

BLUE VALLEY

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Azul Island broke the turquoise blue waters with a startling suddenness. One saw it not as an island but as a massive, egg-shaped boulder dropped into the sea. The islands of the Caribbean Sea are tropical and luxurious in their soft green vegetation and colorful flowers. There was nothing soft or green or colorful about Azul Island.

Its precipitous walls rose naked from the sea, rising a thousand or more feet in the sky until they rounded off to form the dome-shaped top of Azul Island. It was barren and foreboding, with the sea beating white against its barrier walls, seeking entrance and finding none.

Only on large-scale navigation maps of the far eastern area of the Caribbean Sea could the island be found. It ran north and south, nine miles long. But no ships ever passed it unless driven far off their course. Neither did any air lane come within five hundred miles of it. So except for the people of the nearest inhabited island, Antago, a little more than twenty miles to the southwest, Azul Island was little known and untouched.

Only at the southern tip of the island did the mountainous rock break away abruptly to become a low, sandy spit of land where the waves were permitted to roll high upon the shore. This spit was the only part of Azul Island that the people of Antago knew, and very seldom did they have any occasion to visit it.

When they did, they would dock their boats at the narrow wooden pier which was the island's sole connecting link with the outside world, and set out across the dunes of the windswept reef. They would walk up the spit to a small canyon at the end of which was a sheer wall rising five hundred feet above them. They would stop and look up, knowing this was as far as they could go on Azul Island.

"Solid rock," they usually said. "The rest of the island is nothing but rock, eight solid miles of it."

And soon they would leave this desolate, foreboding place, sometimes looking back, once they were at sea, at the bare, yellow rock and the dome-shaped top of Azul Island which gleamed in the sun's rays.

Never, even by the widest stretch of the imagination, could they suspect that running down the dome was a long, narrow gap which allowed the rays of the sun to find a valley ... a lost valley within a lost world; a valley as soft and green and colorful as any tropical island in the Caribbean Sea. *And it was inhabited!*

Long and narrow, the valley extended almost the length of the island; a bluish-green gem set deep amidst towering walls that were the yellow of pure gold. High up on the wall at the southern end of the valley an underground stream rushed from blackness to

sunlight, plummeting downward in a silken sheet of white and crashing onto the rocks of a large pool two hundred feet or more below.

From the great opening where the falls began a trail led down the wall. Halfway to the valley floor it leveled off at a wide ledge fronting a cave. A man sat there, writing. He used empty wooden boxes for his seat and desk, and his pen moved quickly over the paper before him. As he finished each page, he dropped it beside him, and with no hesitation went on to the next sheet.

He was a small man, thin but wiry of build. His knobby knees were uncovered, for he wore tropical walking shorts. Earlier in the day he had put on his white pith helmet to shade his eyes from the glare of the hot sun. He was still wearing the helmet, even though the sun had dropped behind the high walls of the valley. But he hadn't noticed, for he was much too absorbed in his writing. His round tanned face, usually boyish and jovial, was drawn taut from the intensity of his concentration.

He continued writing until two short whistles broke the stillness of the valley. Looking up, he noticed for the first time that it was sunset. The shadows from the walls had reached the valley floor, turning the cropped grass to an almost brilliant blue. His gaze traveled far up the valley where a band of horses was grazing. He tried without success to locate his friend Steve.

The two short whistles came again. Reaching for his high-powered binoculars, the man brought them close to the steel-rimmed glasses he wore. Near the edge of the tall sugar cane which grew wild on the sides of the valley, he located the boy. Apparently Steve had been sitting there watching the mares and foals since his arrival in Blue Valley a few hours ago. But now he was getting to his feet. The man saw him place his fingers to his lips; again came the two short whistles. Steve was calling Flame, but the stallion was nowhere in sight.

Then from far up the valley came an answering scream. Steve's whistles were the softest of whispers compared to it. Shrill, loud and clear, it rose to such a high pitch that it seemed it would shatter the towering walls. And when it finally died the valley echoed to the fast, rhythmic beat of pounding hoofs.

The man moved his binoculars to pick up the running stallion. He was coming through the tall cane far up on the opposite side of the valley, the stalks bending and breaking beneath his giant body. When he reached the short, cropped grass, his strides lengthened as he swept toward the boy who awaited him. He was beautiful, swift and strong, and his chestnut coat and mane were the glowing red of fire.

The man put down his binoculars when the stallion came to a stop before the boy. *It's so good to have Steve back again in Blue Valley*, he thought. *Flame's glad. I'm glad. Everybody's happy.* Smiling contentedly, the man turned once more to his writing.

Tall and long limbed, the red stallion stood as motionless as a statue; his small head was raised high, not in defiance but in haughty grandeur. Yet his large eyes never left

the boy and there was soft recognition in them. Finally he tossed his head and his heavy mane rose and fell with the high arch of his neck.

"Flame."

Small ears pricked forward at the sound of Steve Duncan's voice. Long, delicate nostrils quivered. Then, without further hesitation, the stallion moved toward the boy.

Steve touched the silken neck and ran his fingers through the tousled mane, gently smoothing it. Flame stood quietly, with only his eyes moving as they turned from Steve to the band that had strayed in the direction of the water pool, then back to the boy again. And knowing now that Flame had not forgotten him during the ten months he had been away, Steve was content just to stand there beside him and to look at him.

Never was there a horse so beautiful! No other could match the finely molded body or the giant muscles that moved so smoothly beneath tight, sliding skin. No equal did he have in strength of legs and withers, chest and shoulders. And his head was the most beautiful part of him, for every inch of it disclosed the preponderance of Arabian blood that was in this stallion. It was raised high, yet set at an angle, accentuating the high curve at the crest of his long neck. It was wedge-shaped, broad in the forehead and tapering down to long, delicate nostrils. The ears were small and close together; just now they were pricked, almost touching at the tips. The large eyes, set wide apart, were most expressive, glaring wildly when the stallion's fury was aroused and becoming soft and warm when there was nothing to fear or fight.

That Flame had fought often and hard was easily seen in the scars that marked his red coat. Some were jagged, made by the cutting, ravaging teeth of fighting stallions. Others were clean and straight, left by pounding, battering hoofs. Some were old, some new. All of them made this giant stallion what he was, King of the Band. He had won his leadership through fighting; he would lose it the same way.

Steve swept his hands across the muscled withers. He leaned a little on the stallion's back, and the red coat beneath his hands quivered.

"Oh, Flame," he said. "It's good ... so good to be back."

For a moment the boy just stood there. Never had this great stallion known the touch of hands before his, he knew. Never had Flame even seen human beings before Steve and his friend Pitch had found Blue Valley late last summer. It had taken time to convince Flame that he and his band had nothing to fear from Steve's and Pitch's presence, nothing to fight. But finally Steve had won the stallion's love and confidence. He'd been able to play with him, run with him, ride him any time of day or night. And now after so many long months he was back with his horse, to continue this life which was as new to him as it was to Flame.

He placed more of his weight on the stallion's back. Flame tossed his head as though he knew what was coming and was impatient to get along with it. Steve leaped as high as he could and pulled himself, face downward, across the stallion's back. Flame whirled while the boy was still hanging on precariously, but Steve's hand

found the thick mane and quickly he pulled himself upright as Flame again came to a stop.

The boy pressed his knees close to the withers and then he touched the stallion low on the neck. With short, springy steps Flame lightly crabstepped down the valley. He snorted repeatedly, and his ears shifted, half turning to Steve. He wanted to move out of the crabstep, yet he awaited the boy's command.

Finally Steve moved his leg slightly, his heel rubbing against the stallion. Flame shifted smoothly into a slow, rocking canter. Then his strides lengthened as Steve bent closer to his arched neck. The rhythmic beat of the stallion's hoofs came faster; he tossed his head and occasionally struck out a foreleg either in play or as an indication that he wanted to run all out. Yet he waited for a further command from Steve, and finally the boy hunched his shoulders far forward and pressed his cheek hard against Flame's silken neck.

Steve felt the ground give way beneath the ever lengthening strides, and the wind whistled until it shut out the pounding hoofs. His eyes filled with the rush of wind and he sought protection from it by burying his head in the stallion's whipping mane.

He had ridden all his life, but this was not riding. This was being part of a horse!

Through blurred eyes he saw that they had almost reached the pool beneath the waterfall. The band moved quickly away, scattering at sight of their running leader. Steve touched Flame and the stallion swerved obediently away from the pool, cutting across the valley floor to the far side. Steve began talking to him then, and shifted his weight back off the withers. The stallion slowed down, although he pawed repeatedly with his foreleg, striking out in play.

Steve brought him to a stop, and except for tossing his head Flame stood still. The yellow walls had been the only spectators to the exhibition of Flame's blazing speed.

Steve turned his attention to the band. The horses were grazing again. The boy counted over a hundred of them, including all the suckling foals who stayed close beside their dams. And there were weanlings who frolicked and played, glorying in their newly acquired independence from their mothers and testing their strength and speed against one another. Yearlings and older colts and fillies kept to themselves, content in their maturity.

Flame was their leader. They looked to him for protection against any danger and for guidance. Yet Steve knew that some day one of the older colts, falsely secure in his strength and youth, would attempt to take Flame's leadership away from him. They would meet in physical combat, and to live and maintain his supremacy of the band Flame would kill. There could be but one leader of the band. It had been that way for centuries, ever since the Spanish Conquistadores had forsaken the ancestors of these horses in Blue Valley. Forebears who had been left here to die. But who had not died. Instead, they had lived and bred and the band had survived. The horses the Spaniards had forsaken in this valley were of the purest blood and the finest obtainable; they had passed on their speed, stamina and beauty to their offspring. And

Blue Valley with its good grass and water and protective walls had fostered these horses until today there was no finer band in all the world.

Steve touched Flame on the neck, stroking him gently. *No one knows what Pitch and I have found*, he mused. *Not even Mother and Dad know or suspect anything out of the ordinary. They like Pitch; he's an old friend of the family. They were glad I wanted to visit him on Antago last year, glad that I wanted to come back again this summer. Mother especially. For when Dad had proposed the long automobile trip for their vacation this summer, she had said, "You and I can do that, Paul. Let Steve visit Pitch again. Let him travel outside the country while he can; there'll be time enough for him to take automobile trips with us."*

Steve smiled to himself as he thought of his mother's words. What Mom really had meant was that she was glad he'd be with Pitch. She had great respect for Pitch's intelligence and she thought it would do Steve good to be with him. She thought of Pitch as a scholar, an historian. She knew of his interest in archaeology and that he and Steve were doing some digging on an uninhabited island twenty miles northeast of Antago. Yes, that was what had brought them to the spit of Azul Island. And they had found more than they'd bargained for, much more than they'd ever dreamed of finding. But no one else knew.

Flame moved uneasily beneath him. The stallion wanted to be off with his band, and Steve noticed that it was becoming dark fast. He'd better be getting back to Pitch. He had a lot of questions he wanted to ask him. Touching Flame, he cantered across the valley to the trail which went up to the ledge; there he dismounted and, giving the stallion a light slap on his haunches, watched while Flame returned to his band.

He started up the trail, thinking of all the wonderful days to come, over two months, which he'd be able to spend with Flame and the band in their lost world.

PITCH'S MAP

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The climb to the ledge was steep but not hard, and within a few minutes Steve had reached the campsite. But Phil Pitcher didn't look up from his writing.

"You'll go blind trying to work in the dark, Pitch."

The man raised his head in a quick, startled way. "Oh, it's you, Steve," he said, putting down his pen.

"Not expecting anyone else, were you?" Steve asked, smiling.

"No. No, of course not. It was just that I was so absorbed." Pitch paused to remove his glasses and rub his eyes, then he too smiled. "You're right. It *is* almost dark. I'll just put these papers away."

Steve turned on the Coleman gasoline lantern, and his eyes blinked in its bright yellow light. He watched Pitch pick up the pages of the work he had done that day and place them carefully in his leather briefcase before putting it just within the cave's entrance. At the base of the opposite wall were three shovels, two picks, an axe and a pile of rope. Beside them were two rolled sleeping bags and a half-filled box of canned foods. In the center of the ledge was a small but efficient two-plate kerosene stove, and next to it all the pots, pans and eating utensils they'd ever need. Just within the entrance of the cave Steve saw a box containing two flashlights, a camera, more tools and a pile of other things. Yes, during the ten months he'd been away from Blue Valley, Pitch had well equipped the camp with supplies from Antago.

"You're writing about everything?" he asked Pitch.

"Yes, Steve. I began with our finding the entrance to the tunnels, and then have gone on covering just about everything I've seen and done during the time you've been away. I've given a detailed account of every discovery, every trip I've taken through the tunnels. I've taken photographs of Blue Valley, the smaller valley and the canyons and gorges. Also, I've given what I believe from my findings is an accurate history of the island. I've stated that I believe that this island, like Cuba and Puerto Rico, was used as a supply base by the Spaniards during their conquest of the New World. From here they equipped their armies with provisions and weapons ..."

"And horses," Steve interrupted.

"Yes, horses," Pitch agreed. "Horses of purest blood, they were. The very finest specimens of their race to be obtained in Spain. Horses who faced the battles and world-shaking adventures with the men of Cortés, the Pizarros and DeSoto in their conquest of the Americas!" Pitch's eyes were bright with his enthusiasm. "I've mentioned, too, Steve, that I believe this island was the Spaniards' very last stronghold in the Caribbean Sea. I feel that when the English and French drove back the Spanish armies in the latter part of the seventeenth century, the Spaniards retreated to this natural fortress. But in time they had to forsake this island hurriedly, and they left behind the ancestors of the horses we have in Blue Valley today."