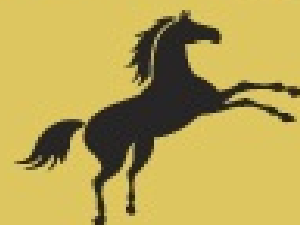


THE ISLAND STALLION

Walter Farley

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THE YOUNG BLACK STALLION (*with Steven Farley*)

THE ISLAND STALLION



BY WALTER FARLEY

A YEARLING BOOK

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Dedicated to

*all boys and girls who love horses
but never have had one of their own*

CONTENTS

Cover

Other Books by This Author

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

1. Island of Lost Horses
2. Bull Whip and Bottle
3. Unpleasant Awakening
4. The Stallion on the Cliff
5. The Search
6. Underground World
7. Lost!
8. Fight of the Stallions
9. The Piebald King
10. The Chase
11. Sucking Death
12. Steve Makes a Promise
13. Lowered Head
14. A Boy and His Horse
15. Pitch Makes His Move
16. Winged Hoofs
17. Steve's Decision
18. Last Day
19. Raging Demons!
20. Their Lost World

About the Author

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 to 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 navigational 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* 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 boat 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 wall 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 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 several 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, *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 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 as 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. Are you 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. 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’ve 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! The

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 week-end 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 he knew of 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!

“I went to Tom immediately and asked him about it,” Pitch continued gravely. “I asked him if what I’d learned from the photographer was actually true. He laughed. I remember him laughing very well. Of course, it was obvious to him that I was tremendously interested and excited. Tom told me to sit down and relax because, he said, there wasn’t a bit of truth to the story. He’d heard it mentioned every so often for the past fifteen years, but believed none of it. It made a good human-interest story for newspaper readers, he said, and I remember he also intimated that the editor of the local paper, an old friend of his, was capable of making up such a story for the benefit of his readers.”

“Then it’s not true,” Steve interrupted, obviously disappointed, “none of it. But Pitch, how did the horses get there, then? And why does the government of Antago leave them on Azul Island when they could have much better pasture land here?”

“That’s what I wondered, too, Steve,” Pitch returned, “and that’s exactly what I asked Tom. His first answer was, ‘How do animals get anywhere? They were taken there, of course!’ To me, his answers were most confusing. I didn’t know what he was driving at until I asked him why the government of Antago allowed him, as agent in charge, to wrangle the horses on the island once every five years. And why did they limit the number of horses to be removed? Why did they insist that enough horses be left on Azul Island to maintain the progeny of this breed? Why, indeed! if the story wasn’t true?”

“He just laughed at me for a long time. Then he said in his most cynical way, which can be so very aggravating, that he believed it wasn’t so much the Antago government which was interested in these horses as it was the Antago chamber of commerce! And then he repeated that it made a good story, a story that could be placed in many foreign newspapers to publicize Antago, which was what the chamber of commerce wanted! He even intimated that he wouldn’t be surprised to learn some day that the horses had been taken to Azul Island from Antago for the express purpose of creating such a story!

“But I didn’t believe a word Tom told me,” Pitch went on. “By that time I was very much interested in the subject and was determined to see it through. I decided to learn all I could about the colonial history of Antago, and anything at all that was available on Azul Island. I wasn’t able to learn much here, because the people seem so little interested in the past. It’s only the present and future that hold their attention. They talk all the time about how much more they should get for their sugar and rum, and why Antago should be provided with an airmail service instead of having to rely upon the few boats that stop here. Problems like these are

all they care about.

“So I got hold of some books from the States and learned that at one time Antago was used as a supply base by the Spaniards!” Pitch’s eyes were bright as he went on excitedly, “From here, Steve, those infamous Conquistadores, men like Cortés, Pizarro and Balboa, may have selected their armies, their horses, guns and provisions, and set forth to plunder the Incas and the Aztecs of their gold!”

Pitch paused a moment, then continued in a calmer voice, “I also learned that in the year 1669, British and French pirates succeeded in sacking Antago and driving the Spaniards from the island.”

“And Azul Island?” Steve asked. “Did you learn anything about it?”

“No,” Pitch replied. “Nothing ... absolutely nothing about its history. The report mentioned only that it was an uninhabited island twenty miles north of Antago.”

“Then in spite of what Tom said, you think that the horses now there could be descended from the horses of the Conquistadores?” Steve asked with keen interest.

“I do, Steve. I most certainly do,” Pitch said slowly. “The Spaniards surely knew of Azul Island and it’s very possible that they could have used it for something ... or were even forced to go there when Antago was sacked by the British and French pirates. I’m terribly interested,” he added quickly, “because here’s an island that’s been avoided for centuries except for the few visits by Tom and the others who preceded him to obtain horses. And for all anyone knows, it’s possible that there’s other evidence besides the horses that the Spaniards once inhabited the island. I very much want to look around, because it’s obvious no one else has.”

“Pitch,” Steve said quickly, “I want to go with you to Azul Island.”

“You mean what I’ve said about Azul Island interests you as well?”

“More than you know,” Steve replied quickly. “When can we go, Pitch?”

“Why ... I guess most any time,” Pitch said thoughtfully. “I’d planned on going when your father wrote that you’d like to come here. Yes, we could go anytime you say.”

“Tomorrow, Pitch?”

“Tomorrow?” Pitch’s blue eyes met Steve’s. “Why, I guess so. I’m pretty much of a greenhorn when it comes to a camping trip, but I guess I have most everything ready for it. He paused, a look of concern upon his face. “You’re sure you want to go to Azul Island more than anything else, Steve? It’s your vacation, you know, and I’d hate to have you go there solely on my account.”

Steve smiled. “It’s not ... it’s on my own account that I want to go.”

A few minutes later the car turned down a long driveway, and Steve saw the large house at the end. But between them and the house, not far off the road, he saw a corral. A tawny-colored horse with a long, unkempt mane was running about the ring. Steve heard Pitch say, “There’s one of the horses from Azul Island.”

Standing in the center of the corral was a giant of a man, heavy limbed and long armed. In one hand he held a bull whip, and in his other the lead rope that was attached to the bridle of the horse that was running about the ring. The animal rolled his eyes restlessly, but he never actually ceased watching the man who held him. The man, too, had eyes for nothing but the horse.

Pitch brought the car to a stop opposite the corral. He and Steve were but thirty feet away now, and two men sitting on the fence waved to Pitch. But the eyes of the man in the center of the ring remained on the horse.

Pitch said, "That's Tom." He said it matter-of-factly, as though leaving it to Steve to draw his own conclusions.

Tom! This man was Tom Pitcher? This towering giant, who could make six of Pitch? It was hard to believe; for never, Steve thought, had he seen two men more unlike each other. And these two were brothers? Stepbrothers, he reminded himself. But even so, he'd expected some resemblance.

The sharp crack of the bull whip brought his attention back to the scene before him. Trotting faster about the corral, the terrified horse snorted continually, his eyes shifting from the man who turned slowly with him to the long leather whip that lay snakelike on the ground between them.

Steve's gaze swept over the horse. Instinctively he noted the large head with long, almost mulelike ears; the shaggy, unkempt mane matted with dirt; and the small, wiry body bleached with dust and hardened sweat. Steve watched him as he moved ever faster about the corral, fearful of the bull whip which sprang at him like a striking black snake whenever he slowed his gait.

It went on for a long while, the man and the horse turning together, the rhythmic beat of hoofs over well-packed dirt, the sharp crack of the whip whenever the beat faltered. The horse's body was wet with sweat, and white lather was heavy about the bridle leathers and the corners of his mouth. But his eyes, now dulled with exhaustion, never left the man in the center of the ring.

Pitch said, "Tom's way of breaking an animal isn't a pretty sight. Shall we go?"

Steve shook his head, but said nothing. He wondered how long the horse had been running about the corral before they arrived.

The tired animal stumbled. The long bull whip cracked and the hard leather end caught the horse on his haunches. Snorting, he regained his stride and ran still faster about the ring. And all the time the man pivoted with him, bull whip raised and ready.

Would Tom never stop? Steve asked himself. How long did this go on? The horse was beaten now! What more did Tom expect? What satisfaction was he getting out of this driving, driving, *driving*?

And still the beat of hoofs went on, echoing more often now to the sharp, staccato cracks

the bull whip.

Steve felt he could take no more of it. He turned and found Pitch watching him. Pitch nodded and his hand went to the key in the car's ignition switch. But before he had reached there came a sudden end to the sound of hoofs and whip. Deadening silence settled about the corral. Together, Steve and Pitch looked back at the scene they had just turned away from.

Tom was approaching the horse, the lead rope sliding through his fingers. The horse stood there trembling, his eyes alive with hate. Tom grabbed the bridle, then signaled to one of the men sitting on the fence. The man jumped down and, picking up a blanket, walked over and put it upon the back of the horse. Then Tom and the horse were alone in the corral again.

Steve saw Tom move to one side of the horse, carrying the reins. The horse sidestepped uneasily, his eyes following the bull whip Tom held coiled in his hand. Then, faster than Steve thought it possible for a man of Tom's weight to move, he was on the horse's back. Steve believed the horse was too tired to put up a fight, but he'd never seen a wild horse broken before.

The horse bucked, coming down with rigid forelegs. Up and down, twisting and turning, he flung himself about the corral. And Tom, his long legs wrapped securely about the horse's girth, stayed with him, flaying the heavy handle of the bull whip hard against the heaving body.

Finally the horse stood still, and Steve thought him surely beaten now. What more was left for him to do? His body could take no more, his spirit had to be broken after all this. But again he was mistaken. For suddenly the horse went down and rolled quickly over on his back. But Tom had moved still faster. As the horse's legs buckled, he slipped off, avoiding the body that had tried to pin him to the ground. And now he stood at the horse's head as the animal lay on the ground. If the horse had wanted to stay there he couldn't have, for Tom whipped him to his feet; then he sprang upon his back again, cutting the bleeding flesh with the hard, blunt end of the whip.

In spite of the beating he was taking, the horse kept throwing his large head back, attempting to knock Tom off. Again Tom signaled to the men sitting on the corral fence, and one of them moved across the ring carrying a bottle.

With a sudden movement Pitch turned on the ignition and started the car's motor. "I've seen this once before," he said quickly, "and you'll be better off if you don't."

But Pitch was too late. As Tom held the bottle in his hand, Steve saw the horse throw his head back again. Tom raised the bottle, then brought it down heavily upon the horse's head. The bottle broke, the contents streaming down over the head and face of the horse. He stood there, dazed, his body trembling, swaying.

As Pitch put the car into gear, Steve saw the broken horse walking slowly about the corral under Tom's guidance. Steve closed his eyes and felt sick to his stomach.

That evening at dinner Steve spoke little, and most of the time his eyes were upon Tom sitting at the head of the table. There were moments when Steve thought he had a good idea of how the horse must have felt that afternoon.

At last, conscious of having been staring, Steve shifted his gaze to the chair in which Tom sat. It was a large mahogany chair, heavier and stronger than Steve's or Pitch's. It had to be. Tom's giant frame was slumped in it like a bulging sack of grain. Now he was leaning heavily

over the table as he talked, his giant hands dwarfing the plate of food set before him. His long fingers, blunt and square at the tips, curled even now although he held nothing in them. No knife or fork, no bull whip or bottle.

Suddenly Steve heard his name mentioned. Looking up at Tom's dark, low-jowled face, he found the black eyes upon him, the thin lips drawn slightly at the corners in what could have been a smile. Steve could see the small, square teeth—teeth that looked as hard and strong as the rest of this man.

“... that bottle didn't hurt him none,” Tom was telling him.

So he knew, Steve thought. He was the kind of man nothing could be kept from for very long.

Tom had turned to Pitch. “Isn't that right, Phil? You've seen me use the bottle before. It didn't hurt the horse one bit, did it?”

“That's what you tell me,” Pitch said slowly. “I don't know much about these things, but ..”

Steve's eyes were upon Pitch as his friend groped for words in reply to Tom's question. It was apparent that Pitch, too, was uncomfortable. Perhaps, thought Steve, even a little frightened—as he was.

Settling back in his big chair, Tom laughed heartily, drowning out whatever it was that Pitch had meant to say. Then he turned to Steve again. “The top of a horse's skull is as hard as a rock,” he said, his face unsmiling once more. “You could break a hundred bottles over it without hurting the horse.”

How did he know? thought Steve cynically. Had he ever been a horse? Had he ever been hit heavily over the head with a bottle?

Tom hadn't finished. “It's not the bottle, but the water in the bottle that does the trick,” he said. And now his voice was slightly contemptuous of their silent criticism. “The horse thinks the water is his own blood as it streams down over his head and into his eyes. It scares him. It scares him so much that he never forgets it, and you won't ever find him throwing back his head again.” Tom settled back in his chair once more, as though awaiting their reaction to his full explanation.

Pitch was busy cutting his meat. Steve looked down and toyed with the food before him.

Silence hung heavily about the room until, suddenly, it was shattered by Tom's explosive laughter. “You're both too soft,” he said angrily. And then, to Steve, “Why, I wasn't any older than you when I used my first bottle on a horse's head. We toughened up pretty young those days.” He stopped, turned to Pitch. “Or did we?” he added, smiling. “Perhaps I'm mistaken. Perhaps it was pretty much up to the man himself.” Once more he addressed himself to Steve. “Phil left England to go to college in the States, while I joined up with the British Army and went to India. I got put in the cavalry, and that's where I learned the bottle trick. We used to get a lot of our horses from Australia in those days. They were ugly-looking animals called Walers. Uglier than the ones from Azul Island, and much bigger, too. They had a nasty way of throwing their heads back at you. The way we stopped them was with the bottle.” Tom paused, smiling. “Yes,” he added, “first the bull whip, running them until they're groggy, then finish up with the bottle. It never fails to break a horse—one who'll give you a decent fight.”

Steve raised his eyes and studied Tom. Was that it? he asked himself. Was it the thrill of overpowering an animal in physical combat that Tom enjoyed so much? Tom was looking

him, nodding his large head. Nodding as though he had no trouble reading Steve's every thought.

"Yes," Tom said, still smiling. "It's a pity that there were so few horses with any spirit in this last group from Azul Island. There were only three of the whole lot of thirty that put up with any sort of a scrap. They seem to have less spirit than they ever had. Now, fifteen years ago when I first went to the island it was different. There'd be about ten or more who'd give me a good workout."

Tom was silent, and Steve thought he had finished until he suddenly said, "There's no other reason I want to bring in these horses from Azul. They don't make any money for me. Nobody will pay much for them. And then ten percent of whatever I do get has to go to the government. It doesn't leave me with anything. Oh, I didn't mind when I could look forward to a little fun, but if the horses don't show more spirit next time, I'll let someone else go to Azul Island."

And now Pitch was talking. Steve heard him telling Tom about their proposed camping trip to Azul Island, the trip he'd planned on taking for several weeks. Yes, Pitch was saying, he was still very much interested in the island in spite of what Tom had told him. He still believed that Azul Island had played a part in the Spanish colonization of the New World. He wanted to look around. Yes, and fortunately Steve, too, was interested in colonial history. He had asked to go. They planned to spend two weeks....

When Pitch mentioned their intended length of stay upon Azul Island, Tom laughed harder than before, and his chair creaked as though in resentment of the heavy pounds of flesh and bone that made up this man. Finally he sat forward again, his elbows on the table and his fingers digging into the sides of his scalp. "Two weeks," he said. "Phil, you should know better, even if the kid doesn't. What in God's name are you going to do for two weeks on a spit of ground that's nothing more than a windswept sandbar? You'll go crazy. You won't spend two days there, let alone two weeks," he concluded, bursting into laughter again.

"I plan to do quite a bit of digging," Pitch said. "And Steve seems very much interested."

Tom turned to Steve, his black eyes smiling but probing at the same time. "You're interested?" he asked. "Interested in what?"

Steve's reply came quickly, instinctively. "Archaeology," he said. And he wondered why he'd said it and how he had remembered a word he'd never used outside of his ancient history class at school.

He saw Tom's brow furrow. Then Pitch said, "You see?"

"No," Tom returned, sarcastically. "No, I don't see. Nor can I see you two spending two weeks in that Godforsaken spot!" Pushing back his chair, he rose to his feet, towering above them.

"We'll stay," Steve said quietly.

Tom looked at him. "You've never been to Azul, and you're so sure?" he asked contemptuously.

Steve nodded without speaking.

Tom walked around the table, his eyes still on the boy. Then he came to a stop and Steve saw the smile on the thin lips again. Tom said quickly, "Phil told me the other day that you wanted a horse more than anything else when you were a kid. Do you still want one?"

"Yes," Steve replied, slowly. "I do. Why?"

“Then take a look at those horses on Azul Island and take your pick of any one of them. you stay two weeks on the island, I’ll give him to you!” Laughing, Tom left the room.

Pitch was talking to Steve now, telling him what they’d have to do that evening to prepare for their trip to Azul Island. But Steve wasn’t listening. Instead, he was thinking of Tom’s parting wager. Two weeks on the island, and he could have his pick of any of the horses there!

The following morning they left Antago as the sun rose out of the sea, and soon were well out of sight of land. Pitch sat behind the wheel of the motor launch, his round face tense as the boat pushed its sharp prow into the heavy sea. Occasionally Steve heard him say something about being a greenhorn when it came to navigation, and that he was much better getting around on land. But Steve had little doubt that Pitch would find Azul Island. Pitch's boat, though an old one, was in excellent condition and very seaworthy. She rolled slightly with the waves, making Steve feel a little uncomfortable in the region of his stomach, but he felt that he could stand anything now that he was actually on his way to Azul Island.

It had worked out nicely, he thought. Pitch's own interest in the island and his desire to get there had made it easy for Steve.

The hours dragged on, and the sun beat mercilessly down upon the open boat. Steve was thankful for the hat that Pitch had made him bring along. Turning to his friend, he saw that Pitch was facing straight ahead, but with half-closed eyes, as though he were deep in concentration. Steve looked back at their wake and at the small dory they were towing. Pitch had insisted upon taking it along just in case something should go wrong with the launch's motor. And lying in the back of the launch were the two backpacks that he and Pitch had crammed with tinned food, cooking utensils and a tiny stove. Beside them lay the folded canvas tent, and next to that the pick and shovel.

Steve's eyes remained upon the last-named objects. He wondered if Pitch would mind very much when he confessed to him that he really wasn't interested in digging up the earth in search of relics the Spaniards might have left there. Tonight he planned to tell Pitch exactly why he had come, why he wanted to explore every foot of Azul Island. And he wondered what Pitch's reaction would be to his story.

Steve remembered very clearly his first impression of the barren, mountainous rock of Azul Island. From the ship, it had looked as though no living thing could climb those sheer walls of yellow stone. Yet surely there had to be a way leading to the interior of the island. Still, Steve thought with concern, whenever Pitch had spoken of the island he had mentioned only the rolling, sandy plain. And Tom too had called it "nothing but a spit of ground ... a wind-swept sandbar."

"Pitch," Steve said, "I was wondering about the rest of Azul Island. I mean, other than the plain and canyon you've mentioned. How do you get into the interior of the island?"

"You don't," Pitch replied. "It isn't possible." Then, looking at Steve in puzzlement, "I hope, Steve, that you didn't think it was."

Steve couldn't keep the disappointment out of his voice. "I did, Pitch. I didn't think Azul Island just consisted of the plain you've mentioned." Then he asked quickly, "But what about the rest of the island, Pitch? There's at least nine miles of it. I know because the ship passed it on the way to Antago."

"Then you must know what a natural fortress it is," Pitch replied quietly. "No one could

possibly scale those smooth walls of stone, even if he wanted to.” Then he added with a attempt at humor, “Which no one has, of course.”

“But from the canyon? Is there no way up from the canyon?”

The serious tone of Steve’s voice caused Pitch to shake his head sadly as he said, “No Steve, I’m afraid not. The canyon comes to an end up against the most precipitous wall of rock you’ve ever seen. There’s an overhanging cliff about three hundred feet above the canyon floor, but that too, of course, is inaccessible. You’ll see for yourself in a little while now.”

In a little while now. You’ll see for yourself in a little while now.

Steve repeated Pitch’s words over and over to himself as the motor launch swept across the sea. He said them when the horizon was nothing but sea and sky. He said them when the yellowish dome of Azul Island appeared, the sun turning it into a glowing spire of copper and gold.

There was no mist and, very shortly, he could see the waves crashing against the wall barriers, sending their white fingers climbing frantically, eagerly up the mountainous rock and though the waves, too, sought an entrance to Azul Island. And then, their force spent, they would retreat, falling back into the sea.

But toward the southern end of the island, the walls began their gradual descent, finally merging with the sea and becoming a long stretch of sandy beach over which the waves unstopped, rolled high onto the shore. At one point, a narrow wooden pier extended into the water. Pitch steered the motorboat toward it.

In a little while now. You’ll see for yourself in a little while now.

Steve helped Pitch moor the boat to the pier. He put on his backpack and carried the folded canvas tent under his arm; then he followed Pitch down the pier and stepped onto the beach. Stretched before him, just over the sand dunes, was the rolling land, and to his left, less than a mile away, where the walls began their ascent again, was the canyon.

They were nearing the canyon when Steve first saw the horses. There were eleven of them, small and lean and shaggy ... a stallion, who stopped grazing to look at them, and five broodmares with five spindle-legged fillies standing close beside them. *It was obvious that Tom had left the worst of the horses upon Azul Island, Steve thought. Certainly the Conquistadores could not have ridden puny animals like these in their long, arduous campaigns into the New World!* He remembered the pictures of statues he had seen in his schoolbooks of men like Pizarro and Cortés sitting astride horses strong and powerful of limb, capable of standing the rigors of long marches through strange and hostile lands. Thoughtfully he watched the horses until the stallion led his frightened, straggling band down the canyon.

Pitch said, “It’s truly remarkable, Steve, that this breed of horse has survived at all in this place.”

Steve bent down, picking up a tuft of grass. He tasted the ends. *Not the lush green grass of Antago, he thought, but hardy grass that could sustain life because it absorbed every bit of moisture in the ground.*

“Of course,” Pitch was saying, “they must spend most of their time in the canyon, where they’re protected from the weather and sun. The grass, too, is more abundant in the canyon.” Pausing, he looked around, then added, “We’ll make camp there, Steve.”

They were approaching it now. The walls, a few hundred yards on either side of them,

were rising, shutting out the sea. A quarter of a mile away, the canyon came to an abrupt end against a sheer wall of stone, the lower part darkened by shadows made by the sides of the canyon, the upper part shining like a golden vision in the sun's rays.

They walked into the shadows of the canyon walls, and for a few minutes Steve was blinded by the sudden transition from glaring light to soft darkness. Then his eyes became accustomed to the shadows, and he saw the end of the canyon a short distance away. The horses were standing there, grouped together, their frightened eyes upon the two humans. But Steve's gaze did not linger on the horses. Instead he looked upward, to the cliff that hung three hundred feet or more above.

Pitch said, "Now you can understand, Steve, what I meant when I said that it was impossible to get to the interior of the island from here. These walls make it impossible even to get up to the cliff." He was beside Steve, his eyes also fixed on the flat, overhanging rock. "And there'd be nowhere to go from there, either. Just look at that sheer wall of stone behind it!"

Pitch walked away but Steve stood there, still gazing up at the cliff. *Pitch is right*, he thought, *there's no possible way to reach the cliff from the canyon floor.*

Then Pitch's voice reached him. He was calling for the tent. He wanted to set up camp. It was getting late, he said. The sun would be going down shortly.

Steve went over to him and threw his pack against the side of the canyon wall where Pitch had decided to make camp. But as he worked alongside Pitch, his eyes would turn very often to the cliff.

The sun sank rapidly behind the mountainous rock of Azul Island, and soon the darkness of night had spread from the canyon floor to the rolling, sandy plain beyond. Steve and Pitch had finished setting up the tent and now sat before the Sterno stove, heating a pot of beans and frankfurters.

"We should have collected some driftwood before it got dark," Pitch said, moving closer to the small flame emerging from the can of Sterno. "The night air is cool out here. It would have been nice to have a wood fire." Pausing, he added dismally, "I'm such a greenhorn about this, I'm afraid." He turned to Steve, who was still looking up at the darkened wall at the end of the canyon and who seemed not to have heard. Pitch pushed a fork into the frankfurter. "They're ready, I think. Let me have your plate, Steve. Your plate, please," Pitch repeated more insistently.

Steve heard him then and handed over his tin plate. "Thanks, Pitch," he said. He ate in silence for a few minutes, then looked up to find Pitch watching him. Smiling, he moved closer to his friend and the small flame. "Sorry," he said, "I was thinking about something." Then he added quickly, as though to make up for his inattention, "We should have gathered some wood from the beach, Pitch. A good fire would have been nice tonight."

Pitch looked at him, nodding. "Yes," he said, "it would have been nice." Steve certainly must have been thinking about something—and very intently too, Pitch mused—not to have heard him mention the same thing just a few moments before. He wondered what it was that occupied Steve's mind.

They finished eating in silence, each alone with his thoughts. The short neigh of one of the horses echoed throughout the canyon. Pitch turned in the direction of the horses, then to Steve, whose whole attention seemed to be fixed on the small flame before them. Pitch said

casually, "We should have a full moon tonight. It'll be coming up soon." The boy was still looking at the flame and Pitch couldn't tell whether he'd heard or not. "A full moon tonight, Steve," he repeated, louder this time.

Steve roused himself from his reverie. "That's right," he said slowly, "it will be full tonight, won't it?" Then he was silent for a while, and only his eyes betrayed his restlessness. Finally he asked hesitantly, "Pitch, have you ever had something happen to you that you could swear had happened before?" He paused, groping for the right words. "I mean something you couldn't have done, actually."

Pitch was confused. "I don't quite understand what you mean, Steve," he replied with concern. "Do you mean something I may have dreamed?"

"Perhaps," Steve said. "Perhaps you could call it a dream ... only something much more real and vivid than a dream."

Pitch attempted a smile which failed utterly as he saw the intent look in Steve's eyes. "Sometimes," he said seriously, "I do something that I have an idea I dreamed about before. I suppose it's the association of things. It's never been really vivid, though, and I'm never quite sure I actually dreamed it."

"This is very different from that," Steve said slowly. "And it's all here ... now. All this," and he looked out over the canyon floor.

The expression on Pitch's face became still more confused. "I don't understand, Steve," he said. "Perhaps you'd better start from the beginning."

"The beginning," Steve began slowly, "was ten years ago when I had that operation for my abscessed ear. You must remember it." He paused while Pitch nodded in agreement. "The way you must remember too," Steve went on, "how badly I wanted a pony at that time. I couldn't understand why Dad couldn't buy me one, if he could get me a scooter and a tricycle. I had to have a pony, so I tried getting one by myself. I sold subscriptions to a magazine that offered a pony as a prize to the kid getting the most new subscribers." Steve paused again, smiling. "I added, "Yes, you were one of my best customers, Pitch. But I still didn't win the pony. So I continued drawing pictures of ponies and horses, making myself more miserable and Dad and Mother miserable as well, because they couldn't afford to buy me a pony, much less stand the upkeep of one."

Steve's eyes met Pitch's. "I'm telling you all this, Pitch, because it has an important bearing on what happened during the operation." Steve gazed back at the fire again. "I remember the day the doctor came to the house, and he found me in bed, shrieking for a pony. I saw him nod to Dad, and then Dad was telling me I could have a pony if I would only lie still. So I relaxed and thought how wonderful it was going to be to have my very own pony. It wasn't long before the doctor's nurse put something over my nose and mouth. It was the anaesthetic, but I didn't know that. I breathed in the sweet, sickly odor, and I was still thinking of my pony when the fiery pinwheels started. I followed them round and round as they sped faster and faster. Soon they were going so fast that they no longer made a circle, but were one ball of fire. It came at me hard, bursting in my face.

"It was then that I first saw Flame. I didn't name him Flame. The name just came with the horse, for his body was the red of fire. He was standing on the cliff—" Steve stopped and glanced behind him. "That cliff," he added huskily. "Below, too, was the canyon and the rolling land beyond. All this ..." His hand pointed to the canyon and then fell to his side. "

was all very vivid, Pitch—so vivid that when the operation was over I found that I had a real horse named Flame. Ponies no longer interested me, and when Dad brought up the subject of the promised pony, telling me that he hoped I'd understand why he couldn't keep his word, I told him that it was all right, that I didn't want a pony anyway. Then for months and months every time I ran from the house, trotting to the park, I was riding a giant red stallion, the most wonderful horse in the world!

"I grew up," Steve went on, "and put Flame aside along with my tricycle and scooter. But I never actually forgot him, Pitch," he insisted. "I never forgot Flame, or the canyon and cliff. Then a few weeks ago your letter came—your letter with the picture of a place I'd thought of as an imaginary one for so many years!" Steve's voice had risen and there was eagerness in it now as he turned toward Pitch. "How could I have seen this canyon ten years ago, Pitch? How could I, when I'd never heard of Azul Island until a few weeks ago when your letter came? That's what brought me here, Pitch," he confessed.

Pitch was silent for a long while after Steve had finished. And when he finally spoke it was with reluctance, as though what he had to say would have been better left unsaid. "But Steve, you did know of Azul Island."

The boy's eyes were bright as he said quickly, "I didn't, Pitch! I couldn't have known of Azul Island when I was only seven years old!"

"You knew of it when you were only five," Pitch replied slowly. "Not by name, of course. Nor did I."

"You! What did YOU have to do with it?"

Pitch was uncomfortable. "I was the one who told you about it," he said, his eyes avoiding Steve's. "I was visiting your father one day when you came into the room to show him a drawing of a pony you'd made; then you showed it to me. You sat on my lap and I told you a story about horses. It was a story based on one of Tom's first letters to me from Antago. He had written of going to an island not far from Antago to wrangle the wild horses that were there. He described everything in great detail, including, of course, the canyon and cliff. I passed this all on to you, making it as vivid and real as I possibly could. And you and I pretended that we were with Tom, going down the canyon, watching the horses run ahead of us. We had a lot of fun making believe—" Pitch stopped and his eyes met the boy's. "I'm sorry, Steve, real sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Pitch," Steve said, angry with himself. "I guess I knew all the time there had to be an explanation for it all. But," he went on, smiling a little, "I guess I was trying to convince myself that something very unusual had taken place, that for some strange reason I was being told of an island where I should go." His voice dropped. "I suppose I even expected to find Flame here. It's my wild imagination, Pitch. At least Dad would call it that," he concluded bitterly.

Pitch was quiet for a while, then he said, "But there's nothing wrong with having a wild imagination, Steve. Let it loose now, here on this island." His voice became eager, excited. "Azul Island has been uninhabited by people since the days when Spain ruled the world. Think of the relics, the historical treasures we may find hidden within this canyon. We'll look around tomorrow, Steve. We'll do some digging, you and I!"

"Yes," Steve said softly. "Sure, Pitch."

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