

Chapter 15

THE FIRE CHIEF
PAYS A CALL

THERE WAS NO QUESTION about Misty's happiness. She pranced around the ponies that came and went as if she knew that they were temporary guests, while she, Misty, was one of the family. This was her home.

When she playfully nipped the older ponies, they would lay back their ears until they saw who it was. Then they would whinny, as much as to say, "It was only Misty."

She could be wild as a hare or gentle as a lamb. When the days grew brisk, she would *gallumph* across the hard marsh; then suddenly she would stop stock-still, letting a gull alight on her back, while her nostrils quivered with excitement.

"Do you reckon Phantom is happy too?" Maureen asked one day when the winter wind blew raw and cold.

"'Course she's happy," replied Paul. "Did you see me ride her down to the point before breakfast? She was neighing for joy. Her hooves hardly touched the earth."

"Oh, I know she's happy then, but . . ."

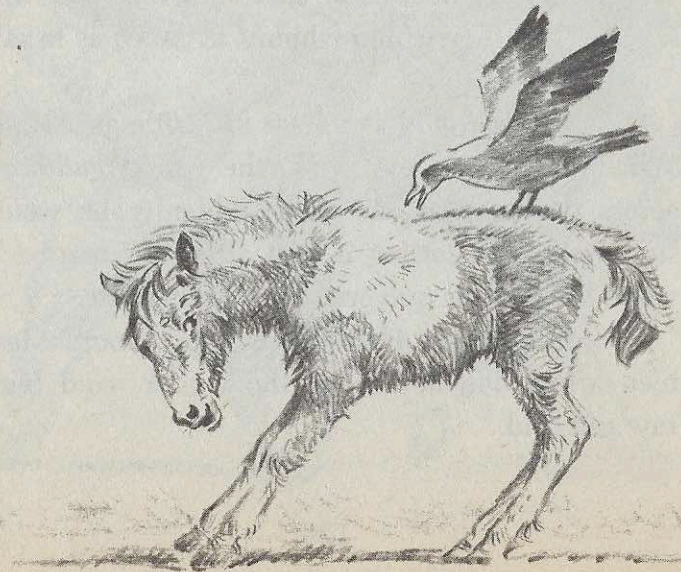
"But what?"

"Well, sometimes I see her leaning out over the fence — not yearning for the grass on the other side of it, but just looking away toward the White Hills and the sea."

"And is there something . . .?" Paul asked after a little thought. "Is there something *far away* about her?"

"That's what I mean, Paul."

"I've noticed it, too," Paul admitted. "Sometimes when you can see the wild ponies frisking along



Assateague Beach, she seems to be watching them. And it's kind of sad — like the time you wanted the doll with real hair at the carnival and you won the pencil box instead."

Maureen blushed. "Now that I'm grown up, I've almost forgotten about the doll. And Phantom'll forget her young days, too."

"Sure she will. We'll race her every day. She's happy then."

There was no doubt about it. The Phantom was wild with happiness when she raced. She showed it in the arching of her neck, in the upward pluming of her tail, in the flaring of her nostrils. Paul or Maureen had only to press their legs against her sides to make her surge forward. Then she would skim the earth like the gulls she knew so well.

With the passing days, the island folk began to notice her speed.

"Reckon Black Comet's going to have a little competition next Pony Penning," some said, wagging their heads wisely.

Others sneezed at the idea. "Phantom's got too much wildness in her," they said. "She's just as liable to jump the fence as run around the track. You can't depend on them wild ones."

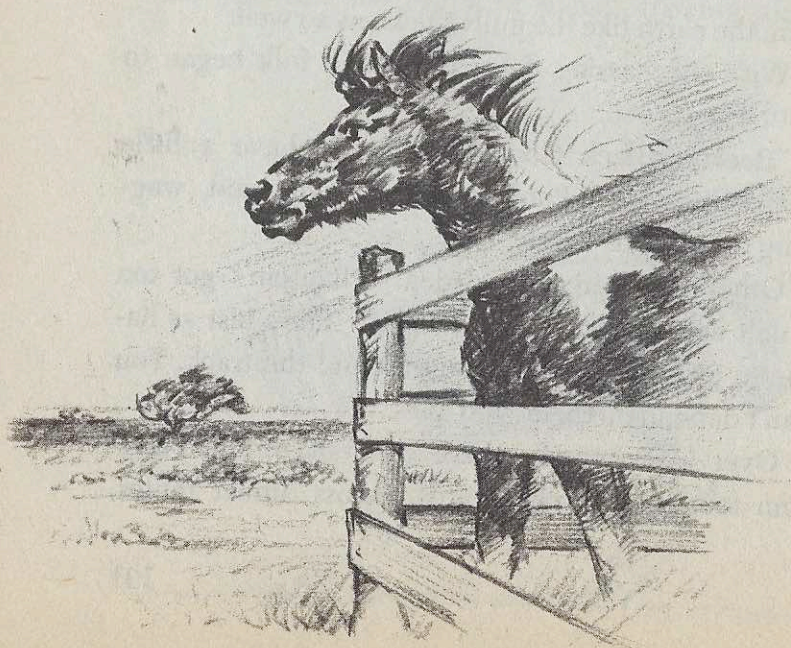
Over in Pocomoke there was talk of the Phantom too. In the schoolyards, across dinner tables,

in the barbershops — everywhere the Phantom's name could be heard.

"She's built for speed," one mainlander admitted, "but I still favor Black Comet. He's used to the crowds. He knows how to snug along the fence. He knows how to save his power for the home stretch."

Spring came early to the little sea island. By the first week in April, myrtle bushes were covered over with a yellow fuzz and pine trees wore light-green finger tips to show another year's growth.

Phantom seemed to grow more restless as the season advanced. When Paul and Maureen came home from school they sometimes found her pacing around and around the corral, her head low-



ered. Other times she stood leaning far out over the fence, and there was a wild, sad look about her.

"Maybe she's looking for us," Maureen would say hopefully.

"Maybe!" nodded Paul.

One late afternoon toward the end of April the fire chief paid a surprise call.

"We 'spected you was coming!" exclaimed Grandma, her round face beaming. "See? Maureen's got a place all laid for ye."

The fire chief smiled. "One — two — three — four — five," he counted the blue-and-white plates around the kitchen table. Then he sniffed the ham baking, and he saw the heaping mound of oysters rolled in eggs and cracker meal and fried a golden brown. He moistened his lips.

"I'm staying!" he said.

There was not much talk while Grandma cut slivers of pink ham, dished up the oysters, and ladled hot gravy over the dumplings. And there was even less while everyone ate his fill.

At last the fire chief pushed his plate aside and lighted his pipe. "I've really come to see the owners of the Phantom," he said between puffs. "Wonder if they'd be interested in . . ."

At exactly that moment the fire chief's pipe went

out and he had to stop in the middle of what he had to say. Slowly he found a match and relit it.

Paul's and Maureen's eyes were fixed on the chief's. They leaned forward on the very edge of their chairs.

"Wonder if they'd be interested in . . ." he stopped to puff and puff.

"Yes?" questioned Paul quickly.

"In racing the Phantom against Black Comet."

Paul's eyes caught Maureen's. Then their faces broke into a grin.

"Ho-ho-ho," chortled Grandpa. "I don't know who the joke's on. But these two been expectin' to race Phantom ever since last Pony Pennin'."

"Even before that," Maureen said gleefully. "Why, that morning over on Assateague when we first saw the Phantom, we talked about it then."

Paul blushed. "Guess we just took it for granted you'd ask us."

The fire chief laughed heartily. "Well, now it's settled for sure," he said as he stood up to go. "Lucy Lee can't run this year. She'll be having a new colt along about then. And Patches has been sold to a dealer. So it'll be the Phantom against Black Comet and Delbert's chestnut filly, Firefly."

"And may the best hoss win!" prayed Grandpa as he nervously fingered the bristles of his ear.