

A PIECE OF WIND AND SKY

APRIL, MAY, JUNE, JULY! Only four months until Pony Penning Day. Only four months to plan and work for the Phantom.

Suddenly time was important.

"We got to lay a course and hold it," said Paul, as he whisked over the fence that same afternoon and began studying the ponies in Grandpa Beebe's corral.

Maureen slipped between the rails and caught up with him. "Quit talking like a waterman, Paul. Talk like a horseman, so I can understand you."

"All right, I will. Grandpa's got eleven mares here. Six of 'em have a colt apiece, and the black and the chestnut each have a yearling and a suckling. Between now and July, how many colts do you reckon Grandpa will sell?"

"Probably all of 'em — except the sucklings."

"That's what I figure! Now if we could halter-break the colts and teach 'em some manners, folks'd pay more for them, wouldn't they?"

"I reckon."

"All right!" exclaimed Paul as he sailed back over the fence. "Maybe Grandpa will pay us the difference."

That night at supper Paul looked up over his plate of roast oysters and caught Grandma's eye.

"Grandma," he questioned, "do you like a mannerly colt?"

Grandma Beebe's face was round as a holly berry, and soft little whiskers grew about her mouth, like the feelers of a very young colt. She pursed her lips now, wondering if there were some catch to Paul's question.

"Paul means," explained Maureen, "if you came here to Pony Ranch to buy a colt, would you choose one that was gentled or would you choose a wild one?"

Grandpa clucked. "Can't you jes' see yer Grandma crow-hoppin' along on a wild colt!"

"Thar's yer answer," laughed Grandma, as she cut golden squares of cornbread. "I'd take the mannerly colt."

Paul swallowed a plump oyster, almost choking in his haste. "Would you," he gulped, "that is, would you be willing to pay out more money for it, Grandma?"

"Wa-al, that depends," mused Grandma, passing the breadboard around, "that depends on how much more."

"Would you pay ten dollars more?"

"If he was nice and mannerly, I would. Yes, I would."

"See there, Grandpa!" The words came out in a rush. "If Maureen and I was to halter-break the colts, could we —" He stopped, and then stammered, "Could we have the ten extra dollars for each colt sold?"

So dead a silence fell over the table that the *drip-drip* of the kitchen faucet sounded like hammer strokes. Grandpa slowly buttered his bread and then glanced about the table.

"Pass your Grandpa the goody, Maureen."

All eyes watched Grandpa spread a layer of wild blackberry jam on top of the butter. Then he added another square of cornbread to make a sandwich. Not until he had tasted and approved did he turn to Paul.

"What fer?" he barked.

Paul and Maureen stared at their plates.

"Must be a secret, Clarence," Grandma pleaded.

Grandpa swept a few crumbs into his hand and began stacking his own dishes. "I ain't never pried a secret outa no one," he said. "And I don't aim to start pokin' and pryin' now. It's a deal, children, and ye don't need to tell me whut the money's fer until ye're ready to spend it."

Paul and Maureen flew to Grandpa and hugged him. For a moment they forgot that they were almost grown up.

The days and weeks that followed were not half long enough. Up at dawn, working with the colts, haltering them, teaching them to lead and to stand tied! Going to school regretfully and hurrying home as soon as it was out!



Now when a buyer came to look at the colts, Maureen did not run to her room as she used to do, pressing her face in the feather bed to stifle her sobs. Nor did Paul swing up on one of Grandpa's ponies and gallop down the hard point of land to keep from crying. Now they actually led the colts out to the buyers to show how gentle they were. They even helped load them onto waiting trucks. All the while they kept thinking that soon they would have a pony of their own, never to be sold. *Not for any price.*

April and May passed. School closed.

Paul and Maureen worked furiously for the Phantom. They caught and sold crabs. They gathered oysters when the tide went out and laid the oyster rocks bare. And most exciting of all, they "treaded for clams." In flannel moccasins to protect their feet, and wide-brimmed hats on their heads, they plunged into Chincoteague Bay. Sometimes they would whinny and snort, pretending they were wild ponies escaping the flies. Then suddenly they would feel the thin edge of a clam with their feet and remember that they were clam treaders, trying to earn money for the Phantom.

Paul learned how to burrow under the sand with his toes and lift the clam to the surface on the top of his moccasin foot. But try as she would, Mau-

reen never could do it. She raked the clams instead, with a long wooden rake. Then she dumped them into a home-made basket formed by spreading a piece of canvas inside an old inner tube. She kept it from floating out to sea by tying it to her waist with a rope.



Slowly, week by week, Grandpa's old tobacco pouch in which they stored their money began to round out, until it held exactly one hundred dollars. It never occurred to Paul and Maureen that the Phantom might escape the roundup men this year too. They felt as certain of owning her as if someone had sent them a telegram that read,

SHIPPING YOUR PONY ON PONY PENNING DAY

One early morning, when July was coming in, Paul cornered Grandpa hustling across the barnyard. He stepped right into Grandpa's path so that he had to stop short.

"Grandpa!" Paul burst out. "Will you rent me one of your empty stalls beginning with Pony Penning Day? I'll do a man's work to pay for it."

Grandpa roughed his hand up the back of Paul's head. "Who you want it fer, lad? Plan to sleep in it yourself?"

Paul's face turned red. "I," he hesitated. "That is, Maureen and I are going to . . ."

"Wa-al?"

"We're going to buy — we're going to buy the Phantom on Pony Penning Day."

There! The news was out!

Grandpa threw back his head. He opened wide

his mouth, ready to break out in laughter; but when he saw the grave look in Paul's eyes, he did not laugh at all. Instead, he let out a shrill "Wee-dee-dee-dee, wee-dee-dee-dee," as he pulled a handful of corn out of his pocket and spattered the golden kernels about his feet.

From all over the barnyard came wild geese and tame geese, big ducks and little ducks, marsh hens and chicks. The air was wild with their clatter.

"Can't no one catch the Phantom," Grandpa yelled above the noise. "For two years she's give the horse laugh to the best roundup men we got on Chincoteague. What makes ye think she's going to *ask* to be caught?"

"Because," Paul shouted through the din, "because the Fire Chief promised I could go along this year."

Grandpa Beebe stepped back a pace and studied his grandson. His clear eyes twinkled with merriment. Then a look of pity crossed his face.

"Lad," he said, "the Phantom don't wear that white map on her withers for nothing. It stands for Liberty, and ain't no human being going to take her liberty away from her."

"She wants to come to us," Paul said, trying to keep his voice steady. "Ever since that day on Assateague, Maureen and I knew."

A white striker bird flew up from the ground and perched on Grandpa's gnarled forefinger. Grandpa directed his remarks to the bird. "Can't fer the life of me see why those two want another pony. Why, the corral's full of 'em. They're as much Paul's and Maureen's as anybody's."

Paul's lips tightened. "It's not the same," he said. "Owning a pony you never have to sell . . ."

The striker bird flew away. Paul and Grandpa watched in silence as it dipped and rose to the sky.

Grandpa stood in thought. "Paul, boy," he said slowly, "hark to my words. The Phantom ain't a hoss. She ain't even a lady. She's just a piece of wind and sky."

Paul tried to speak, swallowed, and tried once more. "We got our hearts set on her," he faltered.

Grandpa pushed his battered hat to one side and scratched his head. "All right, boy," he sighed. "The stall is yours."

A moment later Paul was telling Maureen the good news. "Owning a stall is next best to owning a pony," she laughed, as they both went to work in a fever of excitement.

With long brooms and steaming pails of water, they washed the walls and the ceiling of Phantom's stall. They scraped inches of sand from the hard-packed floor, dumped it in the woods, and brought

in fresh, clean sand. They built a manger, spending long moments deciding just how high it should be placed. They scrubbed a rain barrel to be used for a watering trough. They even dug a "wickie" — the long, tough root of a brier that trails along under the ground.

"Phantom won't be frightened when she smells and feels a wickie halter," Maureen said. "It'll be much softer than rope."

