breath. "Tom and I," he added, "tied the sold rope around the colt's neck, but it's going to take a lot more than two of us to handle that Phantom."



Maureen watched the sun slide out from behind a low cloud and make diamonds of the raindrops on the grass. She turned her back on it. How could the sun shine when things went wrong?

The fire chief clasped and unclasped his cane. "I had no idea," he spoke quietly. "If you had only said something about it yesterday."

Maureen was about to leave, but Tom called her back.

"How's about taking my last chances on the sorrel?" he suggested. "There's a *gentle* critter. And ye'd still have a hundred dollars to spend on candy and things."

Maureen raised her eyes to Tom's. Then she smiled at him through her tears. She felt sorry for Tom. "Guess he's never really wanted anything," she thought, as she slowly walked over to untie Watch Eyes.