

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!'"



Chapter 18

WILD BUGLE

IT RAINED FITFULLY DURING THE NIGHT following the race. By morning the rain stopped and the sun broke through softly in slanting rays, drawing the moisture upward in thick curtains of mist.

After the excitement of the day before, matters on Pony Ranch were settling down to their usual routine. Paul and Maureen were busy with chores, Paul repairing the chicken house and Maureen scrubbing the water pans. Misty tagged first one, then the other — like a puppy with two masters.

Close to the fence stood the Phantom. She kept lifting her head upward, as if to worship the miracle of the sun drawing water. From time to time Paul took sidelong glances at her.

"Let's take turns racing her as soon as our chores are done," he called to Maureen. "You can be first."

Maureen smiled to herself. She knew that Paul

was trying to make it up to her for not riding in the race. She hurried with her chores. Then, with Misty at her heels, she hung her apron on the clothesline and went to get the wickie.

When the Phantom caught sight of the wickie she whinnied, then stood trembling while Maureen slipped the ropelike root between her teeth, brought it under her chin, and tied a square knot. It was strange how gentle Phantom could be. But even in her gentleness there was a wilding look in her eye, as if only her body were inside the corral while her real self lived somewhere far away.

Grabbing Phantom's mane, Maureen jumped onto her back.

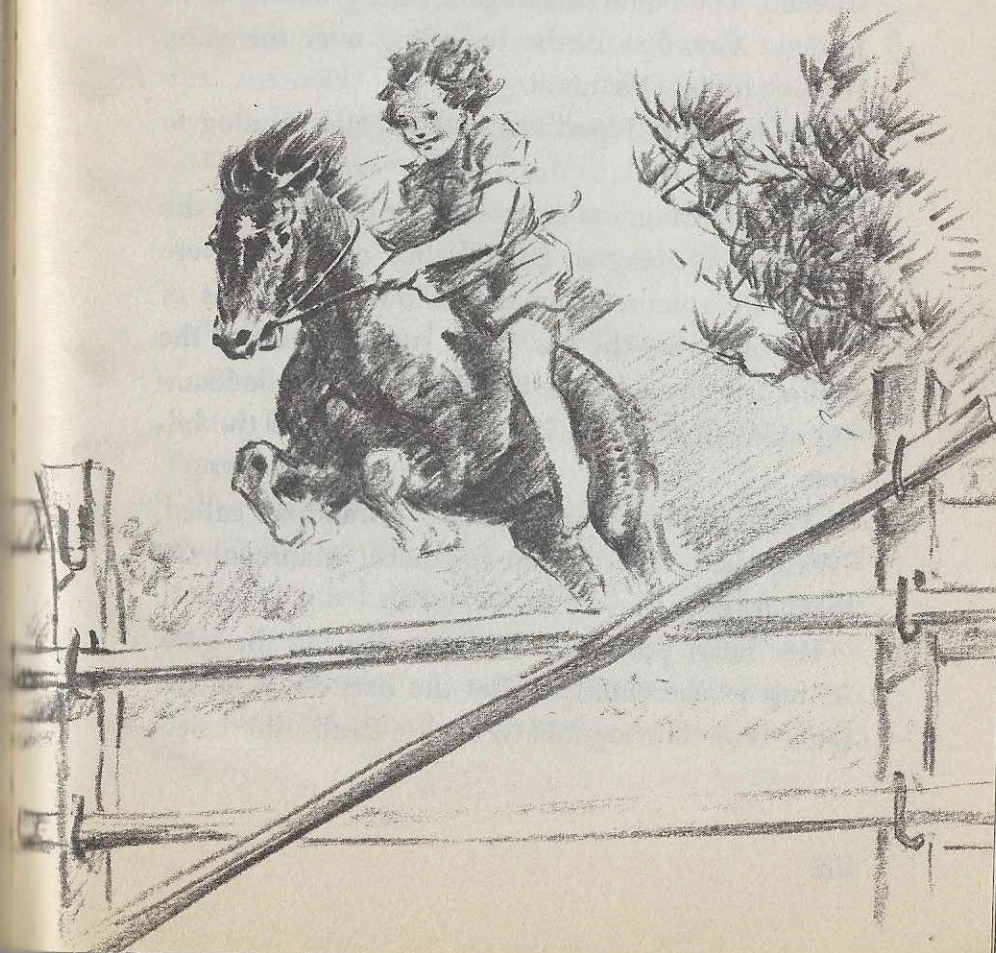
"Ready!" she called to Paul.

Paul dropped his hammer and came running to let down the bars of the gate, which fitted into horseshoes nailed to the fence posts. Phantom pawed the ground nervously as if irked by Paul's slowness.

With one bar down, Maureen put her heels into Phantom's side and Phantom sailed over the hurdle and out upon the marshy plain.

Misty tried to follow but Paul pushed her back. "Soon we'll be racing you too," he promised, combing her foretop with his fingers. "But today we got to make Phantom happy."

Then he carefully replaced the top bars, climbed over the fence, and wandered out to a lone pine tree. There he stood, leaning up against the tree, waiting his turn. His blood quickened as he watched Phantom whip across the little point of land that went down to meet the sea. Around and across and up and down the flat tongue of land she swept, like the sea mews that soared overhead.



At last Paul waved them in. "My turn now!"

At exactly the moment when Maureen turned Phantom over to Paul, there was the sound of a ringing neigh in the distance. It speared the morning stillness. It seemed to come, not from the sea, but from the Spanish galleon, back across the ages.

Phantom's ears pricked. She jerked her head in the direction of Assateague Island. Tremblingly she listened. The bugle came again, strong and clear. It brought Grandpa Beebe bounding over the gate, running toward Phantom.

"It's the Pied Piper!" he yelled. "He's coming to git the Phantom."

Paul and Maureen strained their eyes toward the island of Assateague, but all they could see were the white spumes from the billows and skeins of mist rising from the sea. Then suddenly one of the whitecaps seemed to be flying free. It was the foaming mane of the Pied Piper, racing in with the billows.

"Git on Phantom's back!" Grandpa called. "Whup her, Paul! Whup her hard! Maureen! Git that gate open!"

Her heart pounding, Maureen flew to the gate. As fast as she could, she let the bars down, at the same time shoving Misty back. "Paul!" she cried.

"Get a handful of her mane. Ride her toward Misty."

With a gasp of anguish she looked back. Paul was not trying to hold Phantom. He was slipping the wickie out of her mouth. He was giving Phantom her freedom.

"Oh, Paul!" screamed Maureen. "Hold her! Hold her! Don't let her go!" But her words were lost. The Phantom's whinnies were high with excitement. The Pied Piper was heading straight for her, his neck thrust forward, his head down, his eyes hidden by that long creamy foretop.

Grandpa waved his hat, trying to head him off, his arms whirling like a windmill. The Pied Piper veered around him. Then he snorted and trumpeted to the heavens.

"Paul!" bellowed Grandpa. "You'll be tromped down. Git outen the way!"

But Paul stood there as if caught in the Pied Piper's spell.

For a moment the Phantom hesitated. She looked obediently to Paul, her master. Then that wild bugle sounded again. It seemed to awaken some force within her, creating a curious urging in her mind. A shudder of excitement went through her. She twisted her body high in the air, as if she were

shaking herself free — free of fences that imprisoned, free of lead ropes, free of stalls that shut out the smell of pines and the sound of the sea.

An impatient whinny escaped her. She whirled past Paul, then ran flying to meet the Pied Piper.

The air went wild with greeting. Deep rumbling neighs. High joyous whickers. The stallion and the mare were brushing each other with their noses,



talking together in soft little grunts and snorts, as animals will. At last the Pied Piper nipped her thigh, urging her forward. This time the Phantom did not hesitate. She flew toward her island home. Only once she turned her head as if she were looking backward.

“Take good care of my baby,” she seemed to say. “She belongs to the world of men, but I — I belong to the isle of the wild things!”

For long seconds Paul and Grandpa and Maureen stood stock-still. They watched the Pied Piper plunge into the surf until he seemed part of the flying foam. They watched the Phantom until all they could see was the white map on her withers. Then the map smalled until it too was lost among the whitecaps of the sea.

The air about them quivered like a violin string. Then suddenly the string snapped, and the everyday world was all about once more. Grandpa was no longer the wiry man who had bounded over the fence. He was himself, gnarled and a little stiff-legged as he walked to the gate. Paul followed along behind him, and some of the Phantom’s happiness seemed to shine in his face. He had given her the freedom she longed for.

Maureen lowered the bars of the gate for them, then put them back in place.

With one accord the old man and the boy and girl went to the Phantom's stall. It was not empty. Misty's quizzical little face with its funny blaze was peering around at them. She came trotting out of the door and gave Paul's face a great swipe with her wet tongue. It was as if she had said, "Why is everyone so quiet? I'm here. Me! Misty!"

She reached out for Maureen too, and as Maureen turned her cheek to be nuzzled, she noticed a few copper-colored hairs from Phantom's tail caught in the half-door of the stall. Winding them into a circlet, she fastened them above the manger.

"Guess she was just a Phantom after all," Maureen spoke quietly.

"'Course she was," Paul said.



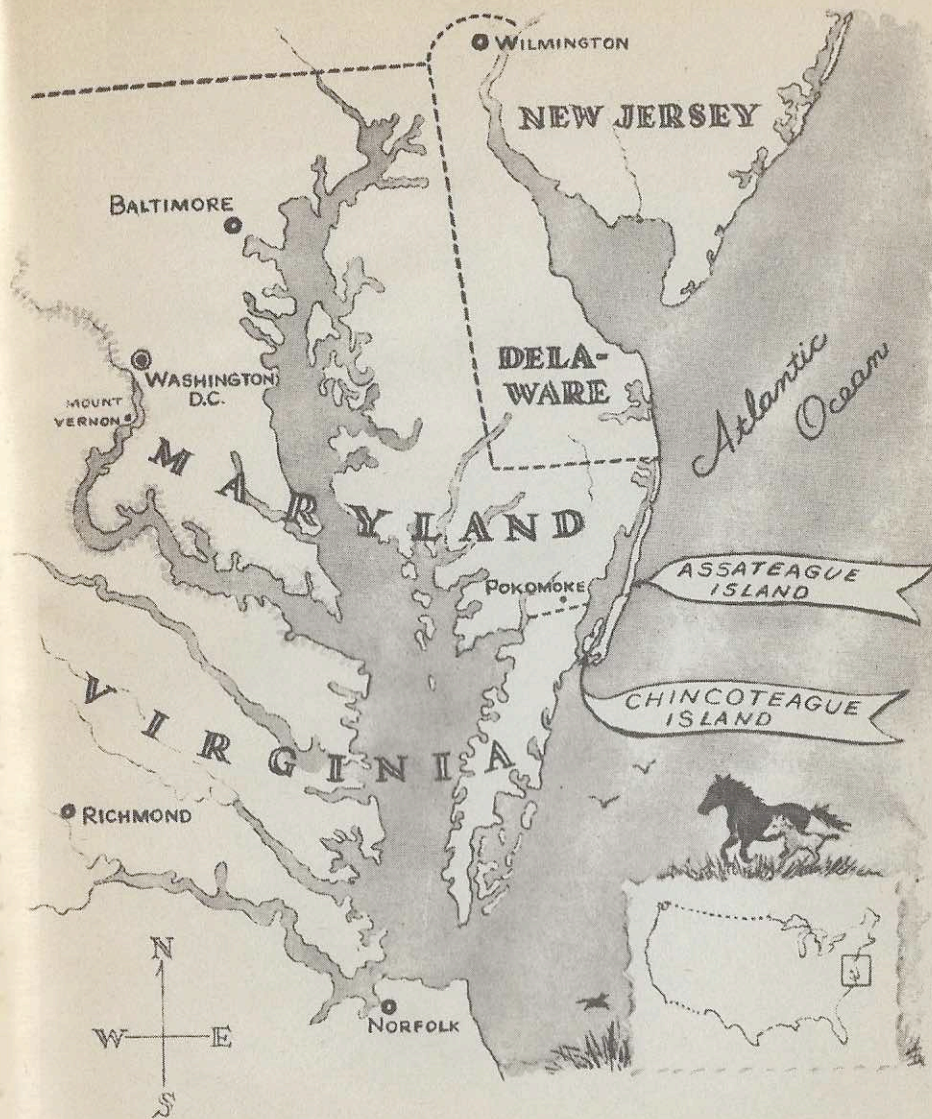
Grandpa began working hard at the bristles in his ears. "Ye done the right thing, children," he said huskily. "Phantom wuz never what you'd call happy. She belongs to Assateague. But Misty here, she belongs to us."

At mention of her name, Misty sidled over to Grandpa and scratched her head up and down against his broad shoulder. How good it was to be the center of attention! She went from one to the other, butting her face gently against Paul's pocket, asking for a kernel of corn, lipping Maureen, nipping the brim of Grandpa's battered old hat.

"Phantom was a good mammy," Maureen said. "She stayed with her baby as long as she needed to. Colts got to grow up sometime," she declared, her thoughts slipping back to what the fire chief had said.

Misty seemed to sense the importance of this moment. She backed away from the group, her head uplifted, not toward the sea and the island of Assateague, but inland, toward the well-pounded trails of Chincoteague. Her whole body quivered as if she saw a promise of great things to come — of races won, of foals tagging at her side. Overcome by all the excitement in store, she kicked her heels in ecstasy and let out a high, full whinny of joy. It sounded for all the world like explosive laughter.

Paul gave a little gasp.
"What did she say?" Maureen asked quickly.
"I never!" Paul's eyes widened in disbelief.
Grandpa clapped his hat far down on his head.
"Land sakes, Paul! You never what?"
"Reckon I never heard a pony talk up so plain.
Why, she just laughed deep down inside her. 'I'm
Misty of Chincoteague,' she said, plainer'n any
words."



Four miles off the eastern shore of Virginia lies the tiny, wind-rippled isle of Chincoteague. It is only seven miles long and averages but twenty-one inches above the sea.

Assateague Island, however, is thirty-three miles long. Just as Paul Beebe says, Assateague is an outrider, protecting little Chincoteague from the rough seas of the Atlantic. The outer island is a wildlife refuge for wild geese and ducks, and the wild ponies.