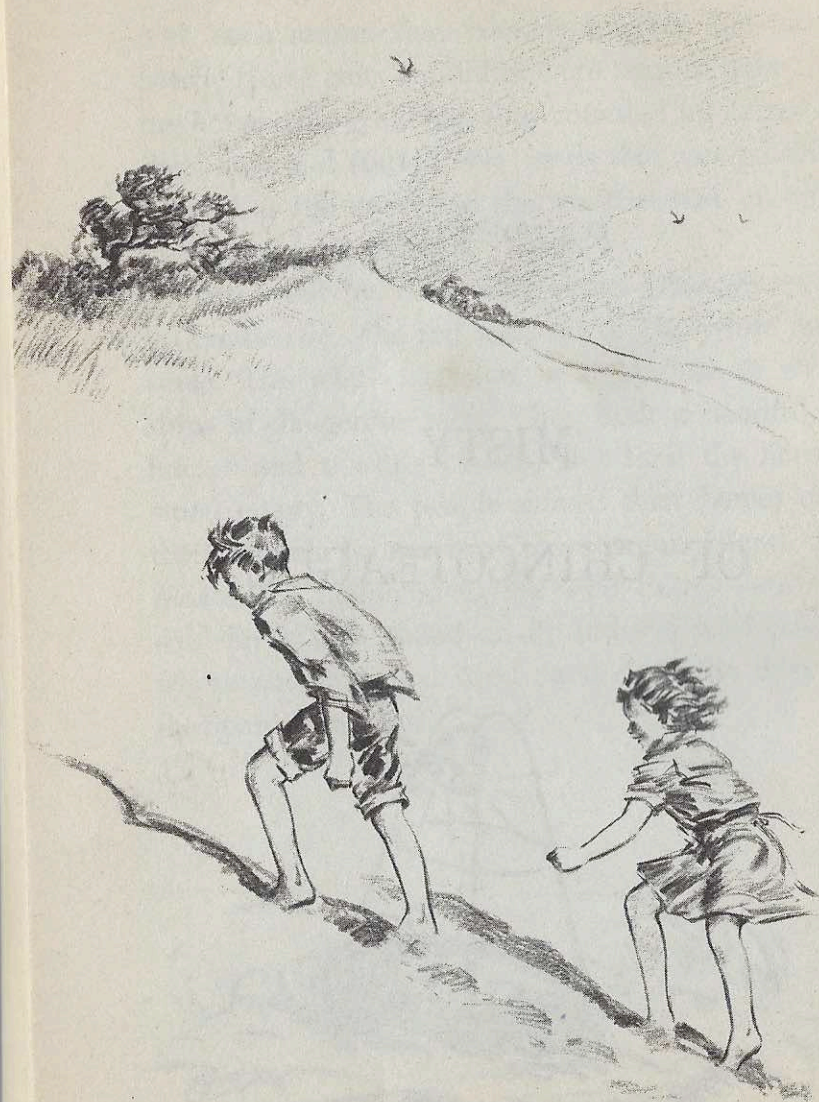


THE PHANTOM

SPRING TIDES HAD COME once more to Assateague Island. They were washing and salting the earth, coaxing new green spears to replace the old dried grasses.

On a windy Saturday morning, half past March, a boy and his sister were toiling up the White Hills of Assateague Beach. The boy was taller than the girl, and led the way. Their progress was slow. The heavy beach sand seemed to pull them back, as if it felt that human beings had no right to be there.

In the early-morning light the two figures were scarcely visible. Their faded play clothes were the color of sand, and their hair was bleached pale by the sun. The boy's hair had a way of falling down over his brow like the forelock of a stallion. The girl's streamed out behind her, a creamy golden mane with the wind blowing through it.



Suddenly the boy bent over and picked up a whitened, bow-shaped object. The girl was at his side in an instant.

"What is it, Paul?"

The boy did not answer. He kept feeling the object, running his fingers over it, testing the weight of it. Then he squinted his eyes against the sun and looked out upon the thin line of blue where the sky and the sea met.

"Is it the bone of a horse?"

Paul looked down his nose in disgust. "Maureen," he shook his head, "aren't you ever going to grow up?"

"Is it an Indian bow washed white by the sea?" the girl persisted.

Paul hardly heard. His eyes were scanning the horizon.

"See a ship?" Maureen asked.

"Hmm," he nodded.

"I don't see anything. Where, Paul? What kind of ship?"

"A Spanish galleon," he said. "She's caught in a northeaster. Look at her pitch!"

"Oh, Paul," fretted the girl. "You are always play-acting." Then she added wistfully, "I hanker to see the things you see. Tell me what the ship's like. Make it a whopper."

"Can't see her now. She's lost in the swell."

He pushed the hair out of his eyes. "There she is!" he gasped, enjoying his own make-believe. "Her sails painted gold, and there's a gold horse with wings at her prow. She's heading toward the shoals. She's going to crack up!"

"Oh, Paul!"

"What's more, she's carrying live cargo! Horses! And they're feared of the storm. I can hear 'em crying and screeching above the wind." He turned abruptly to his sister. "Now can you guess what I just found?"

"No. What?"

"Why, a rib bone, you goose. A rib bone of the Spanish galleon that was wrecked." Paul braced his legs in the sand and watched his sister's face. The result pleased him. Her eyes and mouth flew open.

"This is part of her hull. Fact is, it's her bones that caused the sands to drift higher and higher till they formed the White Hills we're standing on."

The girl looked around and about her. Everything was still and quiet on little Assateague Island. Their grandfather had brought the game warden to the island in his boat, and she and Paul had asked to come along. But now she wondered if they should have come. The men were seeing how the



wild birds had weathered the winter. They were far to the north. No other creatures were in sight. Suddenly she felt a little chill of fear.

"Paul," she asked in a hushed voice, "do you feel like we're trespassing?"

Paul nodded. "If you look close," he whispered, "you can see that the wild critters have 'No Trespassing' signs tacked up on every pine tree."

"I wasn't thinking about the wild things," Maureen replied. She shielded her eyes against the sun and looked off in the direction of Tom's Cove. "Wish Grandpa'd come to take us back home to Chincoteague. It seems spooky-like to be exploring a ship's graveyard."



"I like exploring. I don't care if . . ."

Suddenly, from the pine thicket behind them came the sharp crackling of underbrush. Paul wheeled around, his eyes darting to an open glade.

"Watch the open place, Maureen! It's the Pied Piper and his band!"

With manes and tails flying, a band of wild ponies swept into the natural grazing ground. A pinto stallion was in command. He bunched his mares, then tossed his head high, searching the wind.

Paul and Maureen fell to the sand. They did not want the wind to carry their scent. They watched as the stallion herded his family like a nervous parent on a picnic. When he made certain that no one was missing, he began browsing. It was like a signal. His mares lowered their heads and settled down to the business of grazing.

Paul's eyes were fixed on the wild horses. They were cropping grass peacefully. But he knew that one strange sound would send them rocketing off into the woods. He and Maureen spoke softly, and scarcely moved.

"Do y'see the Phantom?" asked Maureen.

The very mention of the name "Phantom" set Paul's heart thumping against the walls of his chest. That mysterious wild mare about whom so many stories were told!

"No," he answered. "They're bunched too close."

"Do you reckon the Phantom's real? Or do you reckon it was some sea monster upset that boat last roundup?"

Paul gave no answer. Was the Phantom real? Sometimes he wondered. She had never been captured, and the roundup men did sometimes tell tall tales. Some had said she was a dark creature — dark and mysterious, like the pine trees. And some said

she was the color of copper, with splashes of silver in her mane and tail. And some spoke of a strange white marking that began at her withers and spread out like a white map of the United States.

"Maybe," whispered Maureen, "maybe she got poor and died off during the winter."

"Her?" scoffed Paul, his eyes never leaving the herd. "Not her! Any pony that can outsmart Grandpa and all the roundup men for two years running can rustle her feed, all right. Remember how Uncle Jed said his horse broke a leg trying to follow the Phantom at the roundup last Pony Penning Day?"

"Wish girls could go along on the roundup; maybe she wouldn't bolt away from another girl."

Paul snorted. "She'd leap into the waves and swim out to sea, just like she did last year and the year before that." Then suddenly his face lighted, as if an idea had just struck him. "But this year it's going to be different."

"Why is it?"

"Because," Paul replied, gripping the rib bone in his hand, "because I'm old enough to go with the roundup men this year. That's why. And if there *is* such a filly, I'm going to get her, and on Pony Penning Day she'll be in the corral with the others."

"For sale?"

"No, I'll tie a rope around her neck to show she's already sold. To me. To us," he added hastily, thinking of the cost of her. "She'll sell for around a hundred dollars, maybe."

"Oh, Paul! Let me help."

"All right, I will. How much money can you earn between now and Pony Penning Day?"

Maureen drew a quick breath. "I can earn as much as any boy. I can rake clams and gather oysters, and I can catch soft-shell crabs; and if Grandma doesn't need me, I suppose I could clean out people's chicken houses. I won't mind the work if ever we could *keep* a pony for our very own."

A little silence fell between them as they lay on their stomachs in the sand, their eyes fastened on the herd.

"I reckon we'd better keep our plans to ourselves," Paul spoke at last. "Then, if we don't get her —"

"Then nobody can poke fingers at us and laugh," finished Maureen. "Paul . . ."

"Hmm?"

"Why does everyone in school think we're lucky to live on Grandpa's pony ranch? Why is it?"

Paul was busy with thoughts of the Phantom.

"Do you reckon," Maureen went on, remembering to keep her voice low, "do you reckon it's because their families are watermen instead of horsemen?"

"Maybe."

"Or is it because Papa and Mama are in China, and they think grandparents aren't as strict as parents?"

Paul was in a dream. He was capturing the mysterious wild mare. He was listening to Maureen with only half his mind.

"I reckon it's the ponies," he said at last. "But what fun is it to gentle a wild colt, and just when he learns that you're his friend, Grandpa sells him and you never see him again?"

"I can't abide it either," said Maureen, "but there's something hurts worse."

"What?"

"It's when the colts are sold, right out from under their mothers. I get sick inside watching it."

"That's because you're a girl."

Suddenly Paul leaped to his feet. "Look!" he cried as a red streak broke from the herd and went crashing into the woods. "It's the Phantom! I saw the white map on her withers. I did. I did!"

For a full minute the pony was lost among the



pinetrees. Then out she came, heading toward the White Hills. Behind her whipped the Pied Piper, and his ringing cry was a command.

“Run, Maureen! Run! He’s a killer.”

The boy and his sister flew down the hill, stumbling over dried brush and blackberry vines. As they reached the beach, they turned back and watched, breathless. Pied Piper was overtaking the Phantom. He was running alongside her. Now he was twisting into the air, lacing her with his forefeet. They could hear the dull pounding of his hooves against her body. Then they saw the Phantom turn. They saw the droop of her tail as she gave up her dash for freedom and meekly followed the stallion into the woods.

Long seconds after they were gone, the air seemed to quiver with the Pied Piper’s bugle.

“I hate him!” cried Maureen, bursting into tears. “I hate him! I hate him!”

“Quit acting like a girl, Maureen! Pied Piper knows she’s better off with the band. Even the Phantom knows it. Grandpa says horses got to stick together for protection. Same as people.”