



The Heads of Apex
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Justus Miles was sitting on a bench in the park, down at the heels, hungry, desperate, when a gust of wind whirled a paper to his feet. It was the advertising section of the *New York Times*. Apathetically, he picked it up, knowing from the past weeks' experience that few or no jobs were being advertised. Then with a start he sat up, for in the center of the page, encased in a small box and printed in slightly larger type than the ordinary advertisement, he read the following words: "Wanted: Soldier of Fortune, young, healthy; must have good credentials. Apply 222 Reuter Place, between two and four." It was to-day's advertising section he was scanning, and the hour not yet one.

Reuter Place was some distance away, he knew, a good hour's walk on hard pavement and through considerable heat. But he had made forced marches in Sonora as badly shod and on even an emptier stomach. For Justus Miles, though he might not have looked it, was a bona fide soldier of fortune, stranded in New York. Five feet eight in height, he was, loose and rangy in build, and with deceptively mild blue eyes. He had fought through the World War, served under Kemal Pasha in Turkey, helped the Riffs in Morocco, filibustered in South America and handled a machine-gun for revolutionary forces in Mexico. Surely, he thought grimly, if anyone could fill the bill for a soldier of fortune it was himself.

222 Reuter Place proved to be a large residence in a shabby neighborhood. On the sidewalk, a queue of men was being held in line by a burly cop. The door of the house opened, and an individual, broad-shouldered and with flaming red hair, looked over the crowd. Instantly Justus Miles let out a yell, "Rusty! By God, Rusty!" and waved his hands.

"Hey, feller, who do you think you're shovin'?" growled a hard-looking fellow at the head of the line, but Justus Miles paid no attention to him. The man in the doorway also let out an excited yell.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Kid! Hey, Officer, let that fellow through: I want to speak to him."

With the door shut on the blasphemous mob, the two men wrung each other's hands. Ex-Sergeant Harry Ward, known to his intimates as "Rusty," led Justus Miles into a large office and shoved him into a chair.

"I didn't know you were in New York, kid. The last I saw of you was when we quit Sandino."

"And I never suspected that 222 Reuter Place would be you, Rusty. What's the lay, old man, and is there any chance to connect?"

"You bet your life there's a chance. Three hundred a month and found. But the boss has the final say-so, though I'm sure he'll take you on my recommendation."

He opened a door, led Justus Miles through an inner room, knocked at a far door and ushered him into the presence of a man who sat behind a roll-topped desk. There was something odd about this old man, and after a moment's inspection Justus Miles saw what it was. He was evidently a cripple, propped up in a strange wheelchair. He had an abnormally large and hairless head, and his body was muffled to the throat in a voluminous cloak, the folds of which fell over and enveloped most of the wheelchair itself. The face of this old gentleman—though the features were finely molded—was swarthy: its color was almost that of a negro—or an Egyptian. He regarded the two men with large and peculiarly colored eyes—eyes that probed them sharply.

"Well, Ward, what is it?"

"The man you advertised for, Mr. Solino."

Solino regarded Justus Miles critically.

"You have been a soldier of fortune?" he asked. He spoke English with the preciseness of an educated foreigner.

"Yes, sir. Rusty—that is, Mr. Ward knows my record."

"I was his sergeant in France, sir; saw fighting with him in Morocco, Turkey, Nicaragua—"

"You can vouch for him, then; his character, courage—"

"You couldn't get a better man, sir. If I had known he was in town I would have sent for him."

"Very well; that is sufficient. But Mr.—Miles did you say?—understands he is embarking on a dangerous adventure with grave chances of losing his life?"

"I have faced danger and risked my life before this," said Justus Miles quietly.

The other nodded. "Then that is all I am prepared to tell you at this time."

Justus Miles accompanied Ward to his room where the latter laid out for him a change of clothing. It was luxurious to splash in warm water and bath-salts after the enforced griminess of weeks. The clothes fitted him fairly well, the two men being of a size. Lounging in his friend's

room after a substantial meal, and smoking a Turkish cigarette, he questioned Ward more closely.

"Who is the old fellow?"

"I don't know. He hired me through an advertisement and then set me to employing others."

"But surely you know where we are going?"

"Hardly more than you do. Solino did say there was a country, a city to be invaded. Whereabouts is a secret. I can't say I care for going it blind, but neither do I like starving to death. I was in about the same shape you were when you applied. Desperate."

Justus Miles stretched himself comfortably.

"A spiggoty by the looks of him," he said; "negro blood, no doubt. Well, fighting's my trade. I'd rather cash in fighting than sit on a park bench. I suppose the old boy will tell us more in good time, and until then we're sitting pretty, with good eats to be had; so why worry?"

And yet if Justus Miles had been able to look ahead he might not have talked so blithely.

During the week that followed his employment, he saw nothing of Solino, though Ward met the old man for a few moments every day to receive his instructions. "It puzzles me," he confessed to Miles, "how the old chap lives. There's a private exit to the street from his rooms, but I could swear he never goes out. How could he in that wheelchair—no attendant. And yet he must. How would he get food?"

Justus Miles smiled lazily. "No mystery at all, Rusty. We're gone for hours at a time. What's to prevent him from phoning to have his meals brought in?"

"But I've questioned them at the restaurant and they say—"

"Good Lord!—is there only one restaurant in Manhattan?"

Yet Justus Miles himself could not help feeling there was something mysterious about Solino, but just how mysterious he did not realize—until, one evening, he stood with a half dozen of his fellow adventurers in a lonely spot on the Long Island coast and watched the darkness deepen around them. "We shall wait," said Solino presently, "until the moon comes up."

The moon rose at about nine o'clock, flooding the beach and the heaving expanse of water with a ghostly light. From the folds of Solino's

cloak, close about his muffled throat, a peculiar ray of green light flashed out over the water. In answer, a green light flashed back, and presently, something low and black, like the body of a whale half submerged, stole towards the beach. Scarcely a ripple marked its progress, and the nose of it slid up on the sand. "Good Lord!" whispered Miles, grasping Ward by the arm: "it's a submarine!"

But the craft on which the surprised soldiers of fortune gazed was not an ordinary submarine. In the first place, there was no conning tower; and, in the second, from the blunt nose projected a narrow gangway bridging the few feet of water between the mysterious craft and the dry beach. But the men had little time to indulge in amazement. "Quick," said Solino; "load those boxes onto the gangway. No need to carry them further." He himself wheeled his chair into the interior of the submarine, calling back, "Hurry, hurry!"

The adventurers accomplished the loading in a few minutes. "Now," came the voice of their employer, "stand on the gangway yourselves. Steady; don't move."

Under their feet they felt the gangway vibrate and withdraw from the land. For a moment they were in utter darkness; then a light flashed up and revealed a long, box-like room. The opening through which they had come had closed, leaving no sign of its existence.

In the center of the room stood a mechanism like a huge gyroscope, and a plunging piston, smooth and black, went up and down with frictionless ease. In front of what was evidently a control board sat a swarthy man with a large hairless head and peculiarly colored eyes. The adventurers stared in surprise, for this man, too, sat in a wheelchair, seemingly a cripple; but unlike Mr. Solino he wore no cloak, his body from the neck down being enclosed in a tubular metal container. The body must have been very small, and the legs amputated at the hips, since the container was not large and terminated on the seat of the peculiar wheel chair to which it seemed firmly attached.

Solino did not offer to introduce them to the man at the control board, who, aside from a quick look, paid them no attention. He ushered them ahead into another, though smaller cabin, and after indicating certain arrangements made for their comfort, withdrew. From the slight sway of the floor under their feet and the perceptible vibration of the craft, the adventurers knew they were under way.

"Well, this is a rum affair and no mistake about it," said one of them.

"A freak—a bloomin' freak," remarked another whose cockney accent proclaimed the Englishman.

"Yuh're shore right," said a lean Texan. "That hombre out there had no legs."

"Nor hands either."

Miles and Ward glanced at one another. The same thought was in both minds. Neither of them had ever seen Mr. Solino's hands. A rum affair all right!

Hours passed. Some of the men fell to gambling. At intervals they ate. Twice they turned in and slept. Then, after what seemed an interminable time, Solino summoned Miles and Ward to his presence in the control room. "It is time," he said, "that you should know more of the enterprise on which you have embarked. What I say, you can communicate to the other men. A year's salary for all of you lies to your credit at the Chase Bank of New York. And this money will not be your sole reward if you survive and serve faithfully."

"Thank you, sir," said Ward; "but now that we are well on our way to our destination, could you not tell us more about it? You have said something of a city, a country. Where is that country?"

"Down," was the astounding answer.

"Down?" echoed both men.

"Yes," said Solino slowly, "down. The gateway to that land is at the bottom of the ocean."

As the two men gaped at him, incredulous, an awful thing happened. With an appalling roar and a rending of steel and iron, the submarine halted abruptly in its headlong flight, reared upward at an acute angle and then fell forward with a tremendous crash. The adventurers were thrown violently against a steel bulkhead, and slumped down unconscious....

How long they lay there insensible they never knew. Justus Miles was the first to come to, and he found himself in Stygian blackness. "Rusty!" he called, feeling terribly sick and giddy. Only silence answered him. "Good God!" he thought, "what has happened?" His hand went out and recoiled from something soft and sticky. Gingerly he sat up. There was a lump on his head. His body felt bruised and sore but it was evidently

sound. He recollected the small but powerful flashlight in his pocket, and drew it forth and pressed the button. A reassuring pencil of light pierced through the gloom. Even as it did so, someone groaned, and Ward's voice uttered his name.

"Is that you, Kid?"

"It's me, all right."

"You ain't hurt?"

"Nothing to speak of. How about you?"

"O. K., I guess. An awful headache."

"Can you stand up?"

"Yes."

Ward's face appeared in the ray of light, pale and blood-streaked.

"I wonder what happened."

"It sounded like a collision."

They stared at one another with fearful eyes. A collision while under-seas in a submarine is a serious matter.

"Where's Solino?"

Justus Miles ran the beam of his torch this way and that, and saw that the room was in a fearful confusion. The gyroscopic mechanism had broken from its fastenings and rolled forward. Somewhere beneath its crushing weight lay the control board and the swarthy operator. Then they saw Solino, still in his overturned wheelchair, the cloak drawn tightly about himself and it; but the top of his head was crushed in like an eggshell. Justus Miles had touched that head when he stretched out his hand in the darkness.

He and Ward had been saved from death as by a miracle. Over their heads the great piston had hurtled, killing Solino and tearing through the steel partition into the chamber beyond, visiting it with death and destruction. One hasty examination of that place was enough. The men in there were dead.

Sick with horror, the two survivors faced the stark reality of their terrible plight. Trapped in an underwater craft, they saw themselves doomed to perish even more miserably than their companions. As the horrible thought sank home, a cool breath of air, suggesting the smell of stagnant salt water, blew through an opening created by the crushing of

the plates in the vessel's hull—an opening larger than the body of a man. Miles and Ward stared at it with puzzled eyes. With such a hole in her hull, the boat should have been admitting water and not air. However, they approached the gap and examined it with their torches.

"Here goes," Ward said after a moment's hesitation, and clambered through the opening, followed by his friend. When they were able to make out their surroundings, they saw that they were in a vast tunnel or cavern, the extent of which was shrouded in darkness. How the submarine had left the ocean and penetrated to this cavern it was impossible to say; but evidently it had come so far over a shining rail, a break in which had caused the disaster. The cavern or tunnel was paved with disjointed blocks of stone which once might have been smooth and even, but which now were disarranged by time and slimy with dampness and seagrowths. In the clammy air Miles involuntarily shuddered. "Good Lord, Rusty, we're certainly up against it! The only fellow who could tell us our whereabouts is dead!"

Ward's jaw tightened. "That rail leads somewhere: it's our only hope. But first let us get our guns and some food."

They were fortunate enough to discover several thermos bottles unbroken. Hot coffee revived their fainting spirits. Treating their bruises and cuts as well as they could, they left the submarine or car—it seemed to have been convertible for use either in water or on rail—and trudged ahead.

Beyond the break that had caused the wreck, the rail stretched away into illimitable blackness. Over rough stones, stumbling into shallow pools of water, the light of their torches serving but faintly to show the depressing surroundings, the two men plunged. Neither of them was without fear, but both possessed the enduring courage of men habituated to facing danger and sudden death without losing control of their faculties.

Time passed, but they had no means of telling how much, since their wrist watches no longer functioned. But after a while they noticed that the grade was upward and the going easier. At the same moment, Ward called attention to the fact that, even without electric torches, it was possible to see. All around the two Americans grew a strange light—a weird, phosphorescent glow, revealing far walls and massive pillars.

Now they could see that they were in a vast chamber, undoubtedly the work of human hands; a room awe-inspiring to behold, and even more

than awe-inspiring in the reflections it forced upon their minds. Passages radiated on either hand to mysterious depths, and great bulks loomed in the spectral light. Justus Miles gave a low cry of amazement when a closer investigation revealed those bulks to be the wrecks of mighty and intricate machines, the use of which it was vain to conjecture. He looked at Ward.

"Solino spoke of a city down in the ocean. Can this be it?"

Ward shook his head. "Everything here is old, abandoned. Look—what is that?"

The figure of a giant creature, carved either from stone or marble and encrusted with phosphorous, stood lowering in their path. It was that of a winged beast with a human head. Its features were negroid in character; and so malignant was the expression of the staring face, so lifelike the execution of the whole statue, that a chill of fear ran through their veins. It was in Ward's mind that this gigantic carving was akin to the ones he had seen in Egypt, and as old, if not older.

Beyond the statue the rail curved and the grade leveled; and, rounding the bend, they were amazed to come upon a sort of "yard" where the rail stopped. In that enclosure, on several sidings, were submarine cars similar to the wrecked one they had abandoned. But that was not the sight which brought them to a breathless halt. Beyond the sidings stood what appeared to be a small building of gleaming crystal.

After a moment of breathless wonder they cautiously approached the bizarre structure. No dampness or phosphorus impaired the clarity of its walls. The material composing them felt vibrantly warm to the touch. It was not glass, yet it was possible to look without difficulty into the interior of the building, which appeared to be one large room containing nothing but a central device not unlike the filaments of an electric bulb. In fact, the whole building, viewed from the outside, reminded the two adventurers of a giant light globe. The filaments radiated a steady and somehow exhilarating light. The door—they knew it was a door because an edging of dark metal outlined its frame—gave admittance to the room.

"Shall we?" questioned Miles; and Ward answered doubtfully, "I don't know. Perhaps... ."

But at last they turned the golden knob, felt the door give to their pressure, and stepped through the entrance into the soft radiance of the interior. Unthinkingly, Ward released his hold on the knob and the door swung shut behind them. Instantly there was a flash of light, and they were oppressed by a feeling of nausea: and then, out of a momentary pit of blackness, they emerged to find that the room of crystal had oddly changed its proportions and opaqueness. "Quick!" cried Ward; "let us get out of this place." Both men found the door and staggered forth.

Then, at sight of what they saw, they stood rooted to the spot in sheer amazement. The gloomy tunnel and the sidings of submarine cars had vanished, and they were standing in a vast hall, an utterly strange and magnificent hall, staring up into the face of a creature crudely human and colored green!

The green man was almost of heroic proportions; he was clad in but a breech-clout, and was so broad as to appear squat in stature. He carried a short club, and appeared almost as dumbfounded as the two Americans. A moment he regarded them, then, with a ferocious snarl of rage, he hurled himself upon the startled Ward and half clubbed, half pushed him to the floor. Recovering from his momentary inaction and realizing the danger in which his friend stood, Miles shouted and leaped upon the green man's back, fastening his sinewy fingers about the giant's throat.

But the latter was possessed of incredible strength, and, straightening up, he shook off Miles as a bear might shake off an attacking dog, and threw him heavily to the floor. Then the green giant whirled up his club, and it would have gone hardly with Miles if Ward had not remembered his automatic and fired in the nick of time. As if poleaxed, the green man fell; and both the adventurers recovered their feet.

"Look out!" shouted Ward.

Through a wide entrance came charging a dozen greenish giants. Miles fired both his pistols. The leader of the greenish men paused in mid-leap, clawing at his stomach.

"This way, Kid!" yelled Ward; "this way!"

Taking advantage of the confusion in the ranks of the attackers, the two sprang to where an exit in the far wall promised an avenue of escape. Down a broad passage they rushed. Seemingly the passage ended in a cul-de-sac, for a wall of blank whiteness barred further progress. Behind them came charging the greenish giants uttering appalling cries.

Desperately the two Americans turned, resolved to sell their lives as dearly as possible; but at that moment happened a sheer miracle. The blank wall divided, revealing a narrow crevice through which they sprang. Noiselessly the crevice closed behind them, shutting out the green pursuers, and a voice said—a voice in precise but strangely accented English:

"We have been expecting you, gentlemen, but—where is Solino?"

Never would Miles and Ward forget the amazement of that moment. They were in a place which looked not unlike a huge laboratory. Then they saw it was a lofty room containing a variety of strange mechanisms. But it was not on these their eyes focussed. Confronting them in odd wheelchairs, with hairless heads projecting from tubular containers like the one they had seen encasing the man at the control board of the submarines, were all of half a hundred crippled men!

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Miles, "I must be seeing things!"

"Where is Solino?" demanded the voice in strangely accented English.

Ward saw that the question came from an individual in a wheelchair a few feet in front of them.

"Solino is dead," he answered.

"Dead?" A ripple of sound came from the oddly seated men.

"Yes, the submarine car was wrecked in the tunnel, and everyone aboard was killed save us two."

The hairless men looked at one another. "This is Spiro's work," said one of them, still in English; and another said, "Yes, Spiro has done this."

Miles and Ward were recovering somewhat from their initial astonishment. "What place is this?" asked the former.

"This is Apex—or, rather, the Palace of the Heads in Apex."

The Palace of the Heads! The two Americans tried to control their bewilderment.

"Pardon us if we don't understand. Everything is so strange. First the submarine was wrecked. Then we entered the crystal room and the tunnel vanished. We can't understand how this place can be at the bottom of the Atlantic."

"It isn't at the bottom of the Atlantic."

"Not at the bottom? Then where?"

"It isn't," said the voice slowly, "in your world at all."

The import of what was said did not at first penetrate the minds of the Americans. "Not in our world?" they echoed stupidly.

"Come," said the crippled man smiling inscrutably, "you are tired and hungry. Later I shall explain more." His strangely colored eyes bored into their own. "Sleep," said his voice softly, imperatively; and though they fought against the command with all the strength of their wills, heaviness weighted down their eyelids and they slept.

From dreamless sleep they awakened to find that fatigue had miraculously vanished, that their wounds were healed and their bodies and clothes were free of slime and filth. All but one of the crippled men—for so in their own minds they termed the odd individuals—had gone away. That one was the man who had first addressed them.

"Do not be alarmed," he said. "In our own fashion we have given you food and rest and attended to your comfort."

Ward smiled, though a trifle uncertainly. "We are not easily frightened," he replied.

"So! That is good. But now listen: my name is Zoro and I am Chief of the Heads of Apex. Ages ago we Heads lived on a continent of your Earth now known to scholars as Atlantis. When Atlantis sank below the waves—in your sacred book that tragedy is known as the Flood—all but a scattered few of its people perished. I and my companions were among the survivors."

The Americans stared at him unbelievably. "But that was a hundred thousand years ago!" exclaimed Ward.

"Three hundred thousand," corrected Zoro.

They stared at him dumbly.

"Yes," said Zoro; "it sounds incredible to your ears, but it is true. Mighty as is the industrial civilization of your day, that of Atlantis was mightier. Of course, the country wasn't then called Atlantis; its real name was A-zooma. A-zooma ruled the world. Its ships with sails of copper and engines of brass covered the many seas which now are lands. Its airships clove the air with a safety and speed your own have still to attain. The wealth of the world poured into A-zooma, and its rulers waxed vain-glorious and proud. Time after time the enslaved masses of A-zooma and of conquered countries rose in great rebellions. Then against

them marched the "iron baylas" breathing death and destruction, and from the air mighty ships poured down the yellow fog... ."

Zoro paused, but presently went on: "So we ruled—for ten thousand years; until the scientists who begot those engines of destruction became afraid, because the serfs themselves began to build secret laboratories. We of the priesthood of science saw the inevitable disaster. Long ago we had put off our bodies—"

Zoro smiled at the Americans' amazement. "No," he said, "I am not a cripple in a wheelchair. This tubular container holds no fleshly body. Inside of it is a mechanical heart which pumps artificial blood—blood purified by a process I will not describe—through my head. It also contains certain inner devices under my mental control, devices that take the place of human hands and feet. Only by accident or through lack of certain essentials can I die."

His listeners stared at him in awe. "You mean," faltered Miles, "that save for your head you are all—machine?"

"Practically, yes. We priest-scientists of the Inner Mystery prolonged life in such fashion. I was three thousand years old when—But enough! I will not weary you with a recital of how the slaves burrowed the bowels of A-zooma and of how the masters loosed against them the forces of the atom. Suffice it to say that on an island we built our vast system of buildings—or tunnel as you choose to call it—and sealed them away from the outside world, entrance being made by submarines through automatically controlled locks.

"At about this time our experiments opened up another realm of existence, manifesting at a vibratory rate above that of earth. To this new realm we brought workers who built the City of Apex and the palace you are in. But, unfortunately, we brought with us no weapons of offense, and in the new world we had neither the material nor the delicate mechanisms and factories to reproduce them. However, for countless ages there was no rebellion on the part of the workers who, even in A-zooma, had worshipped us as gods. They were born, grew old and died, but we abode forever. Besides, in the City of Apex they were freer than they had ever been before, merely having to furnish our laboratories with certain raw materials and the wherewithal to sustain the blood supply on which our lives depend. But, of late, they have made common cause with the original inhabitants of this plane, the green men—"

The green men! As if the words were a signal, a dreadful thing happened. Out of a far shadow leaped a lean and hideous monster. To Miles' startled eyes it seemed to grow as it leaped. Thin, unbelievably thin it was, yet swelling at the head. From between two goggle-eyes writhed a rope-like trunk. Twelve feet in the air its head towered over Zoro. "Look out!" screamed the American.

Zoro's chair seemed to jump. Too late! Around the tubular container wrapped the snake-like trunk, plucking the wheelchair and its occupant from the floor and dangling them high in air. "Shoot!" cried Zoro.

Miles shot. His bullet ploughed through the unbelievably thin body and ricocheted from a pillar beyond. Ward fired with better effect. One of the goggle eyes splattered like glass. Under a fusillade of bullets the monster wilted, giving expression to a weird, shrill cry. Zoro dangled head downwards. To drop from such a height on his skull would probably be fatal.

But the monster did not drop him. Instead, in its death agony, its grip tightened, and the Americans witnessed an incredible sight. Before their very eyes the monster began rapidly to shrink. Its tenuous body telescoped together, becoming thinner and thinner in the process, until on the floor there lay the lifeless body of a snake-like creature not more than six inches in length!

"Good Lord!" breathed Miles.

Zoro who had escaped unscathed from his perilous plight, regarded it with his peculiarly colored eyes.

"It is a tah-a-la," he said, "and must have entered the room at the same time you did. The green men often capture and train them for hunting. When about to seize their prey their bodies have the power of enormously stretching." Outwardly he seemed unaffected by the danger safely passed and waved away several of his fellows who had wheeled to the spot attracted by the noise of the pistols. The Americans were more shaken. "Perhaps," said Ward, "there is danger of—"

"None," replied Zoro. "I know there are no other tah-a-las inside these rooms, since it is the nature of these beasts to rush to each other's aid when they scream. And as for outside attacks, the laboratories are insulated against any the insurgent workers can make. Their weapons are poor—the green men use but clubs. No, it is not their attacks we fear but their refusal to furnish us with supplies. They worshipped us as gods,

and the giving of supplies was long a religious rite. But now they doubt our divinity, and, since they no longer listen to or obey our decrees, we have no means of punishing them. Spiro is responsible for this."

"Spiro?" questioned the two men.

"He whom we raised to the dignity of godhead on the accidental death of Bah-koo, causing a deep sleep to fall upon him in the temple and grafting his head upon the mechanical body left by the latter. Twice before we had done this with citizens of Apex, and how were we to know that Spiro would resent it? True, he was in love with Ah-eeda, but the physical passions of men die with the organisms that give them birth. For three years he dwelt with us in the laboratories, learning the wisdom of the Heads, and then,"—Zoro's face became forbidding—"he denounced us to the people. Though there was more or less discontent, they would never have dared defy us save for him. He told them that our curses could do no harm, that we were merely the heads of men like himself and would die if they refused to give us the wherewithal to renew blood.

"But this refusal of theirs is an evil thing," he cried, looking at the Americans with his strangely colored eyes. "It violates the custom of ages, and strikes at the very roots of our existence. So we held council and sent two of our number to Earth after men and weapons to enforce our demands. For years we had watched Earth, seen its myriad civilizations rise and fall, studied the coming of America to power and importance. So it was to America that Solino went, by way of the tunnel that still exists under the Atlantic—"

"And hired us," interrupted Ward, "and brought us to the tunnel in the submarine-car where we—"

"Stepped into the crystal chamber," finished Zoro. "That chamber is a re-vibrating device of certain rays and chemicals. The shutting of the door closed the switches and hurled your bodies to where a receiving-station on this plane integrated them again."

So they were not at the bottom of the ocean. They were—stupendous thought—living in a new world of matter!

"Spiro suspected our plans," continued Zoro. "He isolated us in our laboratories, and, by means of a crystal tube, went through to the tunnel, tore up a section of track, and wrecked the submarine-car. But his act

was only partially successful. You two escaped death; you are here; you are ready to keep faith and fight in our service."

"We are ready to fight," assented Miles and Ward. The situation was certainly an unusual one, and one they did not clearly understand; but theirs was the simple code of the mercenary soldier—they would fight for whoever hired them, and be loyal as long as their wages were paid.

"Then there is no time to lose," exclaimed Zoro. "Already our blood grows thin. You must go back to the wrecked submarine and retrieve your weapons."

"But how?"

"There is a sending tube in the next compartment."

They followed Zoro through lofty rooms filled with amber light until they came to one wherein were assembled the rest of the Heads. Zoro spoke to them swiftly in a strange, flowing tongue. Then he conducted the two Americans to a crystal chamber at the end of the room and bade them enter it. The vibrant light caressed their limbs.

"When I close this door," he said, "you will find yourselves back in the tunnel. Board one of the submarine-cars on the siding and proceed to the wreck." He gave them detailed instructions how to operate the car. "Then get your weapons and return. Do you understand?"

They nodded.

"The workers possess no arms the equal of machine-guns and bombs. They will be at your mercy. Remember that you are fighting for our lives and that, if you save them, your reward will be great. Fear nothing."

The door closed. After a moment there was a blinding flash, a moment of swooning darkness, and then they were staring through transparent walls into the phosphorescent gloom of the underseas crypt. Suddenly, what they had recently undergone seemed the product of an illusion, a dream. Ward shook himself vigorously. "I guess it was real enough," he said. "Let us see if the car works."

They ran out to the wreck and returned without trouble. The machine-gun was mounted for action and the gas-bombs slung over their shoulders in convenient bags. "All right," said Miles tensely, "let us go."

Again they entered the crystal chamber; again there was the flash of light and the sensation of falling into darkest space. Then, in a moment it seemed, they were stepping into the hall from which they had fled

pursued by the green men—only for the second time, to be confronted by a crowd of hostile giants. "Don't fire, Kid!" yelled Ward. "It's no use to kill them uselessly. Give them the bombs!"

Disconcerted by the attack of tear-gas, the green men broke and fled. "After them," panted Ward: "we've got them on the run!"

Thrilling to the lust of battle, the two Americans emerged into an open square. They had little time to note the odd buildings and strange statues. Coming towards them with leveled weapons, the nature of which they did not know, was a band of short men—that is, short in comparison with the greenish giants. Behind this company appeared still another, and another. Tear-gas was useless to stop their onward rush. "All right," yelled Miles, "it's lead they want!"

The machine-gun spat a hail of bullets. Before the first withering blast the swarthy men recoiled in confusion. Then a second volley scattered them like chaff. Miles and Ward were conscious of no pity for the dead and wounded lying on the pavement of yellow stone. This was their profession, the stern business of which they were masters. In France they had seen worse sights, and in Nicaragua and Mexico. They swept destructively out of the square and into a long tree-lined avenue. This might be another world or dimension but its trees looked not unlike those of tropical America.

In a short while the radiating streets were cleared of crowds and the cries of the mob died away. Miles and Ward paused in the shadow of an overhanging wall and wiped their faces. "That was quick work, all right," said Ward; and, even as he said it, the wall seemed to fall upon their unprotected heads and crush them into unconsciousness... .

Out of a sick darkness they came. At first they thought they were confronting Zoro. Then, as the mists of unconsciousness cleared from aching heads, they perceived that they were in a vast hall crowded with swarthy men in short tunics, and with greenish giants wearing nothing but breech-clouts and swinging short clubs. The fierce eyes of the greenish giants were upon them, and the vengeful ones of the swarthy men. But the desire of both to rend and tear was held in check by the dominant head emerging from a tubular container mounted upon a wheelchair. The Americans stared. This was not the head of Zoro. No!

"The head of Spiro," thought Miles and Ward with sinking hearts.

They had fallen into the power of the leader of the insurgent workers!

Spiro—for it was indeed he—regarded them with pitiless eyes. His English was slower and not as fluent as that of Zoro, and his words harder to understand.

"You Americans, beings of another world, have come here at the bidding of the Heads to slay and kill for gold."

He paused. "I who for three years studied your country, learned its language, history, did not believe men of your race could be so vile."

He paused again, and Ward broke out hotly, "It is true that we came here to fight for gold, but who are you to speak of vileness? Have you not turned on the Heads, your benefactors, now your brothers, who raised you to their height? Are you not leading a revolt of the workers which would deny them the means of sustaining life? Are you not seeking to perpetrate—murder?"

Spiro regarded him slowly. "Is it possible you are in ignorance of what those means are? Listen, then, while I tell you the hideous truth. Since the dawn of our history, until the present moment, the Heads have maintained their lives by draining blood from the veins of thousands of Apexans yearly!"

The Americans' faces whitened. "What do you mean?" breathed Ward.

"I mean that the artificial blood pumped by mechanical hearts through the brains of the Heads—yes, and that is now being pumped through my own!" cried Spiro bitterly—"is manufactured from human blood. Human blood is the basis of it. And to get that blood every Apexan must yield his quota in the temple. Slowly but surely this practice is sapping the vitality of the race. But though the Apexans realized this they were afraid to speak against the custom. For the Heads were worshipped as gods; and when the gods spoke, blasphemers died—horribly."

Miles and Ward shuddered.

"Even I," went on Spiro, "denounced blasphemers and thought it holy that each should yield a little of his blood to the Almighty Ones. Then I woke from darkness to find myself—a Head. At first I could not understand, for I was in love with Ah-eeda—and can a machine mate? But it is true that love is largely desire, and desire of the body. With the death of the body, desire died; and it may be that pride and ambition took its place. But, for all that, there were moments when I remembered my lost manhood and dreamed of Ah-eeda. Yes, though the laboratory of the

Heads revealed wonders of which I had never dreamed, though I looked into your world and studied its languages and history, though I was worshipped as a god and endless life stretched ahead of me—nevertheless, I could see that the strength of my race was being sapped, its virility lost!"

His voice broke. "In the face of such knowledge what were immortality and power? Could they compensate for one hour of life and love as humanity lived it? So I brooded. Then one day in the temple I looked into the face of a girl about to be bled and recognized Ah-eeda. In that moment, hatred of the fiends posing as gods and draining the vitality of deluded worshippers, crystallized and drove me to action. So it was I who denounced the Heads, aroused the people!" Spiro's voice broke; died. Miles and Ward stared at him, horrified; and after a while Miles exclaimed, "We never suspected! We would never have fought to maintain such a thing had we known!"

"Nonetheless," said Spiro inflexibly, "you fought for it, and many people died and more are afraid. Superstition is a hard thing to kill. Already there are those who murmur that truly the Heads are gods and have called up demons from the underworld, as they threatened they would, to smite them with thunder until once more they yield blood in the temple. But I know that without blood the Heads must die miserably and the people be freed from their vampire existence. It is true that I too shall die, but that is nothing. I die gladly. Therefore, to keep the people from sacrificing blood, to show them that you are mortal and the Heads powerless to save the demons they have raised, you must be slain in front of the great palace.

"Yes; you, too, must die for the people!"

Bound and helpless, lying on their backs and staring into the gloom of the small chamber into which they had been thrown, Miles and Ward had time to ponder their desperate situation. Spiro was delaying their death until the workers of Apex would have time to gather and witness it. At first they had struggled to loosen their bonds, but such efforts served only to tighten them. Then they had tried the trick of rolling together so that the fingers of one might endeavor to undo the knots securing the other. On a memorable occasion in Turkey they had freed themselves in this manner. But the attempts proved fruitless now. The floor of the chamber was smooth, nor could they find any rough projection on which to saw the cords.

Exhausted, they finally desisted. The same thought was in both minds: Were they doomed to die in this strange world, fated never to see Earth again? Well, a soldier of fortune must expect to meet with reverses. Still, it was a tough break. After a long silence Ward said, "How were we to know that the heads lived on the blood of the people?"

"Would it have made any difference if we had known?" asked Miles.

"Perhaps not." Ward tried to shrug his shoulders. "After all, we have fought to maintain systems not much better. There is little difference, save in degree, between draining the life-blood of a race and robbing it of the fruits of its labor."

"But sometimes we fought to liberate people," protested Miles.

"Yes, I like to think of that. It's good to have something to our credit when we cash in. And it looks," he said pessimistically, "as if our time to do so has come."

They ceased talking. Time passed cheerlessly. Finally both of them fell into a heavy slumber from which they were aroused by the sudden flashing in their eyes of a bright light, bright only in comparison with the former intense darkness. "What's that!" cried Ward, startled.

"S-sh," said a soft voice warningly, and when their eyes became accustomed to the illumination, they were amazed to perceive the slender form of a young girl carrying a torch. She was marvelously lovely to look at, with her blue-black hair brushed straight back from a low, broad forehead and her smooth skin as dark as that of an Egyptian. Nor was she dressed unlike pictures Miles had seen of people of ancient Egypt. The embroidered plates covering the small breasts shone and glittered; bracelets and bangles flashed on bare arms and shapely ankles; while from the waist to below the knees was a skirt of rich material. On the small feet were sandals of intricate design. Besides the torch, the girl carried a slim, gleaming knife, and for a moment the adventurers were guilty of imagining she had come to slay them where they lay. But her manner quickly dispelled their fear. Sinking on her knees beside them, she said, "Do not be afraid; Ah-eeda will not harm you."

So this was Ah-eeda, the girl of whom Spiro had spoken. Miles and Ward devoured her loveliness with their eyes; her coming flooded their bosoms with renewed hope. She continued speaking. Her English was not at all fluent, and she was often compelled to make it clear with

expressions in her own tongue and with explanatory gestures. But to Miles and Ward, who knew nothing of temple training, her speaking English at all was a miracle.

"Is it true that you are men from another world?"

"Yes."

"And you came to make the people give their blood to the Heads?"

"No, that is not true. We were in ignorance of what it was we fought for. Had we known the truth we would have refused to fight for the Heads."

"Then, if I were to set you free, you would go back to your own world and not fight my people any more?"

They nodded vigorously.

"Oh, I am so glad," exclaimed the girl; "I did not want to see you die!" She looked at Miles as she spoke. "I saw you before Spiro this afternoon. Poor Spiro!" she murmured as she cut their bonds. It was some time before circulation was restored to their limbs. Miles asked anxiously, "How many guards are there at the door?"

"Twelve," said the girl; "but they are playing wong-wo in the room outside and drinking soola." She pantomimed her meaning. "I came here through a secret passage beyond," she indicated by a wave of her hand. "Now that you can walk, let us hurry." Shyly she took Miles' hand. The warm clasp of her fingers made the blood course faster in his veins.

Through a long passage they glided to another room. There were several confusing turns and dark hallways, and twice they had to cower in shadowy corners while Ah-eeda boldly advanced and held converse with occasional persons encountered, though for the most part the way was silent and deserted. At last they came to a low door opening on a narrow street and the girl put out her torch.

"To return to our own world we must first reach the Palace of the Heads," said Ward. The girl nodded. "I will guide you there. But we must hurry: the workers will soon be gathered."

Never were Miles and Ward to forget that breathless flight. The girl led them through narrow and devious byways over which dark buildings leaned, evidently avoiding the more direct and open thoroughfares. It seemed as if they were to escape without hindrance when, suddenly, out of a dimly lighted doorway, lurched the gigantic figure of a green

man carrying a flare. This flare threw the figures of the fugitives into relief.

"Ho!" roared the green man, and came at them like a furious bull. It seemed characteristic of his kind to attack without parley. The torch dropped as he came. There was no resisting that mighty bulk. Unarmed, and with scant room to move backward, the two Americans went down; and that would have been the end of the battle if Ah-eeda, who had shrunk to one side out of the way of the combatants, had not snatched up the still flaming torch and held it against the naked back of the greenish giant. With a scream of anguish the latter ceased throttling the Americans, clapped his hands to his scorched back and rolled clear of them.

Instantly they staggered to their feet and fled down the roadway after the light-footed Ah-eeda. Behind them the screams of the green man made the night hideous. "Damn him!" panted Ward; "he'll have the whole town on our heels!" Providentially, at that moment the road debouched into the great square. This they crossed at a run, and so, for the last time, entered the Palace of the Heads. Its wide halls and chambers were practically deserted.

Past the crystal chamber where they had first materialized into this strange world they dashed, and through the far door and down the corridor to the blank wall. Already in the rear could be heard the sound of pursuit, the rising clamor of the mob. Ward hammered on the wall with both fists. "Zoro! Zoro! let us in!" Now the first of the mob had entered the corridor. "Zoro! Zoro!" Noiselessly, and just in time, the wall parted and they sprang through, Miles half carrying the slender form of Ah-eeda. The wall closed behind them, obliterating the fierce cries and footbeats of their pursuers.

In front of them was Zoro, his hairless head projecting from the tubular container. Ah-eeda shrank fearfully into Miles' embrace. All the other Heads were ranged back of Zoro, but there was something odd about them. The massive craniums lolled loosely to one side or another and the curiously colored eyes were glazed or filmed. Zoro held his head erect, but only with an effort, and his features were drawn and ghastly looking.

"Yes," he said in a feeble voice, "the Heads are dying. You need not tell me that you have failed. In the end force always fails. No longer will the veins of the people yield their blood to us, and without their blood we

cannot live. Soon three hundred thousand years of intelligence will be no more." His voice faltered.

Miles and Ward had learned to feel nothing but horror and detestation of the Heads, but now in the face of their tragic end, hearing the dying words of Zoro, awe and sympathy struggled with other emotions in their hearts. These mighty intellects had lived before the days of the flood; their eyes filming now in death had seen the ancient empires of Earth rise and fall... . Sumeria, Babylon... . Stupendous thought; and yet in the face of death a hundred thousand years of life was of no more importance than that of a day. Suddenly Ward sprang forward and shook the fainting Head. "Zoro! Zoro! what of us? We served you faithfully and would now return to Earth."

Visibly Zoro made a great effort to reply. "Go to the crystal tube in the laboratory beyond," he said at last. "It still works. I have told you how to run the car. Mend the tracks. The locks open automatically and let the car into the ocean when it strikes the switch. Your reward is in... ." The words died away. Then, with a sudden influx of strength, the hairless head straightened, the strangely colored eyes cleared, and in a loud voice Zoro called out something in an unknown tongue and then collapsed.

Out of that chamber of death the Americans fled, suddenly afraid of its weird occupants. In time the workers of Apex would break into that strange laboratory and find the vampires of the ages dead. And in a very short time Spiro himself would die—Spiro the avenger.

At the crystal tube Miles paused. "Ah-eeda," he said softly, "we return to Earth, but I shall never forget you, never!"

A moment he hesitated, and then bent and kissed her swiftly. Instantly she was in his arms, clinging to him passionately.

"I too," she cried; "I too!"

"She means," said Ward, "that she wants to go back with us. What do you say?"

"God knows I am tempted to take her," said Miles; "but would it be right? What does she know of Earth?"

"Nothing," said Ward; "but I believe she loves you. And have you thought that after helping us to escape she may not be safe among her own people?"

Miles bowed his head. "Very well," he said; "so be it. I swear to make her happy."

So there were three of them who entered the crystal tube.

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