

“RUN, FLAME! RUN!”

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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 to 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 it 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 to 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 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 on 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 this 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 in 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 all the relics Pitch had found

indicated this ... and as further evidence there were the horses 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.

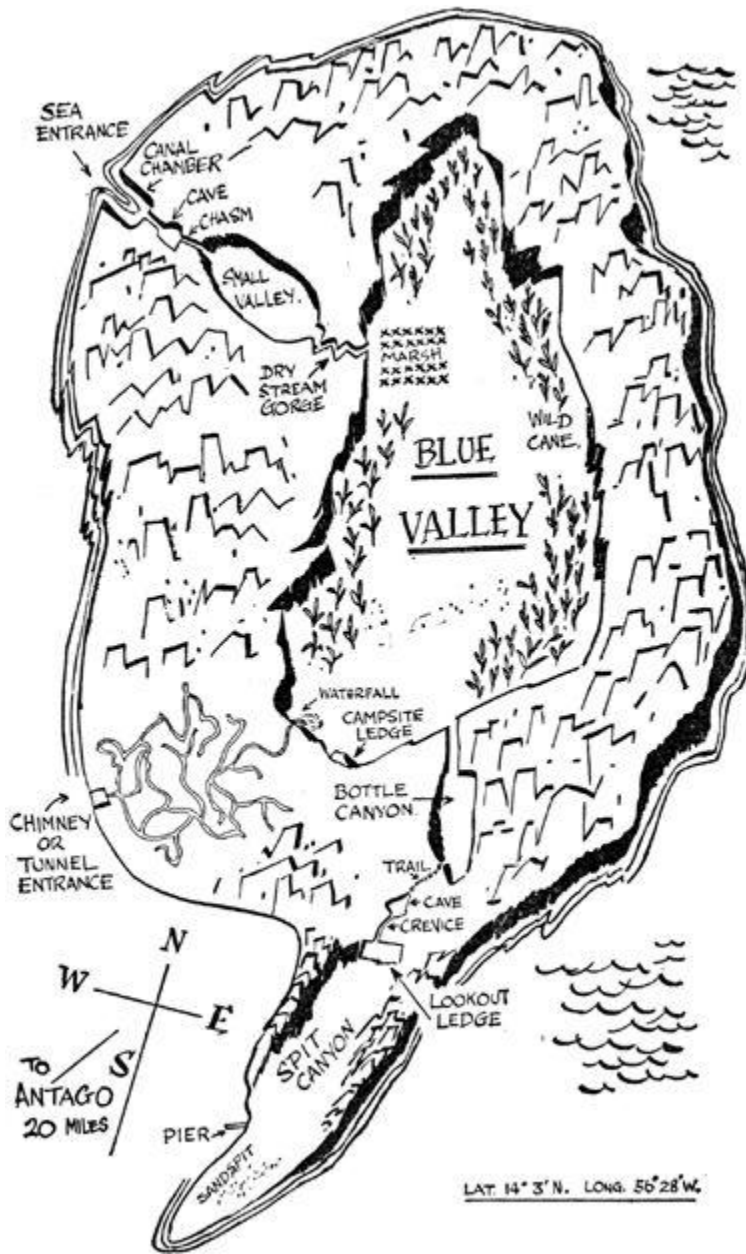
Steve's thoughts turned to all the swift rides he'd had on Flame. Had there ever been a faster horse than his stallion? He sat up and watched Flame move from one patch of grass to another. His red body was scarred heavily from all his battles to maintain leadership of the band, but his legs were straight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



NOTHING

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. A 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 passageways. 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.