

GEORGE HENRY WEISS

THE HEADS OF APEX

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The Heads of Apex

By Francis Flagg

Far under the sea-floor Solino's submarine carries two American soldiers of fortune to startling adventure among the Vampire Heads of Apex.

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 underseas 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.

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