

quad 4

*Chapter 13*

A PONY CHANGES HANDS

PAUL TOOK THE NEWS WITHOUT A WORD, but all the sunburn suddenly washed out of his face, leaving it pinched and white.

The day passed in a kind of dream. Both Paul and Maureen tried to stay away from the grounds, but something drew them there. Yet they no longer belonged to the happy crowds. They were onlookers now, like hungry people on the outside of a restaurant window.

Sick with longing, they watched colts being tugged and pushed and lifted into waiting cars. Some went off in station wagons, some in trailers, some in dealers' trucks. Many of them squealed and kicked and fought. A few were too frightened to struggle.

They stared fixedly as Grandpa bought a truck-



load of yearlings. "Soon we'll be gentling them — for someone else," Maureen whispered sadly to Paul.

The day that was to be so full of excitement dragged out. Even the merry-go-round with its brightly painted ponies and its brassy music did not help them forget. To Paul, the music kept wheezing, "You found and lost Misty! You found and lost Misty! You found and lost Misty!" To Maureen it was a noisy mockery.

"We'll have us another hoss family. Just as purty. Mebbe purtier," promised Grandpa Beebe



as they sat at a table in the dining hall at noon. But Grandpa's words sounded bigger than his voice.

The ladies of the auxiliary hovered over them anxiously, heaping their plates with oysters and clam fritters, and great helpings of Chincoteague pot pie.

"Land sakes!" exclaimed a motherly person to Paul and Maureen. "What's the matter with you two young'uns? Such puny appetites! Take my Delbert now, he's on his fourth helping."

But try as they would, Maureen and Paul could not eat. The food that usually tasted so good lodged





in their throats. Even Grandpa Beebe had no appetite. "Ef I didn't *know* 'twas plump oysters and rolled-out dumplings with chunks of chicken," he said, "I'd swear I was eatin' bran mash!"

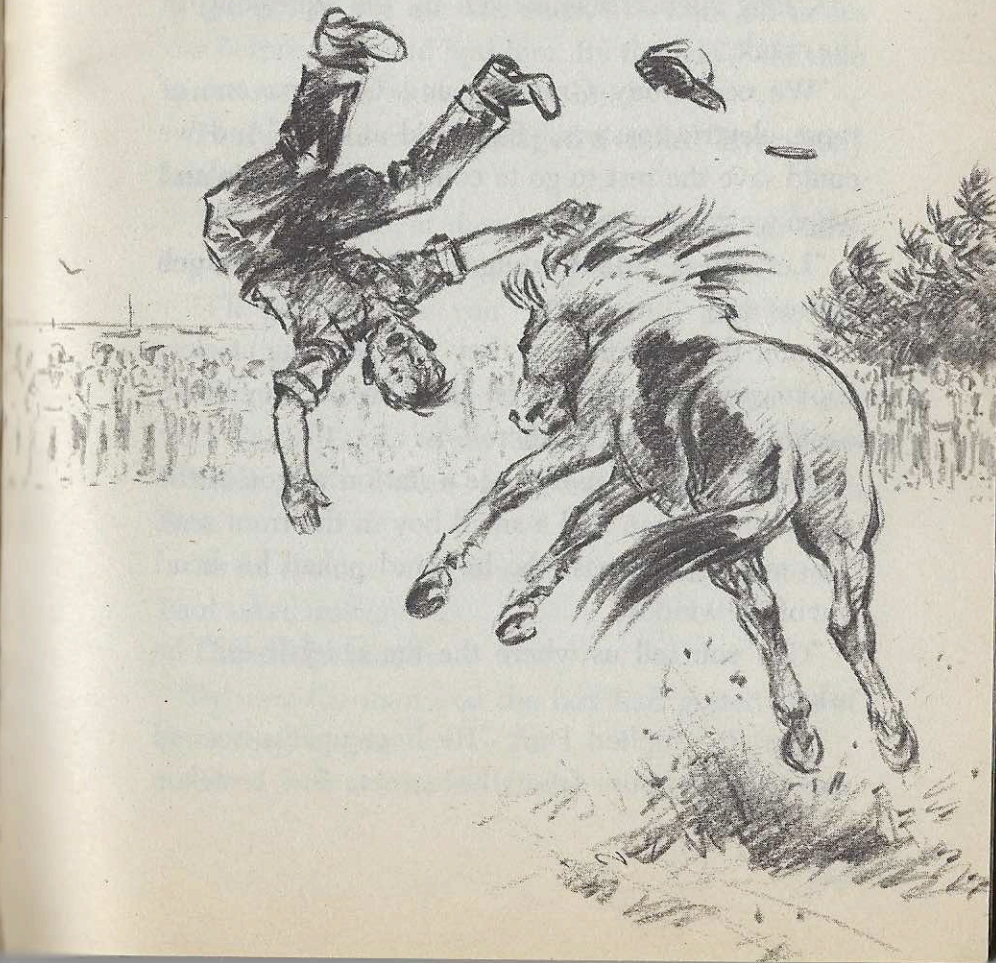
In the afternoon there was the bronco busting. It was like any Wild West show, except there were no mountains in the distance. Only fishing boats and the sea, and gulls flying, and a soft wind singing in the pines.

The wild ponies, crazed with fright, were let out of chutes. While the crowds gasped and shrieked, the ponies crow-hopped. They bucked. They threw their riders at once, or tolerated them for brief seconds. The people cheered madly when an oyster-tonger, wearing a red baseball cap and holding a big unlighted cigar in his mouth, stayed on his bronco for a matter of minutes. And just when he was doffing his cap and bowing to the crowds, the pony tossed him and his cigar and red cap high into the air.

An instant's pause — then such a whooping and laughter went up, as he recovered his cigar and pulled his cap over his face, that it was heard by Grandma in the kitchen at Pony Ranch. Paul and Maureen watched, but they were not really a part of the laughing, cheering crowd.

Thursday night, Friday passed. The Pied Piper and all the brood mares except the Phantom were driven into the channel to swim back to Assateague for another year of freedom.

It was Saturday before Paul and Maureen were able to talk about their loss. They were in the doorway, taking turns grinding clams for Grandma.





"If only I had never gone on the roundup," Paul said bitterly.

Maureen shook her head. "It was my fault. If only I'd gotten to the grounds at four 'stead of five!"

"If only I'd told the fire chief the night before."

"What'll we do with the hundred and two dollars?" Maureen asked.

A long silence was broken by the squeaking of the crank.

"We could buy Grandma and Grandpa one of those electric toasters," Paul said at last. "And we could save the rest to go to college on the mainland when we get grown."

"Let's do it," Maureen agreed, but without much enthusiasm.

Later that morning, as they were looking at electric toasters in a window on Main Street, they heard a man's voice call, "Hi, there!"

They turned around to see a station wagon at the curb, with a man and a small boy in the front seat. The man leaned past the boy and poked his head out of the window.

"Can you tell us where the fire chief lives?" he asked.

"Yes sir," replied Paul. "He lives up the second street, third house from the corner. But I reckon

he's still at the grounds. They're having the drawing on the sorrel this morning."

The boy's head shot out of the car. "The drawing's over," he exclaimed. "And guess what!"

"What?" asked Paul and Maureen.

"I won the pony!" he said breathlessly.

"That's right," nodded the man, who did not seem to share the boy's eagerness. "And now we've got to see the fire chief. He went off in his car before we could find him. By the way," the man questioned, "do you two know him?"

Paul and Maureen managed a smile. "Everybody knows him," they said.

The next moment they spied the chief's car turning in at a gas station on the opposite corner.

"I'll get him for you," Paul said, and he ran across the street.

"Hmm," mused the chief as he limped back with Paul. "Looks to me like Foster, the man from Norfolk. Only before, he didn't have a boy with him."

"Is he the one who bought Misty and Phantom?" Paul asked quickly.

The chief nodded.

By now the man and the boy had gotten out of the station wagon.

"How do," said the fire chief.



"Good morning," replied the man. He took off his hat and began twirling it nervously in his hands. He cleared his throat. Then he pulled a clean white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead.

"This is Freddy, my young son, and we . . ." He hesitated a moment, then hurried the words, "and we have a problem. You see, the other morning your man Tom sold us a chance on a pony, and I forgot all about it. That is," he laughed, "until this morning when I stopped off at the grounds to show Freddy the tiny foal I had bought for him."

"Tell him, Daddy! Tell him!" interrupted Freddy.

"Just as we stepped out of the car," Mr. Foster continued, "they were raffling off the sorrel colt, and —"

"We won!" shouted Freddy.

"No!" exclaimed the chief, and Paul and Maureen saw the tired look suddenly lift from his face.

"We won! We won!" cried Freddy. "Now tell him the rest, Daddy. Tell him!"

Mr. Foster spoke very quickly now, as if the sooner told the better. "You see, sir, Freddy likes the sorrel pony because it is almost the color of my horse. He likes it better than the new-born foal."

Paul and Maureen could hardly breathe. They were staring at Mr. Foster as if they could not believe what they heard.

"Of course," Mr. Foster added, "I appreciate that Pony Penning Day is over and you may not have another chance to sell the little foal. In that case," he said, putting his hat back on his head, "in that case, why — we'll just have to hold to our bargain. Though what we'll do with *two* colts and how we'll get that wild Phantom home has me worried."

There was a long moment of stillness. An old man came along wheeling a cart of squash and watermelons. As the man went by, a dog lying in the doorway of the hardware store thumped his tail noisily. Across the street a juke box was spilling out the words, "Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam."

Still the chief made no answer. Instead, he hooked his cane over Paul's shoulder. Then he took a notebook out of his pocket and slowly, carefully, began thumbing through it, reading notations on each page. Finally he tore a leaf out of the book and took a fifty-dollar bill out of his wallet.

Handing the money and the page of writing to Mr. Foster, he said, "There was a boy and a girl had their eyes on the mare and her colt. I can't be



sure," he said with a wink, "but I've a mind they still might be interested."

Maureen gave a little gasp. Then she picked up the astonished Freddy and gave him a sound kiss.

"Don't mind her," Paul said to Freddy. "Just girls' fribble." Then he grabbed the fire chief's hand and wrung it until his own ached. He shook hands with Mr. Foster too, and even with Freddy.

At last he threw back his head like a spirited horse and let out such a loud whinny that it was heard the full length of Chincoteague Island.

