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Chapter 9

ON TO THE
PONY PENNING GROUNDS

IT WAS NOW MID-MORNING, and the hot July sun was high in the heavens. The wild ponies stood with heads hanging low, tails tucked in. They looked beaten and confused. Only the Phantom's foal seemed contented. She slept, her sides rising and falling in the cool shade made by the mare's body.

"Rest 'em a bit longer," Wyle Maddox directed. "Then on to the pony pens."

Maureen sat watching, thinking. The little colt must never know the hungry feeling of being without a mother. But the hundred dollars? Would it pay for both?

She was jolted out of her thoughts with the cry, "Get-a-going!"

Onlookers fell back while Maureen, Grandpa

Beebe, and the other horsemen surrounded the ponies and began driving them toward town. The Phantom broke at the start, her colt weaving along behind her like the tail of a kite.

"Please, God, don't let Phantom escape now!" breathed Maureen as she and Grandpa Beebe took out after them. But Phantom could not travel fast with her stilty-legged youngster. Maureen soon came upon them, hidden among the foliage of a kinksbush, the Phantom's proud, wild face and the colt's comical baby face all framed round with green leaves.

With a shout she drove them back into the herd.

After that the mare no longer tried to escape, for there were no openings into the cool woods — only lines of cars and visitors forming a solid fence on either side of them.

Slowly and dejectedly the wild ponies paraded through the main streets of Chincoteague. Only the Phantom's colt seemed happy with her lot. She could smell her dam close by. Her stomach was stretched tight with milk. She was full of sleep. She kicked her heels sideways, dancing along, letting out little whinnies of joy. She seemed to *like* Chincoteague.

All up and down the streets the people came

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spilling out of their houses, shouting to one another as they recognized some mare or stallion from previous roundups.

"There's that pinto with the shark eyes."

"Look at the Pied Piper! His forelock's grown 'most as long as his tail!"

"See all the big colts!"

"Who's the chestnut mare with the white mark on her shoulders?"

"Not the Phantom! Not her!" they gasped in disbelief.

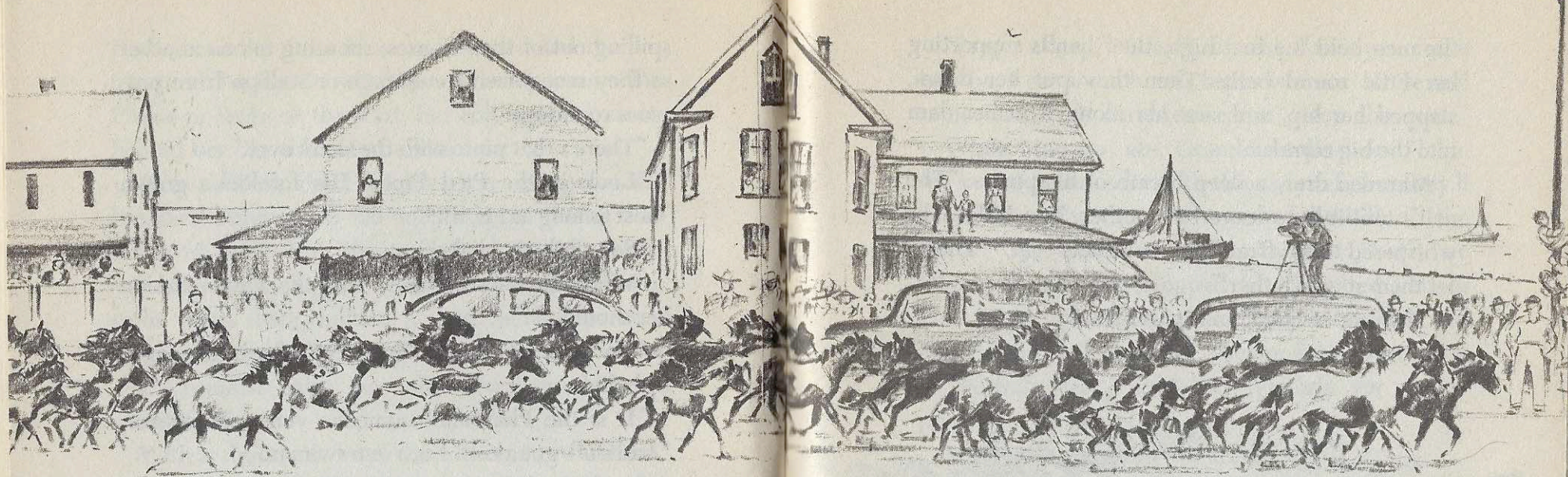
"It *is* the Phantom!" someone yelled in answer. "And she's got a colt! I saw 'em swim in!"

"And Paul Beebe caught her," someone else called. "I heard Kim Horsepepper tell all about it."

The excitement ran from house to house like a flame in the wind. "They got the Phantom! Paul Beebe got her! And she's leadin' a colt!"

Through the shouting, elbowing crowd, the slow parade went on — past stores and restaurants, past the white frame hotel, past the red brick firehouse which the colts of other years had paid for.

Maureen looked straight ahead. She stayed so close to the Phantom and her foal that when the foal looked sideways Maureen could see her long golden eyelashes.



At last the procession turned into the pony penning grounds. It moved quickly once around the ring. Then once again, while children and parents and horse dealers hung over the fence. The children shouted at the top of their lungs.

“Oh, Dad! Buy me that colt with the star on her face!”

“I want the one with the white stockings!”

“I want the littlest one!”

Only the dealers were silent. They were thinking in terms of buying and selling.

Grandpa Beebe rode close to Maureen. “We got

’em here,” he sighed sharply. “Now it’s up to the men afoot.”

Again that feeling of something pressing against her throat came to Maureen as she watched the men on foot drive the ponies out of the ring, separating the colts from their mothers. They herded the colts into small pens, giving the mares and stallions the run of a big corral.

Suddenly it was the Phantom’s turn to be herded into the corral. She flew ahead of the men, never allowing them to touch her. Now two brawny men were making a grab for her foal. For long seconds

the men held the foal high, their hands supporting her little round belly. Then they put her down, slapped her hip, and sent her along with her dam into the big corral.

Maureen drew a deep breath of happiness. "The colt's too little to leave her mother. Too little!" she whispered into Grandpa's whiskery ear. "They'll let them stay together."

Then she hurried home to tell Paul.



"Paul's asleep," Grandma said, "and you leave him be. I got some butter beans warmin' fer ye and some nice fresh cornbread sittin' a-top the oven."

While Maureen ate, Grandma talked on. "I kin see you're boilin' over with things to tell, but they'll keep till you've ate. Between whiles I'll do the talkin'." She closed one eye in thought. "Let's see. Oh, Victoria Pruitt stopped by. Figgered you or Paul might like to earn some money helpin' her and Mr. Pruitt catch chickens. They're fixin' to ship 'em to Norfolk. But I told Mis' Victoria yer money pouch was fat as a tick."

Maureen's spoon fell to the floor.

"Oh, Grandma! The Phantom's got a colt, and we got to earn a lot of money to buy her too."

Grandma looked at Maureen's plate. She saw that the beans were gone and there was nothing left of the cornbread but a few crumbs. "Go 'long," she nodded. "Mis' Victoria wanted ye right much."

Maureen spent the afternoon chasing hundreds of chickens and cooping them up in little crates. By sundown her arms were pecked and scratched, and her face streaked with perspiration.

As she walked home, clutching two dollars in her moist hand, she saw Paul riding toward her on Watch Eyes.

"Leg up behind me," he called out. "I got to go

to the store for Grandma. You can help carry the things."

Maureen scrambled up behind her brother. "Paul!"

"Huh?"

"Do you reckon the firemen'll sell us both the Phantom and the little one?"

"'Course. The colt's too young to take away from the mare."

"But where'll we get the money?"

Paul slowed Watch Eyes to a walk. "I been working on it whilst I slept," he said. "What time does the sale begin?"

"It says half-past nine on the program."

"All right," exclaimed Paul, giving Watch Eyes his head. "You and I'll get to the pony penning grounds at sunup. We'll wait there at the entrance for the fire chief. Soon as he comes, we'll say to him, 'We got exactly one hundred dollars, sir. We earned it in less'n four months. In four months more we can earn another hundred. Y'see, Chief, we're fixin' to buy the Phantom — and Misty too.'"

"Why, Paul! That's *exactly* what we'll do. It'll be just as easy as that." She threw her arms about Paul's waist. "Misty," she chuckled. "Who named the Phantom's colt?"

"She kind of named herself," Paul answered.

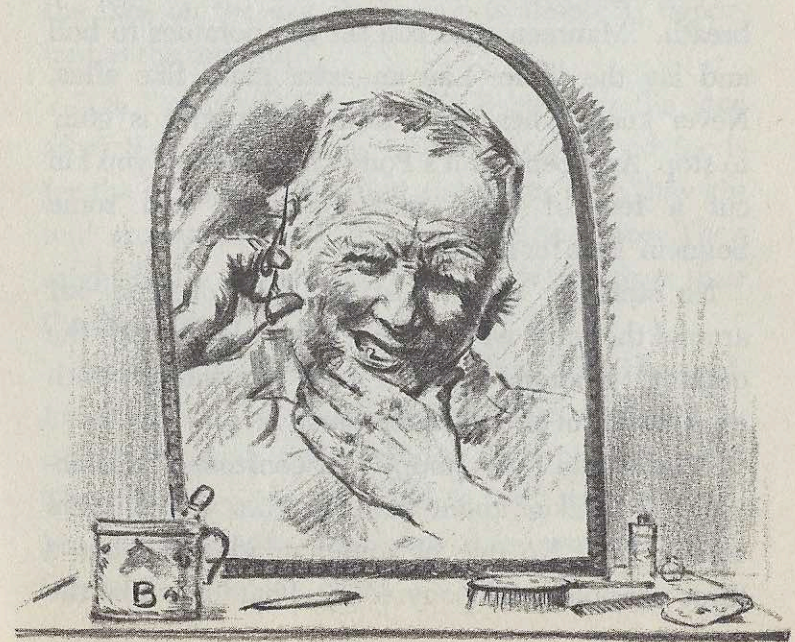
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"When I was in the woods there on Assateague, I couldn't tell if I was seeing white mist with the sun on it, or a live colt. The minute I knew 'twas a live colt, I kept calling her Misty in my mind."

"Misty!" said Maureen softly. "Misty," she repeated as they jogged along. "She came up out of the sea."

Grandpa was in the kitchen, standing before a mirror, trimming the bristles in his ears when Maureen and Paul came in with the groceries.

"Consarn it all!" he fussed. "Do you got to rustle



them bags like cows trompin' through a cornfield? A fella can't hear hisself think, let alone hold his hand steady. This here's a mighty ticklish job."

"Why, Clarence!" exclaimed Grandma, "I've never seed you so twittery."

"Ef'n you had whiskbrooms in your ears, maybe you'd be twittery too."

Grandma stopped basting the marsh hen she had just taken out of the oven and burst out in helpless laughter. "Whiskbrooms in my ears!" she chortled. And soon Maureen and Paul and even Grandpa were laughing with her.

"All right now," said Grandma, recovering her breath. "Maureen, you can set the potatoes to boil and lay the table. Lay an extra place like allus. Never know when some human straggler is goin' to stop. And bein' as it's Pony Penning Day you kin cut a few of them purty-by-nights and some bouncin' Bess fer a centerpiece."

No straggler came. Just the four of them sat around the table while a light wind played with the curtains. Grandpa became more like himself with each mouthful of the tender marsh hen.

"The reason I was jumpy," he confessed, "was account of thinkin' about that Phantom you children wanter buy. No one of sound mind ever buys a three-year-old wild pony. Why, Phantom's like the

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topsail on a ship — a moon-raker she is!"

The flapping of the curtain broke the little pause that followed.

"Besides," Grandpa continued, "my feet is killin' me. Reckon we're in fer a blow. A sou'wester come up this afternoon, and I never seed a nor'easter take no back talk from a sou'wester."

"If a thunder squall's a-brewin'," spoke Grandma, "the children have got to stay home from the race tonight."

Paul's and Maureen's eyes sought Grandpa's, as much as to say, "How can you do this to us? Why, the race on the eve of the sale is almost as important as the roundup!"

"Oh," coughed Grandpa, "it'll be *after* the race afore the weather turns squally. And my advice is fer the children to go right smart quick, so they kin mill around in the colt pens afore the race. They might find a critter with lots purtier markings than the Phantom."

Paul and Maureen leaped to their feet. They galloped around and around the table, stopping to nose Grandma and Grandpa like curious colts. Then they soberly promised to visit the colt pens, but in their hearts they knew there was room only for the Phantom and Misty.