

Chapter 14

THE WICKIE

USUALLY A COLT LEARNS FROM ITS MOTHER. It hears her whicker at sound of man's voice. It sees her gallop to meet him when he comes down to the corral. It sees her lip man's hand. Soon the colt discovers that man represents the good things of life — delicious surprises in the way of sugar, carrots, apples. And presently it is trying to please man too; not only to be rewarded with something to eat, but to enjoy the tingly feeling of his hand or the pleasant sound of his voice.

With Phantom and Misty, things happened the other way around. Misty accepted human beings right from the start. Their hands felt good to her. She would brace herself, her forelegs splayed out, while Paul or Maureen gently stroked her neck or traced the white blaze on her face. She would lean toward them, asking in the only way she knew that

the attentions never stop. Whenever they brushed her foretop or her mane, she lowered her gold eye-lashes as if dreaming the most wonderful dreams.

"I declare," chuckled Grandpa. "That Misty 'minds me of a girl gettin' beautified for her first dance!"

Never was a colt more curious! A wickie was something to be investigated. First she nosed it. It



tickled her colty whiskers and made her sneeze. Sneezing was fun. And one day, without knowing how it happened, she was wearing the wickie around her neck. It did not hurt! It did not hurt at all. Paul and Maureen were at the other end of it, and they were singing softly,

Come along, little Misty,
Come along.

Misty moved a step toward them, her ears pricked as if to catch the music in her name. And, wonder of wonders, she was rewarded with a lump of sugar as she walked along.

When Phantom saw that Misty was not being hurt, she would come forward too. Nervously she would take what was offered and then back away, a safe distance behind her colt.

Grandma often came out to watch, with a dish of apples to pare, or an armful of clothes to patch.

"This be the topsy-turviest pair I've ever seed!" she would laugh softly. "'Stead of the colt following its mommy, it's t'other way around."

It was days, however, before the Phantom would let anyone touch her. The mere placement of a hand upon her coat acted like an electric shock. She would bolt away, snorting in fright. But as August wore on, the horseflies became so vicious that she turned to Paul and Maureen for help.

"She's missing the surf," Paul said as they watched her trying to shudder her coat to drive the flies away. But the flies seemed to stick faster, drawing blood until Phantom was crazy with pain. They watched her sidle up to the other ponies on the ranch to get the benefit of their swishing tails, but the other ponies bunched up and ran away from her. She tried standing head-to-tail with Misty, but Misty's tail was so short and floppy that it was not much good.

Finally, when she was almost exhausted, she let Paul and Maureen flick the flies for her. She would offer first one leg and then another. And before the fly season was over, she had learned to "shake hands" like any circus pony.

Riding Phantom was quite another matter. Yet it, too, came about so gradually that she was quite unaware how it happened. First Maureen made a wide girth out of an old bedsheet and fitted it around Phantom's body immediately back of her forelegs. Once Phantom discovered that she could gallop just as fast with a band around her body, she no longer minded it. Next, Paul fastened a small sack of sand to the girth. Phantom tried in vain to buck it off, but at last she seemed to realize that she could run as fast as ever with a sack on her back. After that she no longer fought it.

"If she'll carry the sand, she'll carry us!" Paul concluded.

And so it was. By the time frost came, they were riding her bareback, with nothing but a single "come-along" rope made of wickie.

"Phantom just won't take a metal bit in her mouth," Paul explained to Grandpa one evening as he and Maureen stood watching him trim one of his ponies' hooves.

"Great jumping mullets!" Grandpa exploded. "This pinto's forefeet has growed out so far I'm going to need my old-timey razor asides my snips. Maureen, you go git my razor. Now what was it you said about Phantom?" Grandpa asked as he waited.

"She won't take a metal bit," Paul repeated. "We're still using the old wickie for bit and bridle both."

"Wa-al, ain't she travelin' where you want her to?" Grandpa barked, turning to look at Paul.

"Oh yes. We just lean the way we want to go and lay the wickie over against her neck."

"What more do ye want?"

"Nothing, Grandpa. Nothing at all. Maureen and I, we thought you'd be ashamed of us for not doing the job right — on our own pony."

"Ashamed!" bellowed Grandpa, straightening up and rubbing both his ears. "I'm so dang proud it's a wonder I ain't busted my suspender straps.

Name me two other kids as has gentled a three-year-old wild mare."

Maureen came running with the razor.

"Walk!" commanded Grandpa. "How often do ye got to be told that if ye want to live to be a grownup ye should never run with anything as sharp as my old-timey razor?"

"Grandpa says it's all right!" Paul told Maureen. "Phantom doesn't ever need to know a metal bit."

"Not ever?" asked Maureen.

"Not ever!" repeated Grandpa as he wielded the razor in an expert manner. "I reckon she'll be happier without ever knowing."

