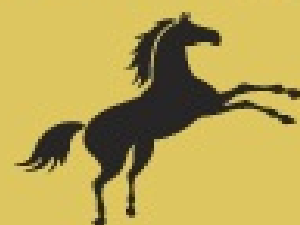


THE ISLAND STALLION RACES

Walter Farley

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THE YOUNG BLACK STALLION (*with Steven Farley*)

THE ISLAND STALLION RACES



BY WALTER FARLEY

A YEARLING BOOK

Published by Yearling, an imprint of Random House Children's Books a division of Random House, Inc., New York

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eISBN: 978-0-307-80489-1

Reprinted by arrangement with Random House Children's Books

v3.1

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About the Author

The tropical sun was hot and brilliant. It made the open waters of the Caribbean Sea appear more blue than they actually were. It turned the golden, rounded dome of Azul Island into a flaming apparition. Yet its rays could not pierce the mist which hung like a gray veil about the base of this island of stone. Blue waters churned white going over the protective reef that lay a short distance out, then turned black as the waves gathered momentum and height and disappear behind the heavy shroud. They could be heard seconds later crashing against the walled barriers of Azul Island.

A lone boy guided the motor launch *Sea Queen* toward the perilous reef, his eyes never leaving the waters directly before him. He handled the wheel carefully, expertly. He watched the submerged coral slide past to either side of the hull. He seemed to know this particular area well. He piloted his launch in an ever alternating course, but one that took him always closer to the gray mist.

His name was Steve Duncan. He was no experienced mariner, for only recently had he been given the privilege and the responsibility of guiding the *Sea Queen* between the two islands of Antago and Azul, a distance of more than twenty miles. His home was in a small city in the United States, and he was on summer vacation from school. He wore a T-shirt and shorts. His body was deeply tanned from weeks spent beneath this hot, tropical sun, and the corners of his eyes were cracked with the white lines that come from squinting in the glaring sunlight for hours at a time. His black hair was cut short and uncovered.

He could have been any average and normal American boy ... except for what he was about to do. In that respect, he did not conform to rule or type or standard.

He took the *Sea Queen* into the gray mist. If he heard the heavy thud of waves crashing hard against the wall of stone beyond, it did not seem to frighten him. He went in a direct line now. The engine throbbed noisily as though in protest to the mounting surge of the sea that would hurl it forward too fast. No longer could Steve see the dome-shaped top of Azul Island. He watched only for the precipitous wall that soon would rise a thousand and more feet above him.

Like the island itself, the approach foreboded danger. But Steve Duncan welcomed it, for he had kept all other people away. Now he began moving the wheel often again, and the propeller was reversed to steady the launch and hold it back from sweeping against the wall of stone that suddenly loomed ahead.

Steve had left the doors of the low sea hole open, and now he skillfully took the launch through it and into the narrow canal which cut the floor of a large chamber within Azul Island. He moored the launch to moss-covered piles that were centuries old, and for a second he thought of the men from the Spanish galleons who had sunk them so long ago. Then he crossed the sandy floor of the chamber and closed the sliding partitions above the sea entrance. There was less light and wind now, but the waters in the canal still flooded and ebbed with the waves that found their way through the opening at the base of the hole.

Hurriedly Steve left the chamber and went down the tunnel which would take him where he wanted to be more than any other place in the world. As his eyes became accustomed to the dim light he ran faster, never once looking at the coral rock in brilliant shades of pink, green, gray and white that had always attracted his attention before. Nor did he give another thought to the Spanish Conquistadores who had brought their men, weapons and horses along this path in their final flight from the English and French. For it belonged to the far distant past, and Steve Duncan was interested only in the present and the great red stallion who awaited him.

He emerged from the tunnel and entered a long chasm, not bothering to glance up at the sky above the close, sheer walls on either side of him. He ran faster, breathing easily but becoming very excited. Soon he arrived at a small sliver of a valley, and crossed the stream that cut its center. Still he ran on till he came to a rock-strewn gorge. There he slowed down to a walk, for the trail was jagged and twisting. He went down the dry river bed, following the gorge until he came to a wide patch of marshland. Here he went a little faster but he didn't run. He hated this particular area with its high reeds, swamp ferns and the thick vapors whose stench of rotting vegetation had been made worse by the sweltering afternoon sun. He held his breath as long as possible between short gasps of the foul air, his eyes remaining fixed on the narrow green swath of solid ground before him. He saw Flame's oval-shaped hoofprints and it made this part of the trip a little easier to bear. Soon he'd be with his stallion. There was only a short distance to go now.

Finally his path led upward, taking him from the hollow that fostered and nurtured the marsh. He began running again, leaving the dense vapors far behind. He climbed higher—and then, just beyond a field of wild cane, he saw Blue Valley! At the upper end a band of horses grazed. A few of them were drinking from a pool that was fed by a waterfall dropping a hundred feet or more down the precipitous wall.

Steve Duncan stopped then and whistled as loud as he could. In answer, a lone stallion emerged from the band ... a tall chestnut horse whose mane and tail seemed to move like a burning flame when he broke into a gallop. Steve ran to meet him.

No longer was the valley a place of quiet and peaceful solitude. The great stallion moved faster and faster over the short, thick grass, the beat of his hoofs resounding loudly from the walls of the natural amphitheater. He ran easily and without effort, his small head held high, his eyes never leaving the distant figure of the boy coming to meet him.

Steve entered one side of the field of wild cane as the horse reached the other. He saw the stalks bend and break beneath the tall body of his horse. As he called and kept running, the red stallion swept by him, close enough almost to touch but without slowing stride. Steve did not turn back but ran faster through the cane.

When he had reached the grassy floor of the valley, he heard Flame behind him, and then the stallion thundered by again, running halfway down the valley before slowing. Steve watched him make his sweeping turn, moving from sunlight into shadows cast by the high western wall. Flame's great body was now shrouded with a clinging veil of blue, a color that the shadows picked up from the grass and coral rock.

And now Flame's call rose above the beat of his hoofs. It wasn't his clarion whistle of angry challenge. Soft and wavering, it hung on the air and welcomed Steve back home.

The boy laughed and kept running across the valley floor. He'd been gone only two days and

this last trip to Antago but to him, as well as to Flame, it had seemed much longer. He was breathing heavily but soon he would stop running. He watched Flame sweep by him once more, and saw the short thrust of a foreleg as the stallion struck out in play without breaking stride.

Upon reaching the opposite side of the valley, Steve jumped onto a flat rock and then turned around, awaiting his horse. In only a few seconds Flame was beside him and he slid quickly onto the stallion's back. He gave no command. He barely had time to close his knees before Flame was off, stretching out as he had not done before.

Only twice during the long ride down the valley floor did Steve call to him, and then he spoke softly into the pricked ears. "Run, Flame! Run!" He had learned long ago never to shout, only to whisper to Flame. He saw his stallion make for the band, the mares and foals scattering at his swift approach. Flame turned on winged hoofs and Steve shifted with him, then he went all-out up the valley and Steve had to close his eyes against the force of the wind Flame created. He pressed his head against the stallion's mane and neck. He was content to let Flame run as long and as fast as the horse liked. He'd know when the ride was over. But now he was *one* with Flame.

A half hour later he slid down from the sweaty back, as hot and wet as his horse. They were near the pool, and from all about them came the neighs of the mares. Flame had scattered them to the far corners of the valley by his playful but rough antics. Steve went to the pool and ducked his head in the cool waters. Flame joined him, snorting and lowering his small head to drink. As always, Steve marveled when after a few swallows Flame left the pool to rejoin his band. Hot as he was, thirsty as he was, this wild stallion would drink very little when overheated. Steve wondered how many domestic horses would have left the cool water as Flame had done.

Now too happy and tired to move, Steve stretched out on the soft carpet of grass. It had been a long hard day but just being back made everything all right again. What could be more wonderful than this? He had found that even the confusion of a small island like Antago bothered him now. He was well spoiled. But who wouldn't be, having found a lost world inhabited only by Flame and his band? It was a world free of every care except the care of horses.

Steve lay back, resting his head on his clasped hands, a long blade of succulent grass between his lips. He looked at the late afternoon sky with its light wisps of rippling clouds. The sun was well down behind the barrier walls, and Blue Valley was as blue as blue could be and very, very pleasant.

He supposed that if the day ever came when an airplane flew close to the dome of the island its pilot would know there was a valley down here. But the pilot would really have to be looking to find it. And where would such a plane be heading anyway? There was no land to the east as far as Africa, and the transatlantic airlines came nowhere near Azul Island. To the west there was only Antago, and no airline served that remote island outpost in the Caribbean Sea. Nor was there any nearby airport to service private planes.

Steve had no fear of discovery of his lost world from the sea. A few tramp steamers put in each year at Antago, but the more traveled sea lanes between North and South America were much farther to the east and west. Besides, no captain in his right mind would approach very close to Azul Island; it looked like a massive, egg-shaped boulder and was ringed by

dangerous reefs. Small launches could get only to the island's small southern sandspit, and from there it was impossible to reach Blue Valley or even to learn of its existence. Natives of Antago said of Azul Island, "*Except for the sandspit it's nothing but solid rock.*" Well, let them go on believing so.

Steve closed his eyes but quickly opened them again. He didn't want to fall asleep. He had some work to do before it got dark. Pitch wouldn't be around tonight to help get camp in order and do the cooking. He wouldn't be around for many nights to come, for that matter. But it was as Steve had wanted it. He hadn't liked the idea of staying at Pitch's home on Antago while his elderly friend was doing his historical research in the New York libraries and museums.

Pitch had finally consented to Steve's remaining alone in Blue Valley, knowing full well that he could take care of himself. But he wasn't really alone, Steve reminded himself. He had Flame and the band. It was exciting being the only one on the island with them. Somehow it changed things a lot not to have Pitch around. Not that he'd ever seen much of Pitch during the daytime. Pitch had always been too busy exploring the maze of tunnels that ran through the coral rock of Azul Island. And when Pitch hadn't been on a tunnel exploration he'd been working on his manuscript, writing in detail all they'd found here and giving his reasons for believing that Azul Island was the last great stronghold of the Conquistadores almost three hundred years ago! The Spaniards had left this natural fortress hurriedly, for as the relics Pitch had found indicated this ... and as further evidence there were the horseshoes which had been left behind. Where else could this pure-blooded band have originated?

At this point in his thoughts, Steve sat up to look at Flame. Flame's forebears were Arabians of the finest strain. All one had to do to be convinced of this was to look at him and the mares. Their pure blood and the ideal conditions in Blue Valley had kept the strain free of flaw through generations of inbreeding. Now they were as perfect a group of horses as their ancestors had been ... perhaps even finer.

Again Steve lay back on the grass, looking at the sky that was spotted with small, fleecy clouds. He was finding it difficult to keep his eyes open and began to realize that he must be more tired than he had thought. But he told himself that he mustn't go to sleep. He had time to rest after his long sea trip ... plenty of time ... just so he didn't fall asleep.

He listened to the splash of the waterfall and the occasional nicker of a mare to her suckling foal. Nothing else disrupted the peace and quiet of Blue Valley. Steve closed his eyes. Flame had come down the valley and was standing close by. Steve didn't have to open his eyes to know the stallion was there. Nor did he need to hear him. It seemed that the very air vibrated with the red stallion's greatness whenever he was around. If one looked, Flame's greatness could be seen in his eyes. But it wasn't necessary to look. One could *feel* it.

Steve suddenly felt a tightening in his throat, and he swallowed hard. Ordinarily he would have wanted Flame to be seen and appreciated by people other than himself, by horsemen who had never looked upon such a perfect stallion. But that kind of thinking wasn't for him. Steve knew. It wasn't possible for anyone but Pitch and himself to look upon Flame. To bring others here would mean the destruction of Blue Valley, the end of everything they held so dear. What they had here would last a long time. No one would know of Blue Valley until Pitch had his historical manuscript ready for publication, and it would take him many years to complete that work.

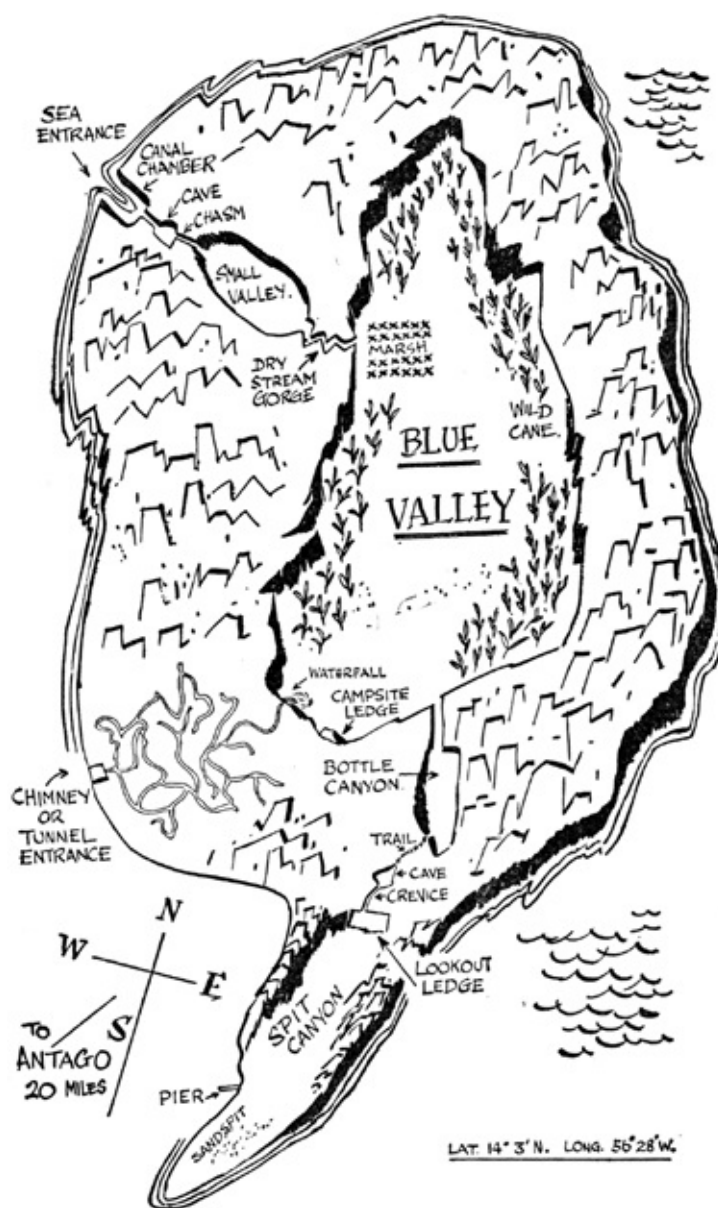
Steve opened his eyes. Flame had taken another drink from the pool and was returning to his band.

Steve's thoughts turned to all the swift rides he'd had on Flame. Had there ever been a faster horse than his stallion? He sat up and watched Flame move from one patch of grass to another. His red body was scarred heavily from all his battles to maintain leadership of the band, but his legs were straight and clean of any serious injuries. He'd give any horse in the world the race of his life!

"Stop daydreaming," Steve told himself. "You have Flame and that's all that matters. Ride him as fast as you like here in the valley and let it go at that."

He looked up at the sky and decided to rest just a short while more before going to camp. He lay back again, closing his eyes and listening to the steady drone of the waterfall; the long moments passed pleasantly, easily, sleepily....

Sure, he wouldn't change things from the way they were. But it didn't do any harm to imagine how things would have been under different circumstances. It didn't hurt to dream, to pretend that he was riding Flame in a great race back home. He could just see....



The great light came suddenly, so suddenly that it made Steve's eyelids smart before he had a chance to open them. And when he did, it was simultaneously with the screams of the mares and Flame. In that flashing second it was Flame's high whistle that made Steve's heart skip a beat, for never before had he heard anything like it! It was shrill but without defiance or challenge or welcome. Instead it held the worst kind of fear and terror, that of unknown peril.

Blue Valley was alive with a kind of golden light that had never before been seen there, even under the brightest sun. Not even the deepest crag or fissure escaped. The light found everything and bathed it all in an awesome glow.

Steve looked up and saw the hurtling sun coming directly at him! He screamed, his terror matching that of Flame and the mares. Then he flung himself flat, his face buried in the grass, his hands pressed hard against the sides of his head.

A sun where there had been no sun. The end of the world had come!

His face unnaturally pale, Steve lay motionless, waiting for the end to come. In quick successive mental pictures he saw his mother and father, his home and Pitch and Flame. Then a heavy black curtain fell and he saw nothing at all. Seconds more he waited, perhaps minutes. From the smell of the earth he knew that he was conscious. He forced himself to use his ears, to listen. He heard the distant rush of the mares' and Flame's hoofs. Then he opened his eyes.

Blue Valley was as it had been ... how long ago? Minutes? A lifetime? Had he imagined all this? No, of that much he was certain. He had only to look at the band and Flame to know. The mares had directed their suckling foals into the middle of a small tight ring they had formed; their heads were toward the center, their hindquarters ready to fling strong hoofs at any attacker. Outside the ring stood yearling colts willing to do battle but trembling with fear. Flame encircled the whole group, his eyes constantly shifting in every direction, his every sense alerted to the responsibility of defending his band. But he too was afraid because he could not see what threatened them.

The only brightness to the valley now came from the last reflections of the setting sun on the high eastern wall. There was nothing to fear or fight. Blue Valley was as quiet and peaceful as it had been before. *Before what?*

Steve sat up but did not attempt to get to his feet. He wasn't at all certain that he'd be able to stand yet. What had bathed the valley in that awesome glow? A meteor from outer space? He had seen shooting stars with long flaming tails in many a night sky. But never in the daytime or so close as this had been. He had read that most meteors were no larger than a grain of sand, becoming extinguished long before they reached the earth. But there'd been cases too of meteors so large that they resisted all the burning friction of the earth's atmosphere and fell intact, digging great holes in the ground.

Steve got to his feet and walked slowly to the pool, where he bathed his throbbing head.

meteor, then, was what it had been. It had almost landed on Azul Island. Where had it struck? Somewhere close, very close to the west. Now it must be at the bottom of the Caribbean Sea.

He turned to the band. The mares had broken their circle. But they were not yet grazing nor did they allow the foals to leave their sides. With short, incessant neighs and nips they kept the long-legged colts and fillies from straying away.

Steve left the pool and climbed the narrow trail up along the end wall. Reaching a broad ledge that overlooked Blue Valley, he went into the cave behind it. Just within the entrance but far enough back to be protected against any driving rains were the stove, table, chairs and canned provisions. But Steve wasn't thinking of food. Whatever appetite he'd had was gone. He got one of the large lanterns, a flashlight and Pitch's binoculars. Then, leaving the cave, he continued up the trail until he reached the great opening where the underground stream rushed out from blackness to daylight, plummeting downward in a silken sheet to the pool far below.

For a second Steve stopped. He turned to look at Flame and the band, then lit the lantern and went into the great opening. He walked to the right of the underground stream. Only when he rounded a long bend in the tunnel did he leave completely the light of day. He walked a little slower then, his hand occasionally touching the jagged rock on either side of him. Finally he came to a fork leading to many tunnels. Steve raised the lantern and saw the chalked figures and letters Pitch had marked on every wall of the explored passageway. Steve knew where he was going and how to get there, but he had learned to take nothing for granted in this underground maze. He made certain he had the right passageway before going on.

He continued for fifteen minutes or more, stopping only at intersections of other tunnels. He cast the light upon the walls. His lantern bobbed from the short, mincing strides he had to take in the low-ceilinged passageways. If he hurried, he thought, he might be in time to look upon a sea still angry with the searing it had received.

Just ahead, a small square of daylight lay on the floor of the tunnel. Reaching it, he stopped and looked up the high ventilation shaft that pierced the stone. Pitch's rope hung down the shaft, but Steve had no intention of climbing to the outer ledge that was directly above him. He'd be able to look out upon the western sea without doing that. He began walking forward again, his head tucked between his shoulders, his back bent more and more as the tunnel became smaller. He went only a short distance before reaching the outer wall. There he extinguished his lantern, for three narrow slits of daylight came through the rock.

He looked through the middle slit first and saw nothing but the open sea. When he moved to the slit on the far right he could see the red sun resting on the water and just beginning its descent into the sea. For a moment he forgot everything in the beauty of the western sky. Seldom had he left Blue Valley to watch a sunset over the Caribbean Sea.

He blinked his eyes often in the brightness of the setting sun and suddenly realized that the glow from it was unusually strong. His gaze left the sun to search the waters around him for any vapors, any steaming bubbles to indicate that a flaming mass of molten metal had fallen. But he saw nothing of the sort so his eyes returned to the setting sun.

The huge red ball was now half obliterated by the sea, and the sky was aglow with all the colors in the universe. But the unusual brightness still marked the sun, and Steve blinked h

eyes again. Once more he thought of the meteor. Perhaps it had struck directly in the path of his vision. Perhaps its steaming vapors were rising from the water and causing the golden glow that enveloped the brilliant red of the setting sun. He turned away, waiting for the sun to set completely so he'd know.

Minutes later the sun disappeared but the bright light on the water remained, *the same brilliant glow that had come to Blue Valley!* Steve told himself that it was being caused by gas from the meteor, still hot, still smoldering at the bottom of the sea. This was what he had hoped to see! This was why he had come! But although this made sense to him, there was no lessening to the pounding of his heart.

He squinted his eyes, hoping to see better. It was a nebulous, glowing mass of light and transparent, for he could make out the red sky directly behind it. Now he was certain it was produced by vapors rising from the sea. It was less bright than it had been only a moment ago. The meteor was losing its self-contained heat. The sea was crushing it, transforming it into nothing but heavy metal, fathoms upon fathoms deep.

Suddenly Steve thought he saw a movement within the golden mass. He tried to smile at this illusion but found he couldn't move his lips. Nothing was out there except vapors, he reminded himself. He reached for the binoculars hanging from his neck. Before he could get them to his eyes he saw another slight movement, then it too was gone.

He focused the binoculars many minutes before he became certain of what he had thought he'd seen twice before.

At first the object had no color or shape. Then as it became separated from the mass it appeared silver and needle-like against the background of red sky. It traveled downward, just above the water and that was the last he saw of it. He didn't know if it had climbed back into the heavens or had sunk into the depths of the sea.

He was frightened but it wasn't the same kind of fear as when he had thought the end of the world had come. Never again would he feel such total, all-engulfing fear as that had been. It was as if he had suffered the very worst that could happen to anyone and, having survived, was stronger for it. Yet he didn't take his eyes from the glowing mass. He watched its brightness fade until it was nothing at all ... only a small, round patch of grayish-white floating on the sea.

Steve held the binoculars up to his eyes until the world outside was as black as the tunnel ... but even then he could tell where it was, for the patch was luminous. To anyone else it would have been nothing but the phosphorescence of a tropical sea. Steve knew otherwise. Something was out there! He turned and stumbled down the passageway.

Arriving at Blue Valley, he went to Flame in the darkness. He sought a return to normalcy in the familiar nearness of his horse. But, like himself, Flame was alert and watchful. The stallion's wild instincts told him that whatever had disrupted the quiet of his kingdom a short while ago hadn't gone. He wouldn't stray from his band that night. He wouldn't sleep or relax his vigil. And Steve knew that it would be no different for himself. But, actually, what had they to watch for? Neither knew, and that's what made the long hours to come so dangerous.

For the time of year, the weather that night was very unusual. No moon or stars were to be seen through a heavy, rolling overcast, yet only a few hours before the sky had been clear except for the flimsy lacework of rippling white.

Steve felt the chilling dampness, the nearness of the drenching rain to come. He moved

closer to his horse, wondering if the heavens, like Flame and himself, were uneasy because of what had come to Blue Valley.

“You’re being silly,” he told himself, aloud and angry. Flame jumped away, startled by his voice. Steve called him back.

Over and over again he decided that what he had seen was only a meteor. He must accept that as a fact and nothing else. The meteor had sunk into the sea, leaving behind a bubbling trail that had created a great disturbance in the water *and in the air above it*. This had caused the golden mass, giving rise to his illusion of the three slender objects he had thought he had seen but actually *hadn’t*. The round, grayish-white patch that had remained on the water afterward was only something that had been created by the chemical reaction of gases and water. Tomorrow it would be gone.

Just then, and without further warning, the night rain came down heavily. Steve felt its rawness and decided that he and his horse were uneasy only because of the unseasonably cold. Suddenly he welcomed the rain, turning his face to the sky and letting it drench him thoroughly.

After a few minutes he told himself that he was being very foolish standing in the rain when it could lead to a bad cold and perhaps complications that would make it necessary for him to leave Blue Valley. “Pitch would really be angry if he caught me doing this,” he thought.

Leaving Flame, Steve climbed the trail to camp. He went inside the cave and lit the stove for the warmth it would provide. He’d have a lot to tell Pitch. Pitch would never believe that Blue Valley had gotten so cold he had had to get the stove going to keep warm!

Steve removed all his clothes and rubbed himself hard with a large towel, then got dry clothes from the trunk and put them on. The rain was still coming down hard and cold. Currents of air swept through the cave. He moved closer to the stove. He thought of having some hot soup, not because he was hungry but for added warmth.

Later he put the bowl of soup, half finished, to one side. He wondered at his lack of appetite. He was still shivering. He had brought no sweaters, no woolen clothes to the tropics. Then he remembered the light blankets and got one to wrap around himself. He didn’t lie down, for he knew he couldn’t sleep. He sat in a deep-seated canvas chair, watching and listening to the torrential downpour outside. It was going to be a long, long night.

Now, if Pitch were here it would be different, he thought. They’d watch the cold rain together and talk about how unusual it was. Pitch would insist upon having a big, hot meal. Afterward Pitch would sit beside him, smoking his pipe and telling about his latest tunnel exploration.

Steve closed his eyes so as not to see the rain any more. He would have liked to close his ears to it too. The rain wasn’t helping matters at all. He wished that Pitch were there with him. He could have discussed with him all he’d seen at sunset, and then he would have been able to forget it and go to sleep.

Perhaps all he had to do was to pretend that Pitch was sitting over there in the other chair listening. It wasn’t hard to visualize Pitch with his bared, knobby knees covered by a blanket. His round face boyish and jovial despite his fifty-odd years. Pitch would be looking very serious, very intent.

And he, Steve, would be saying, “Pitch, the strangest thing happened today. For a while

was as scared as I'll ever be in my life, but now that I know what actually happened it makes a great story. There I was down in the valley with Flame when ...”

Steve went to sleep with his lips moving, explaining to Pitch all that had happened at sunset.

Steve awakened to a morning unlike any he had ever known on Azul Island. The air was so crystal clear that only the finest of fall days in the northern hemisphere could have been compared with it. Never had his valley been more beautiful; it was a sky-blue gem set in soft, warm, molten gold.

Steve breathed deeply and felt his whole being expand with the exhilarating air. It was as though he'd never really breathed before! Would Pitch believe this, when he told him? Would Pitch be able to imagine that a hard, cold rain such as they'd had the night before could wash the valley and air as never before, breathing new life into everything? Look at the horses! Look at Flame! They were frolicking, playing like young weanling colts, every one of them!

Listen to the birds! Where were they? Few birds ever came to Blue Valley and then they never stayed very long. They preferred the lush, green, volcanic islands such as Antago to the comparative coral-rock barrenness of Azul. Steve swept his eyes over the wild cane below where the birds probably had gone in search of cover. He didn't see them yet their song filled the valley, echoing and re-echoing from the walls.

There, up the trail! He saw them then, perched on the jagged rocks beside the waterfall. There were only two, but their incessant calls made it sound as though a whole flock of birds had migrated to Blue Valley.

Steve's gaze left them for the horses again. Oh, he had so much to tell Pitch! He wished his friend were here to share this morning with him. Never had he felt so well, so happy! There were so many things he *wanted* to do today. For a few minutes more he watched Flame frolicking with his band, the tall stallion stopping occasionally to press hard against the yearling colts. Flame did this not in combat but in play. The colts seemed to understand and they pushed back and rose with him, but never too strenuously, for they did not want to antagonize their leader. The day would come when these colts would fight Flame in earnest, teeth for teeth, hoof for hoof, in their attempt to take the leadership from him. But at the present age they were willing to play.

Steve turned away from them and went into the cave. He cooked a large breakfast of powdered eggs and milk and hot biscuits. While he ate he looked often at the gleaming valley and listened to the birds. He had plenty of company today! Not once did he think fearfully of what had happened the day before at sunset. It was something he was glad to have experienced. How many other people had seen a glowing meteor fall to earth? And wouldn't it add further interest to the written record he'd kept of his life on Azul Island?

Steve thought of the filled notebooks he had hidden away. They told of his finding Flame and the band and all the exciting times he'd shared with them. They were something he had kept completely to himself. Even Pitch didn't know of them.

When Steve had washed the breakfast dishes he wanted very much to share this glorious morning in play with Flame. But first he had some work to do. There was the stove to be cleaned, crates of provisions to be opened and stored away, blankets and clothing to be aired

There'd be time later for Flame, plenty of time, all the rest of the day.

For several hours he worked, emerging from the cave every so often to look at the horse. He always drove himself back inside. But the desire to play was very strong on such a day. Finally he was finished except for getting a fresh supply of water. Picking up a bucket, he climbed the trail. The birds, still perched beside the waterfall, flew away at his approach. He was sorry that he had interrupted their song.

One, a bright blue bird with crested head, dove headlong down the wall, not leveling off until just before he reached the pool. The other, a mottled brown-backed bird, was less daring. He glided down, circling several times before coming to rest.

Steve made a mental note to get an accurate description of them for Pitch, who'd probably tell him that the previous night's wind and rain had swept these birds to Azul Island from Antago.

Steve got his water from the rushing stream and then returned to the ledge. Now for Flame!

The red stallion and the band had stopped their play and were grazing. The air remained crisp and cool even though it was almost noon. This had never happened before, and Steve marveled at it. Even the marsh at the far end of the valley wasn't sending up its foul vapors as it usually did at this time of day. He looked for the birds but couldn't find them. He hoped he hadn't scared them away. They belonged with this lovely day.

Steve whistled to Flame and the red stallion came loping toward him as he hurried down the trail. Flame stopped a short distance away, neighed and tossed his head, his heavy forelock falling over his eyes.

"Come on," Steve called.

The stallion shook his head but finally he came forward.

Steve gathered Flame's forelock. "I keep braiding this so you won't go blind trying to see through it, and you keep loosening it somehow," he said, laughing. "Stand still now, and we'll do it over again."

Flame tossed his head when Steve had finished, and the braided forelock moved up and down like a thumping whip. Steve slid onto the stallion's back.

Flame didn't bolt as he had done the previous afternoon. He stood restless but unmoving, awaiting commands from Steve's legs. Finally the light touch came and he went off at a slow gallop.

Steve kept Flame at that gait for a long while. They went down the valley, circled the band and came back. It was a day meant for riding and Steve intended to make the most of it. Just to be astride his horse, to be alone with him, was more than he could ever want.

But that wasn't exactly what he had thought yesterday, he reminded himself. Hadn't he wanted Flame's greatness to be appreciated by others? Hadn't he once again daydreamed of racing Flame? Yes, he admitted all this and he knew the reason for it.

Steve recalled the colorful poster he had seen in the Cuban air terminal during his long flight from the United States to Port of Spain, Trinidad, on his way to Azul Island well over a month ago. He had read it with great interest, as he did anything that had to do with horses. The poster had announced the running of an International Race to be held in Havana, Cuba, August 3rd. That was now less than a week away, he figured. The race was "OPEN TO THE WORLD"—and beneath this screaming declaration was a huge drawing of the globe.

Steve remembered boarding his plane again, wondering if "Open to the World" included Azul Island. So even then he'd been daydreaming of racing Flame! Such a fantastic prospect must be on his mind to a greater extent than he had realized.

Suddenly he heard the whir of feathered wings, and as a bird flew close overhead he saw the flash of the white under-body, the large blue wings and the crested head. It was the bird that had dived so recklessly down the end wall. The smaller, brown-backed bird was flying near the cane, squeaking loudly as though in warning or reprimand to the other.

Suddenly the blue bird flew in front of Flame and then downward, almost in the stallion's path. Flame thrust out a foreleg without breaking stride. He did it not in play but in anger. The bird annoyed him.

Steve, aware of Flame's mounting fury, turned him away from the cane, but the bird followed. Steve let Flame gallop faster and the tall stallion welcomed the opportunity to leave his winged tormentor behind. His strides became longer as he swept across the valley floor.

Steve's clucking matched the rhythm of his horse's hoofs. As the beat became faster and they left the bird behind, he thought once more of the poster he had seen. He pretended that he had Flame on the Havana race track. *Steve Duncan racing Flame!* He bent closer to his horse's neck and told him to go on. Now they were passing all the other horses in the International Race. Now they were really moving!

They swept down the valley floor and as he neared the pool Flame began his wide sweeping turn. Steve leaned with him, urging him to still greater speed. Now they were entering the homestretch. "*Come on, Flame! The finish wire is just ahead!*"

As the stallion lengthened out a low blue streak cut in front of him. Flame slowed his strides and struck out viciously. He even swerved aside, striking again at the bird who had dared to come so close to his legs. This time his hoof grazed the bird's long tail and the feathers flew. The bird dove into the tall cane, then rose again to be joined by his brown-backed friend whose high, squeaky calls of reprimand could be heard above the pounding of Flame's hoofs. After circling, the birds flew away.

Steve buried his head in Flame's flowing mane again, glad that the blue bird had left them alone. The stallion picked up stride and once more the valley echoed only to the beat of winged hoofs.

Minutes later Steve slowed his horse and circled the band. Finally he stopped and slipped off Flame's back. He walked toward the mares but did not go close enough to frighten the foals. He sat down on the grass and waited for the mares to come to him.

He did not have long to wait, for the adult members of the band had accepted him long ago. The mares came closer but the suckling foals stayed behind their mothers, a little timid, a little afraid. It was they whom he wanted to make his friends. Every day he spent a short while with them, trying to win their confidence and acceptance.

He called to these long-legged, furry-coated sons and daughters of Flame, waiting for them to lose their shyness and come to him. But today they showed no curiosity over his presence and did not move from behind their mothers' protective bodies. Steve waited a long while before finally giving up. He got to his feet, regretting that he had made no progress.

On the way down the valley he passed a group of yearling colts at play. He called to one of them but the colt took no notice of him. This was the one whose broken leg he had cared for

the summer before and whom he had intended to take home. But his parents had given him the choice of using the money he earned each year to maintain a horse of his own, continuing his summer visits with Pitch, and he had chosen the latter. He couldn't give up Flame and Blue Valley.

Steve walked on, aware that he didn't feel as well as he had only a short while before. Perhaps it was due to the blunt rebuff he'd received from the foals and the yearling colt ... especially the colt, for they had been such fast friends the previous summer. The colt had grown up and away from him during the months he'd been away.

He brushed the sweat from his face, realizing suddenly that the weather too had changed. The sun's rays had finally penetrated the cool air of the valley. No longer was the day crystal clear but heavy with tropic heat. Steve decided, as he approached the end wall, that the afternoon was no warmer than any other in the past. It was just oppressive by comparison with those wonderful earlier hours.

Returning to camp, he made himself a sandwich, and stayed within the cave to eat it. Finally he rose from his chair and went out on the ledge to stand in the sun again. He felt the beads of perspiration come to his forehead, but he didn't leave the open ledge. His eyes and feet shifted uneasily as he looked down the valley.

Somehow, just as the weather had changed so had he. He was restless, even becoming concerned again about that floating white patch on the water. It was all so silly, so foolish. There was no reason to be concerned. He had decided once and for all it was something that had been caused by the chemical reaction of gases and water. It would be gone by now, swallowed by the sea just as the meteor had been.

He walked from one side of the ledge to the other, still ignoring the relief from the sun which the cave offered him. If it was the floating patch that was bothering him, why not make certain that it had long since disappeared? If his mind would not listen to reason, the only way to rid himself of his apprehension was to go and look again. He'd find nothing, and that would make everything all right.

Taking his knapsack and lantern, he went up the trail. The valley was very quiet; it seemed that the birds too had sought refuge from the heat. He hoped they hadn't forsaken Blue Valley altogether. It was nice having them around, even if the larger one had annoyed Flame. He turned to look at his stallion and the band. They were grazing in the shade of the western wall. Flame moved restlessly from one patch of grass to another, raising his head every so often, ears pricked and listening.

Steve went into the great opening, wondering if Flame felt the same anxiety that he did. And if so, for what reason, when everything had been so serene before? He hurried along the underground stream, anxious to reach the lookout post over the western sea.

When he arrived there he pressed his eyes close to the narrow slit. The afternoon sun was higher than during his last visit, so its rays did not obstruct his view of the sea's surface. He saw immediately that the grayish-white patch was still there, and the blood began pounding in his temples. He pressed his head closer to the stone, welcoming its coolness. He tried to make sense of what he was seeing. It must be floating algae, phosphorescent at night, grayish-white during the day. But why then hadn't it moved? Why was it anchored in the same identical spot as last night?

He forsook the coolness of the stone against his head for the binoculars and the better view

they would provide. As he put the glasses to his eyes, he found that his hands were moist. He chastised himself, ridiculed himself for his mounting concern. But nothing helped.

He looked through the binoculars. The patch was no different than when seen with the naked eye ... it was grayish-white, round and motionless. Steve stayed there a long while, not wanting to leave without having decided once and for all what it really was. He didn't want to spend another uneasy night.

He could not have told how long he had been there when he saw some sort of a stirring directly above the patch. He told himself it was being caused by the sun's rays. But the sun was still high in the heavens. A light was beginning to dance directly above the grayish-white patch. Rapidly it became brighter, and then Steve knew what it was. *The golden mass of the day before. The second sun that had swept over Blue Valley. The meteor that was no meteor!*

In a few seconds the mass was big and round and glowing. Steve closed his eyes against its brightness. Yet he didn't keep them closed, for he wanted to watch. He saw the long flash of an object high above the golden mass before it plummeted down to the water. He made out its needle-like shape just before it disappeared within the great light. Then the mass faded rapidly until nothing was left on the water but that small patch of grayish-white.

Steve lowered the binoculars, turned away and staggered through the tunnel. What was out there on the water? What had he seen?

Whatever it was, he and the horses were safe in Blue Valley. Nothing, *no one* could reach them within the barrier walls of Azul Island. Soon *it* would go away, and all would be quiet and peaceful again. But what was it? He wanted to *know*.

His breath came faster just as his steps did, without his being aware of it. The needle-like object that had flashed through the sky had been guided to that mass of golden light, he decided. Guided by whom? What was the light? Where had it gone?

He stumbled and fell, but managed to keep his lantern from being broken. For a moment he lay on the ground, finding comfort in his familiarity with this underground world. A soothing quietness came to his body and mind. Perhaps he had seen nothing at all. Perhaps his eyes, affected by long weeks of bright, tropical sun, had created these optical illusions of mass and objects. Mirages had appeared to others at sea and in the desert. Why not to him?

Finally he got to his feet and began walking again. But he had gone only a short distance when suddenly he fell to his knees with a force that sent the lantern crashing hard against the jagged wall. The strong current of tunnel air quickly extinguished the flame and then he was in total darkness.

He made no attempt to get the flashlight from his knapsack but remained absolutely still, listening. Yet the voices could not be real, nothing he actually heard! His ears, like his eyes, he decided, must be playing tricks on him in this black world a thousand and more feet beneath the dome of Azul Island.

On hands and knees he went forward, feeling his way along the ground. The voices rang constantly in his ears, soft and almost musical, *clear and so distinct*. Was his mind too playing tricks on him? No one else could be in this maze of tunnels known only to Pitch and himself.

He inched forward, rounding a turn, and there he saw the light of a burning lantern coming from a side chamber. He dropped flat on the ground so quickly that his head struck the stone, the impact making the blood gush from his nose. But he felt nothing, saw nothing ... only his ears seemed alive.

“Really, Jay,” a voice said impatiently, “it’s getting late and we should go back. We’ve wasted most of the day already.”

“Wasted?” another voice asked. “Did you expect to find anything like this? You know as well as I do that we’re most fortunate.”

“Well, of course. I admit all that. But at the same time we mustn’t overdo it. After all there’s work to be done.”

“It can wait.”

Steve raised his head, listening to the voices and experiencing a strange solace in his final acceptance that they were *real*. No longer did he have to fear discovery with no chance to fight back. The danger was here, only a few feet away from him. He rose and went slowly forward, making no noise. He tried to still the pounding of his heart, afraid that it might betray his presence. Closer and closer he moved to the doorway, stealthily transferring his weight from one leg to the other. Not once did he take an awkward, uncertain step or dislodge a loose stone. Every movement was fluid, coordinated and planned. Fear stood silently along with him, but this fear he understood and accepted. It was as real as the voices of the men within the chamber. When he was almost at the doorway, he stopped and listened. The waiting had come to an end. Now he would know what he must face to protect himself and the horses.

“Come in, Steve,” one voice said suddenly. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

The words came as unexpectedly as an unseen blow, almost striking him down as he stood there rigidly, his back against the side of the tunnel. He had felt so certain he could not have been seen or heard.

“Please, Steve, come in,” the voice repeated. “We really don’t have much time.” It was not a command, only an impatient but gracious request.

But Steve had no intention of entering the chamber. And, finding that his legs had lost their temporary immobility, he moved quickly. He knew where this tunnel would take him and he planned to lose his pursuers forever in this world of darkness.

His hands were raised to ward them off if they sought to stop him when he passed the doorway. But they weren’t there. A swift glance disclosed that they were well to the rear of the room, one sitting on the edge of the chamber’s lone table, while the other stood beside it holding a lantern.

Steve came to a sudden stop, telling himself they could never reach him from where they were or travel the tunnels as fast as he. But what made him stop was more than that. It was the men themselves.

They were no taller than Pitch, who was a short man, and they were just as thin and lightly boned. But it was their clothes that startled him most of all. They were dressed more for a northern business office than a tropical expedition, much less one to the rocky depths of Azura Island. Their suits were heavy and newly pressed with knife-edged creases. They wore firm shirts and bow ties.

As Steve looked at them they stared back, their gazes unwavering and interested. Their faces were round and, like their voices, soft and gracious. There was nothing evil or sinister about them. They smiled at him and then were silent, as though waiting for him to speak.

Steve gripped the jagged stone of the doorway, ready to pull himself away at a run. He must not be influenced by their appearance. He must not step inside the chamber, where they might catch him.

Finally the one holding the lantern said, “I *do* wish you wouldn’t take so much time, Steve. We must be getting on.”

The other slid easily from his seat on the table. “You’re always taking so much for granted, Flick,” he reprimanded. “Can’t you see that Steve is startled at finding us here? First, we should introduce ourselves.” He came across the room, his hand outstretched. “My name is Jay, and ...” He stopped abruptly when he saw the boy draw back from the doorway. “Don’t go, Steve. Please don’t go. Are you really so frightened by us?”

It was impossible for Steve to say anything. He could only look at them, wondering who they were and how they had ever gotten there. The eyes of the man standing only a short distance away from him were crystal clear and yet had color. More than anything else they promised him no harm. Yet Steve said not a word, nor did he relax his muscles.

“Flick,” the man said without taking his eyes off Steve, “please bring the lantern over here.”

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