

ISLAND OF LOST HORSES

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Azul Island. Latitude 14° 3' North. Longitude 56° 28' West.

The freighter *Horn*, nine days out of New York City, was a mile from Azul Island, and running parallel to it. The freighter's only passenger, Steve Duncan, stood beside the captain at the bow of the ship. Steve wore only a pair of swimming trunks, and his tanned, lithe body was wet with the spray that whipped from the prow of the *Horn* as she dipped to meet each oncoming wave. Steve had been waiting many hours for his first sight of Azul Island.

The captain passed his binoculars to Steve, saying, "We can't get any closer, Steve. Dangerous reefs there. I've never been this close before."

Through the glasses, Steve could see the long white line of churning waters foaming across the reef between the ship and the island. He watched the waters turn from white to blue-black once they had crossed the reef. Surging forward, the waves gathered momentum and height, only to disappear within the mist which hung like a gray veil about the base of Azul Island. Then there would be a sudden, bursting whiteness again, momentarily blotting out the gray, as the waves smashed heavily against what Steve knew must be a formidable wall of stone.

But above the mist he could see more of Azul Island, for the rock, a yellowish gold in color, rose a thousand or more feet above the sea. It was this massive rock that held his gaze as the *Horn* ran the length of the island. Azul Island was unlike any of the other islands they had passed in the Caribbean Sea. Not only did it differ in color from the green mountain ranges Steve had seen, but there were no peaks or ravines or indentations of any kind over its smooth, bare surface. The top of Azul Island seemed to be rounded off at one height, and Steve could only think of it as a huge stone that had been dropped into the sea. It was cold and barren, as though vegetation would have none of it.

The captain said, "*Azul* means blue in Spanish. I don't see where it gets its name. There's nothing but yellow rock."

"There's supposed to be a plain at one end of the island," Steve said.

"We're about opposite it now," the captain returned, "but the mist is blanketing it. That is, if you want to call it a plain. From the sea, it's always looked like a sandy spit. Oh, it's somewhat rolling and green in spots, but a sailor might as well be drowned in the sea as be shipwrecked on it. Azul Island is one of the most forlorn places I've ever seen." The captain paused and turned to the boy. "How did you know

about the plain? That is, if you don't mind my asking, Steve. Your interest in Azul Island has aroused my curiosity. I was surprised that you even knew of it, because the only map you'll ever find it on is our large-scale navigation map of this area. And it's nowhere near any of the airline routes. I just can't figure out ..."

The boy's eyes were still turned shoreward as he said, "A very good friend of mine, Phil Pitcher, now lives on Antago. He wrote me about Azul Island a few weeks ago."

"Phil Pitcher," the captain repeated thoughtfully. "I believe I remember him, Steve. Sort of a small, thin man, wearing steel-rimmed glasses?"

"That's Pitch, all right." Steve smiled. "I think he did get down to Antago on the *Horn* at that."

"He sure did," the captain said, laughing. "If you don't go to Antago on my ship, you don't go at all. We're the only line that puts in at Antago; it's too far off the shipping lanes for any of the larger lines to bother with. Sure, I remember your Phil Pitcher. He spent most of his time reading during the trip, but every once in a while he'd come out of his shell and tell me about himself. It seems he was a little worried about having given up a job he'd had practically all his life to go to Antago. He wasn't quite sure at the time that he'd done the right thing."

"He's sure now," Steve said quietly. "From what he says in his letters, he's happier than he ever was at home. He wasn't very happy at home. Pitch lived next door to us for as long as I can remember, and he was pretty much a part of our family. We all knew he hated his job. He was a bookkeeper in the office of a big lumberyard, and the job kept him inside all the time. He didn't like that. I guess everyone had heard Pitch say at one time or another that he was going to quit and go to Antago to live with his stepbrother, Tom, who has a sugar plantation there. But no one believed him. Then a little over a year ago he did it. Quit just as he'd said he would, and went to Antago."

"Good man," the captain said, smiling.

"Yes," Steve said seriously, "we were so glad he finally did what he'd always wanted to do. But we've all missed him very much."

"He certainly didn't talk like a bookkeeper," the captain recollected. "You should have heard some of the tales he told me about the Conquistadores and the Spanish Conquest. They were enough to make your head spin."

"Pitch was always interested in the Conquistadores. That was another reason he preferred to come down here rather than go anywhere else. He's a lot closer to them here."

"Then it's Pitch you're visiting on Antago," the captain said.

Steve nodded. "He's been asking Dad and me to get down to see him. Dad couldn't make it very well with his work and all, but he wanted me to go. I had planned to visit Pitch early next summer, instead of coming down now when I only have a few weeks before school opens again, but ..." Steve stopped, his gaze shifting uneasily between the captain and the shoreline of Azul Island. He hadn't meant to divulge so much.

The captain was looking at him questioningly, waiting.

“I—I mean I just decided to come now,” Steve said, without meeting the captain’s eyes.

Smiling, the captain said, “But you’ll have seventeen or eighteen days on Antago before we pick you up on the return trip. Maybe you’ll find that long enough to be there.”

“Sure,” Steve said. “Maybe I will.”

A few minutes later the captain left, and Steve stood alone at the rail as the *Horn* rounded the island and made its way south toward Antago, twenty miles away. He stayed at the bow until he could no longer see the yellow, dome-shaped top of Azul Island, then went below.

In his cabin, he took a worn and much-handled newspaper clipping from the pocket of his suitcase. It was a picture taken on the plain of Azul Island, and Pitch had enclosed it in his last letter. It was because of this clipping, and only because of it, that he was visiting Pitch now instead of waiting until next summer. He couldn’t have stayed at home, wondering. He had to know.

Steve’s dark, somber eyes studied the canyon in the picture. He noted again the high walls, tapering down to the sea; the rolling, barren land in front; and the cliff at the end of the canyon, hanging two hundred feet or more above the floor. And then his intent gaze became fixed upon the group of horses running down the canyon before the many men who followed. The head of a man wearing glasses was encircled in pencil, and alongside was the notation “Me.”

A flicker of a smile passed over Steve’s face before he turned to the caption beneath the picture. He read it carefully, slowly, even though he could have recited it word for word:

CARIBBEAN ROUNDUP!—Last week a group of men from Antago traveled the twenty miles to Azul Island to spend the day wrangling the wild horses that inhabit that island. The horses are believed to be descended from those that the Spanish Conquistadores brought to this hemisphere centuries ago. The government of Antago permits thirty horses to be removed from Azul Island every five years. The agent in charge of the procuring, breaking and sale of these horses is Thomas J. Pitcher.

Carefully, Steve folded the newspaper clipping and put it away.

It was four o’clock when the *Horn* dropped anchor a quarter of a mile from Chestertown, the port of Antago. Steve had finished packing his suitcase and was in the captain’s cabin, awaiting the attention of the man from the Antago Immigration Department, who was talking to the captain. Through the porthole, Steve could see the red-roofed buildings on the shore and the green countryside behind the town. He was taking it all in when he heard the man from the Immigration Department asking for his passport. Steve gave it to him. The captain rose to his feet, bade Steve good-bye and said he hoped he’d have a nice vacation on Antago; then he excused himself and left.

After stamping Steve's passport, the man from the Immigration Department returned it to him, saying, "There's a Phil Pitcher waiting for you on the wharf. If you're ready to go in now, you can come along with me."

A few minutes later, Steve followed the man down the ladder at the side of the *Horn*. Below, rising and falling with the swells of the bay, was a large, deep rowboat manned by six burly black men. The immigration official stepped into the boat and helpfully took Steve's suitcase as the boy followed.

The men pushed away from the ship and began rowing toward town. For a few minutes, Steve looked back over the stern. Already the *Horn's* cargo hoists were lifting heavy boxes from the hold to the barges that had pulled alongside the freighter. In a little while she would be on her way again, and Steve felt a temporary surge of regret that he was not going along.

But quickly he pushed the thought aside and turned his gaze shoreward. *Here, he thought, is the beginning. This is what I actually asked for. It wasn't the Horn or a trip through the Caribbean that I wanted. It was Antago. No, rather, it was Azul Island. Well, I've seen it, part of it at any rate. No, I'm not discouraged by what I've seen. Somehow, I had expected it to be different from the others—forlorn, forsaken by all save the horses. It makes Azul Island all the more interesting. I'll have to arrange with Pitch to get there some way.*

A fishing boat passed close by, its sails hard on the wind. And ahead, Steve could see other boats moored closely to the sides of a canal.

They went up the canal, finally turning in toward a wharf, alongside which there was a large shed. Steve looked for Pitch. At first he did not recognize him, for his gaze passed over the small, thin man wearing knee-length pants and a long-peaked cap. Then the man regained his attention by calling to Steve and sweeping off his cap, waving it vigorously. Seeing the steel-rimmed glasses the man wore was all that Steve needed to identify Pitch at that distance. Waving back, he replied to Pitch's greetings and his frequent questions called across the twenty feet of water. Yes, Steve yelled back, he'd had a good trip. Yes, everything was all right at home. It was good seeing him, too. Antago looked fine, just fine.

And all the while Steve was thinking, *He's the same Pitch, all right. The short pants threw me off at first. I've never seen Pitch's knees before. Just as knobby as the rest of him. His skin has darkened a lot from the sun, but his face hasn't changed any. Mom always said that Pitch had the softest, roundest face she'd ever seen. Just take one look at Phil Pitcher, she'd say, and you know right off that he wouldn't do a bit of harm to anyone.*

The rowboat pulled alongside the wharf and Pitch got hold of Steve's suitcase, sweeping it out of his hands. "You don't know how good it is to see you, Steve!" he said. "I've looked forward to having you or your father down here for a visit. Tell me about him, Steve. And your mother? How is she?"

As they walked to the shed, Steve told Pitch all the news he could think of. He opened his suitcase for the Customs authorities, then shut it again when they'd finished looking through it. One of the Customs men took out a piece of chalk and scrawled his initials over Steve's bag.

"Now we can go," Pitch said, leading the way. "I have the car outside. We're twelve miles from town."

As they drove through the crowded streets, Pitch pointed out the local sights of interest—the bank, the market, theater, hotel—and then concluded by saying apologetically, "They're really not much. Although," he added more hopefully, "I do think you're going to like our house. My brother Tom's house, that is. It's located on a high cliff overlooking the sea. A beautiful view, Steve, very beautiful."

"I'm sure I'll like it," Steve assured him. He said it with enthusiasm, knowing very well that Pitch was afraid he'd be disappointed in his visit to Antago. It made him a little uncomfortable. So as they drove through the outskirts of town, he asked Pitch many questions about Antago and his life there.

And Pitch promptly reacted to Steve's interest in the island. He told him about Antago's sugar cane, among the finest grown in the world, he said. And his stepbrother, Tom, had the largest plantation on the island. Pitch was Tom's bookkeeper. Yes, it was a much better job than working in the lumberyard office at home. It was very easy compared to that, he confided to Steve. Really, there wasn't much to do except at harvest time. And the weather on Antago was always nice. A little hot just now, perhaps. But he could always stand the heat better than the cold. He had disliked the winters at home very much.

Steve pointed to Pitch's shorts and said, smiling, "And you couldn't get by with an outfit like that at home."

"No," Pitch returned very seriously, "no, you couldn't at all. And it's a shame, for they're so comfortable."

The countryside through which they were now driving was heavy with green fields of tall cane, but occasionally there would be open pasture land with lush grass upon which cattle, goats and horses were grazing. Steve had thought it best to wait awhile before mentioning his desire to visit Azul Island, but the sight of the horses caused him to consider bringing up the subject at once. *What's the sense of putting it off?* he thought. *I like Antago all right, but only as a place from which to get to Azul Island. I've only a little over two weeks, and I might as well find out now if Pitch knows how I can get there.*

Pitch had been quiet for a while but now he turned to Steve. "Steve," he asked, "are you still interested in horses? I remember that as a youngster you sold me about ten subscriptions to a magazine I never wanted just because you were going to win a pony." Pitch's tone was hopeful again, as though he was still striving to find something of real interest to Steve.

"Yes," Steve replied, "very much so. I've ridden a lot during the past year."

“Good,” said Pitch. “I was hoping you would be.” He paused a moment and Steve noticed an intentness in his pale blue eyes that hadn’t been there before. “I’d like to tell you something,” Pitch went on, “that’s been of great interest to me of late.” He paused again, and Steve waited impatiently for him to continue.

“Yes, Pitch,” Steve had to say finally. “What is it?”

“Do you recall the picture I sent your father several weeks ago? The one of our rounding up the horses on Azul Island?”

Did he remember it! “Yes, Pitch, I do. That’s why I . . .”

But Pitch interrupted with evident eagerness to tell his story. “It was the only time I’ve been to Azul Island,” he began. “Oh, I’d heard about it, of course; Tom spoke of it occasionally. And before I arrived here he had written me once or twice about wrangling horses on a small island not far from Antago. But,” and Pitch smiled, “you know I’m pretty much of a greenhorn about things like that, and I never really understood any of it. That is, not until I went to Azul Island with Tom and the others.”

Pitch paused and glanced at Steve. Then, as though pleased with the boy’s obvious interest, he went on: “I remember that we all looked upon our visit to Azul Island as very much like a day’s outing. And we spent the time there imagining ourselves as cowboys. I couldn’t help thinking, as we ran after the horses, how strange we’d look to any people from our western states. All of us, of course, were wearing our shorts and had on our sun hats because the day was extremely hot. We had no trouble chasing the horses into the canyon, because the island is very narrow at that point; and twenty of us, walking about thirty yards apart, I would say, easily forced the horses into the canyon. Tom was in charge because he was the only one who knew anything about horses. The rest of us were plantation men, laborers, fishermen and the like with no experience whatsoever in this business of wrangling horses. However, as I’ve said, there was little to it, because Tom told us what to do, and it was he who selected thirty of the most likely looking animals to take back with us to Antago.”

Pitch stopped, thought a moment, then said in an apologetic tone, “I must tell you, Steve, that the horses are small, scrawny beasts and not very much to look at, really. But if you’d seen the desolateness of that small bit of the island, with the sparse grass and only the few, meager fresh-water holes, you’d wonder that they’d survived at all.”

Pitch paused again before adding with renewed enthusiasm, “But they have, Steve! Their breed has survived for centuries on Azul Island!” His words came faster now. “It was on the way back from the island, with the animals crowded into the barge we towed behind our launch, that I first learned of it. I was sitting next to the photographer of our weekly newspaper, and I mentioned that I had been surprised to find so many horses on Azul Island. He mentioned, very casually, that these horses were believed to be descended from the ones that the Spanish Conquistadores rode centuries ago! I tried to learn more, but that was all he knew. His editor had told him, he said. It was just an assignment to him. He wasn’t really interested. It shocked me, actually, because I’ve always been so very much interested in Spanish colonial history

that I suppose I assumed everyone else would be. To think that here was a breed of horse the Conquistadores rode, and which had survived all these hundreds of years, and no one—not even Tom, who knew of my interest—had thought it important enough to tell me!