

## SACRED BONES

"HAL-LOO-OO!" came a voice down the beach. The boy and the girl turned to see Grandpa Beebe swinging toward them, his gnarled arms upraised like a wind-twisted tree.

"Paull!" he boomed. "Put down that bone. Put it down, I tell yel!"

Paul had forgotten all about the curved piece of wood. Now he noticed that he was clenching it so tightly it left a white streak in the palm of his hand. He dropped it quickly as Grandpa came up.

"How often do I got to tell you that bones is sacred? Even ship's bones."

"Is it true, Grandpa?" asked Paul.

"Be what true?" Grandpa repeated, pulling off his battered felt hat and letting the wind toss his hair.

"About the Spanish galleon being wrecked . . ."

"And the ponies swimming ashore?" Maureen added.

Grandpa Beebe squinted at the sun. "It's nigh onto noontide," he said, "and your Grandma is having sixteen head to dinner tomorrow. We got to get back home to Chincoteague right smart quick! I promised to kill some turkeys for her." He sighed heavily. "Seems as if the devil is allus sittin' cross-legged of me."

But he made no move to go. Instead, he squatted down on the beach, muttering, "Don't see why she's got to parboil 'em today." Then he took off his boots and socks and dug his toes in the sand, like fiddler crabs scuttling for home.

"Feels good, don't it?" he said, with a grin. He looked from Paul to Maureen and back again. "Yer know," he went on, and he began to rub the bristles of his ear, as he always did when he was happy. "Yer know, the best thing about havin' fourteen head of children is ye're bound to get one or two good grandchildren outen the lot."

"Grandpa!" reminded Paul. "Is it true about the Spanish galleon and the ponies? Or is it a legend like the folks over on the mainland say?"

"'Course it's true!" replied Grandpa, with a little show of irritation. "All the wild herds on Assateague be descendants of a bunch of Spanish hosses. They

wasn't wild to begin with, mind ye. They just went wild with their freedom."

Maureen did a quick little leap, like a colt bucking. "Then it's *not* a legend?" she rejoiced. "It's *not* a legend!"

"Who said 'twasn't a legend?" Grandpa exclaimed. "'Course it's a legend. But legends be the only stories as is true!"

He stopped to find the right words. "Facts are fine, fer as they go," he said, "but they're like water bugs skittering atop the water. Legends, now — they go deep down and bring up the heart of a story." Here Grandpa shoved his hand into the pocket of his overalls and produced a long stick of licorice and a plug of tobacco. With a pair of wire clippers he divided the licorice in half, and gave a piece to Maureen and one to Paul. Then he cut himself a quid of tobacco.

There was a little silence while the old man and the boy and the girl thought about the shipwrecked ponies.

Then, almost in the same breath, Paul and Maureen blurted out together: "Who discovered 'em?"

Grandpa spat out to sea. "Why, I heard tell 'twas the Indians chanced on 'em first. They comes over to hunt on Assateague, and 'twasn't only deer and otter and beaver they finds. They finds these wild

ponies pawin' the air and snortin' through their noses, and they ain't never seed no critters like that, blowin' steam and screamin' and their tails and manes a-flyin'. And the Indians was so affrighted they run for their canoes."

Grandpa Beebe began rubbing both ears in his excitement.

"Then what, Grandpa?"

"Why, the ponies was left to run wilder and wilder. Nobody lived here to hinder 'em none, nobody at all. White men come to live on Chincoteague Island, but Assateague was left to the critters."

Grandpa reached for one of his socks, then broke out in sudden laughter. "Ho! Ho! Ho!" he belted.

Paul and Maureen looked all around them. "What's so funny, Grandpa?" they asked.

Grandpa was slapping his thigh, rocking back and forth. "I jes' now thought of somethin' right smart cute," he chuckled, when he could get his breath. "Y'see, lots of folks like to call theirselves descendants of the First Families of Virginia. They kinda makes a high-falutin' club outen it and labels it F.F.V. But you know what?" Here Grandpa's eyes twinkled like the sea with the sun blazing on it.

"What?" chorused Paul and Maureen.

"The real first families of Virginia was the ponies! Ho-ho-ho! That's what *my* history book says!"

"Whee! Grandpa!" exclaimed Paul. "I like the way you talk about history."

Grandpa winked in agreement. "Nothin' so exciting as tag ends pulled right outen the core of the past."

"Did the first white men tame the ponies?" asked Maureen.

"No indeedy. Them first white men had no use fer the wild, thrashin' ponies. A slow-going pair o' oxen could do all the plowin' for bread corn and sech. Guess mebbe it was Bob Watson's boy of Chincoteague who fust tried to put a wild pony to plow. She was a dead ringer for the Phantom, too. But that was a long time agone."

Paul's heart turned a somersault.

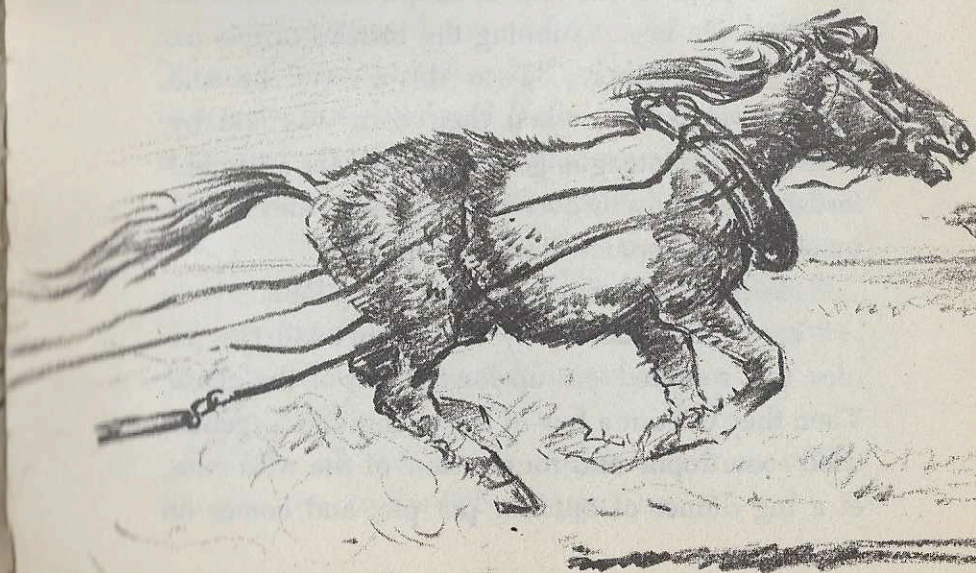
"Well, what happened to her, Grandpa? Did she gentle?"

"Did she gentle! Why, she jes' broke the single-tree as if 'twas a matchstick, cleared the fence, and blew to her island home with the reins a-stringin' out behind her."

"Oh!"

"Some of 'em you jest can't gentle. Not after they've lived wild. Only the youngsters is worth botherin' about, so far as the gentlin' goes. Remember that!"

Paul and Maureen looked at each other. They were thinking of their plan to own the Phantom.



Grandpa Beebe began putting on his socks and shoes. "Likely the game warden is done checkin' up on the wild birds. I promised to meet him at Tom's Cove afore the tide ebbs bare. But," he added, as he pulled on his boots, "I know my tides, and I'll give ye time for one more question."

Maureen looked to Paul. "You ask, Paul."

Paul jumped to his feet. How could he ask just one question when dozens popped into his mind? He began picking up fiddler crabs furiously, as if that would help him think. Finally he turned to Grandpa.

"It's about Pony Penning Day," he blurted out. "How did it start?"

It was plain to see that Grandpa Beebe liked the question. He began rubbing the bristles of one ear and then the other. "'Twas this-a-way," he said. "In the yesterdays, when their corn was laid by, folks on Chincoteague got to yearnin' fer a big hollerday. So they sails over to Assateague and rounds up all the wild ponies. 'Twas big sport."

"Like hunting buffalo or deer?" asked Paul.

"'Zactly like that! Only they didn't kill the ponies; just rounded 'em up for the fun of the chase. Then they cut out a few of the younglings to gentle, tried some ropin' and rough ridin' of the wild ones, et a big dinner of outdoor pot pie, and comes on

back home to Chincoteague. By-'n'-by, they adds somethin' to the fun. They swum the ponies acrost the channel to Chincoteague and put on a big show. 'Twas so excitin', folks come from as far as New York to see it. And afore we knowed it, we was sellin' off some of the colts to the mainlanders."

"Why did they sell the wild things?"

"Why!" echoed Grandpa. "Why, ponies was overrunnin' Assateague. They was gettin' thick as raisins in a pie!"

"That thick, Grandpa?" asked Maureen, her eyes rounded.

"Wal, maybe not that thick," grinned Grandpa.

"Don't keep interrupting Grandpa!" exclaimed Paul.

"Today it's jest the same," Grandpa said slowly. "Along toward the tail end of July, when the ponies is done with fightin' and foalin', and the watermen is tired of plantin' oysters, then we all get to hankerin' for a celebration. So the menfolk round up the ponies, the womenfolk bake meat pot pie, and there ye are! Only now, outside a few hossmen like me, the fire department owns most of the wild ponies. And a good thing it is for Chincoteague."

"Why is it?"

"'Cause all the money they make from sellin' 'em goes into our fire-fightin' apparatus."

Grandpa Beebe rose stiffly. "Come on, you two, I hain't got time to school ye. That's what me and Grandma pays taxes for. Besides, we been a-settin' here so long the sand is liable to drift up over us and make another white clift outen us. It's time we was gettin' back home to Chincoteague and Grandma's turkeys."

