

WINGS ON HER FEET

THE LAST THURSDAY IN JULY dawned hot and still. Another Pony Penning Day had come!

By sunup the causeway between the mainland and Chincoteague was choked with traffic—trucks, station wagons, jeeps, cars of every description, bringing visitors to the island. They watched excitedly as the wild ponies swam ashore after the roundup. They lined the streets to see the procession to the pens; they cheered the bronco busters. But even after these events were over, the crowds kept on coming. For this year the big event was the race. Phantom was running! A wild sea horse against the sleek, well-trained Black Comet, winner for three years.

Toward evening a light wind came up, whisking sheep clouds before it. The sun was a huge red balloon hovering over the bay as Paul and Mau-

reen, riding double on Phantom, turned into the pony penning grounds.

Maureen slid to her feet, and before she could whisper a word of encouragement into the Phantom's ear she was caught like a fly in a web. Her schoolmates, her uncles and aunts—everyone wanted to be with her during the race. They felt sorry for her because she was not riding. They seemed to wrap themselves about her until she could hardly breathe. Oh, how she longed to be by herself! Then she could race *with* Paul and the Phantom! Only by being alone could she *be* Paul and Phantom both.

It was the voice over the loud-speaker that came to her rescue. "Tonight, ladies and gentlemen," the voice blared, "Black Comet from Pocomoke races against Firefly and the Phantom!"

Everyone began running toward the track. Maureen slipped away from her friends and lost herself in the crowds. She wedged her way into a small opening between strangers, and soon she was standing at the rails, her stomach against a fence post. She heard strange voices all about her. But now there was no need to listen to them. They were as unimportant as the little insect voices of the night.

She drew a deep breath as the names of the three entries were announced again.

"There comes Black Comet!" the cry went up on all sides. "There he is!"

She saw Black Comet amble out on the track, aloof and black as night. He seemed bored with the entire business. Maureen would not have been surprised to see him yawn.

Now Firefly, a tall, rangy mare, pranced nervously to the starting post. Maureen's eyes passed over her lightly, then lingered on the Phantom, who was parading to the post with dignity in her manner. She seemed unaware of the crowds, as if for her they did not exist. Her head was uplifted, her nose testing the winds, her body trembling. She could not understand the delay. She snuffed the wind hungrily. The wind was calling her, yet Paul was holding her back.

At last the signal was given. A roar went up from the crowd.

"They're off!"

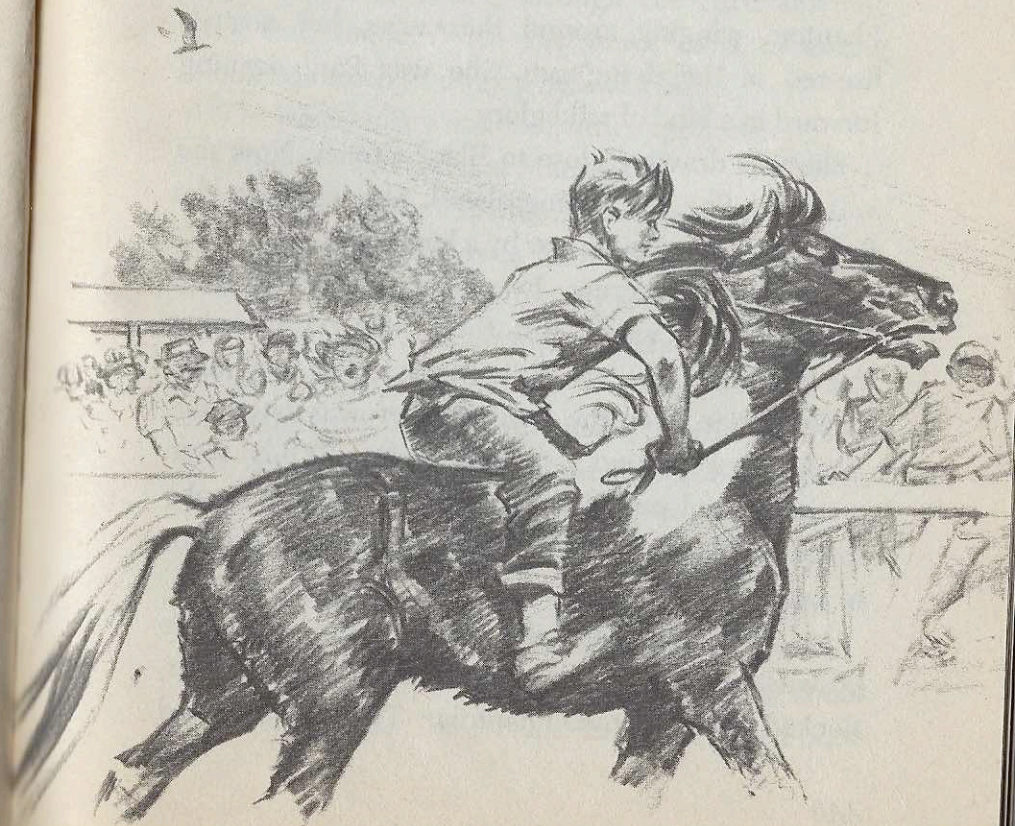
"Black Comet at the rail," came the clipped voice over the loud-speaker, "Phantom on the outside. But it's Firefly who's taking the lead!"

From then on no one could hear the announcer for all the yelling. The changeable crowds were calling, "Firefly! Firefly!"

Firefly held the lead the first quarter, then Black Comet shot forward and pulled out in front.

Maureen dug her fingernails into the fence rail. "Phantom!" she prayed. "Oh, Phantom! Get a-going! It's a race."

But the Phantom was not running a race. She was enjoying herself. She was a piece of thistle-down borne by the wind, moving through space in wild abandon. She was coming up, not to pass Fire-



fly and Black Comet, but for the joy of flying. Her legs went like music. She was sweeping past Firefly now. She was less than a length behind Black Comet.

The people climbed up on the fence rails in a frenzy of excitement.

"Come on, Black Comet!" screamed the crowds from Pocomoke. "Come on!"

"Gee-up, Phantom!" cried the island folk.

Maureen was no longer an onlooker. She was the Phantom winging around the curve, her nostrils fire-red in the dying sun. She was Paul, leaning forward in a kind of wild glory.

She was drawing close to Black Comet. Now she was even. She was sailing ahead. She was over the finish line. She was winner by a length!

The crowds grew hysterical. "It's Phantom! Phantom! She won!" But there was no stopping the Phantom! She was flying on around the track.

The voice over the loud-speaker was laughing. "Only once around," it was saying. "Only once around." Paul pulled back on the wickie and spoke softly in Phantom's ear. Gradually he brought her to a stop.

Maureen was laughing, and crying too. The crowds pushed past her, dived between the rails, flocked around the Phantom. They yelled and

thumped one another on the back as the judge handed Paul a purse.

Paul felt of its bulging contents. Then his eyes swept the crowds.

"Here — here I am!" cried Maureen.

Every eye turned to see whom Paul wanted. When they discovered Maureen, standing on the top rail of the fence like a bird on a twig, friends and strangers too clapped and cheered. In an instant Paul was riding through the little opening they had made. With the fence as a mounting block, Maureen swung up behind Paul.

The island folk went mad with happiness.

"Hoo-ray for Paul and Maureen!"

"Hoo-ray for the Phantom!" they rejoiced.

But Paul and Maureen found only one face in all that sea of faces and heard only one voice in all that blur of noise. It was Grandpa Beebe's. "Git home," he bellowed. "Tell Grandma."

All the way home Paul talked to the Phantom. "Do you know," he murmured, "do you know you won twelve whole dollars? And we're going to spend it all on you?"

"We could buy her red plumes, and ribbons to braid in her mane," suggested Maureen.

Paul leaned far forward to get as close as he could to Phantom's ear. "We could buy you shiny brass

and leather trappings," he said. "You could be handsomer than any horse in the king's guard."

The Phantom let out a long whinny into the deepening twilight.

Paul laughed and laughed. "Want to know what she said?"

"What'd she say, Paul?"

"She said, 'Buy that toaster for Grandma and Grandpa. As for me,' she said, 'all I want is wings on my feet!'"

