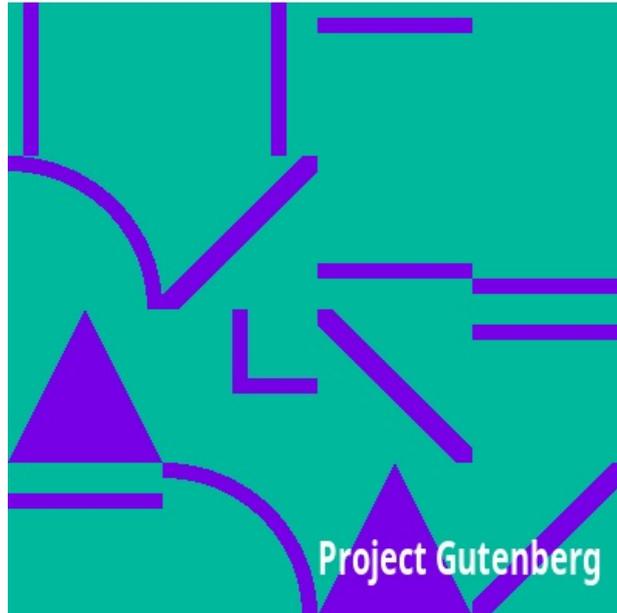

The Infra-Medians

Sewell Peaslee Wright



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The Infra-Medians

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

Into a land of shadows and lost souls goes Pete Grahame in search of his hapless friends.

THERE was no sense to the note. There was no sense to anything that Vic Butler did, for that matter. Where he hid away his vast scientific knowledge in that rattle-brained, red-haired head of his has always been a mystery to me. The note read:

Dear Pete:

If you get this, I'm in a jam that promises some action.

Drive out, if plane-peddling is palling on you, and bust into the lab. I'm leaving another note there for you, old son, and after you read it you can let your conscience be your guide.

Bring a gat along, and plenty of ammo. Hope's away, at Aunt Cleo's, so don't get in touch with her and spoil her visit.

Vic

I had a hot prospect lined up for a demonstration that morning, but I didn't even stop to give him a ring. Vic and I had been buddies ever since we were kids—and, besides, he was Hope's brother.

Vic's place was out on the river, about ten miles from town, and that little tan roadster of mine made it in just about ten minutes. The traffic in the business district slowed me up a bit.

There was nothing at all pretentious about the place; it was a rambling, lazy-looking house built largely of native stone, stretching its length comfortably in the shade of the big maples. Perrin, Vic's man-of-all-work, came hurrying out of the house to greet me as I locked my wheels on the drive before the door.

"I'm glad you're here, sir!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "I was just about to phone for the police; I was for certain, sir. Such goings on, I don't know what to think!"

"What's the matter, Perrin? Where's Mr. Butler?"

"That's it, sir! That's exactly it. Where's Mr. Butler? And—"

"Just a moment, please! Cut it short, Perrin. What's happened?"

"I DON'T know. Yesterday afternoon Mr. Butler leaves a letter for me, which I'm to mail early this morning, special delivery. It's to you. I reckon you got it, sir?"

"That's why I'm here. Go on."

"Well, after that, he locks himself up in his workroom, so Mrs. Perrin says, she being housekeeper, as you know, sir, leaving word not to disturb him for dinner.

"We don't think so much of that, Mr. Butler being took with streaks of working at all hours, as you know. But when Miss Hope came home unexpected this morning—"

"What?"

"She cut her visit a few days short, her aunt having other house guests turn up unexpected like, and Miss Hope arrives first thing this morning, being here when I return from town after mailing the letter to you, sir.

"Mrs. Perrin had just told her about the master, and Miss Hope looks into his room. He isn't there, and the bed hasn't been slept in. 'The poor dear,' she says, 'he's worked himself half to death, and dropped off on that horrible cot he keeps in his laboratory,' says Miss Hope. 'I'll let him sleep.'

"But just a few minutes ago, just before you arrived, sir, she became nervous like, and rapped on the door. There wasn't a sound. So she went up to the master's room and found a key, and went in. And now *she* don't answer, and we were just about ready to call the police!"

"Let's go inside!" I hurried by Perrin and through the cool, quiet hall to the broad door that opened into the big room at the back of the house, which was Vic's laboratory.

Vic! Hope!" I pounded as hard as I could, shouting their names. There was no response.

"Is there another key, Perrin?" I snapped.

"No, sir; none that I know of. The master was mighty fussy about his workroom."

"Can we get in through the windows?"

"No. They're barred, if you remember rightly, and fitted with this frosted glass, so you can't see in, even."

"Then get me an ax!" I commanded. "Quick!"

"An ax?" hesitated Perrin.

"An ax—and be quick about it!"

Perrin mumbled a protest and hurried away. I turned to Mrs. Perrin, who had come up to determine the result of my shouting.

"How long is it since Miss Hope went in there?"

"How long, sir? I'd say about twenty minutes before you came. Maybe twenty-five. I wasn't paying any particular attention, sir. She just got the key and went in. After a few minutes I heard something buzzing in there, and I thought maybe Mr. Butler was showing her some new gadget of his, like he was always doing. Then there was a telephone call for him, and I couldn't make neither of them answer; that's when Mr. Perrin and I began to get worried."

"I see." Perrin came hurrying up with the ax, and I motioned them aside. I swung the ax, and the head of the weapon crashed against the lock. The knob dropped to the floor with a clatter, but the door gave not at all.

I brought the ax down again, and something cracked sharply. The third blow sent the door swinging wide.

Cautiously, fearing I know not what, I entered the familiar room. Nothing, apparently, had been disturbed. There was no sign of disorder anywhere. The blankets on the narrow cot in the corner of the room had not been unfolded.

But neither Vic nor Hope were anywhere in sight.

YOU and Mrs. Perrin stay there by the door," I suggested. "I don't know what's wrong here, but something's happened. There's no need for all of us entering."

My second glance around the room was more deliberate. To my right were the big generators and the switchboards, gleaming with copper bus-bar, and intricate with their tortuous wiring. Directly before me was the long work-bench that ran the full length of the room, littered with a dozen set-ups for as many experiments. At my left was a sizable piece of apparatus that was strange to me; on a small enameled table beside it was a rather large sheet of paper, weighted down with a cracked Florence flask.

In a sort of panic, I snatched up the paper. Vic had said in his note, that he would leave another note for me here. This was it, for in a bold scrawl at the top was my name. And in hardly decipherable script, below, was his message:

Dear Pete:

First of all, let me say that you've no particular call to do anything about this. If I'm in a jam, it's my own doing, and due to my bull-headedness, of which you have so often reminded me.

Knowing your dislike for science other than that related to aeronautics, I'll cut this pretty short. It'll probably sound crazy to you, anyway.

You know that there's sound above the frequencies to which the human ear will respond. You know there are light rays that the human eyes can't perceive. Some work I've been doing the last five or six months indicates that there's a form of life about us, all around us, which isn't perceptible to our senses—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.

Well, I'm going to do a little exploring. I'm going to take a whirl at what I'll call the Infra-Median existence. What I'll find there, I don't know. Life of some kind, however, for my experiments prove that. Possibly not friendly.

All this being so, there's an off chance that I'll find myself tangled with something I can't anticipate. And if you are called upon to read this, then something has gone wrong with my plans.

Should you wish to take a flier after me, stand in the center of the square outlined by the four uprights of the device beside which this little table stands. Be sure your weapon—I told you to bring a gat—is on your person.

There's a small instrument board set on one of the posts. Turn the upper of the two dials until the hand of the meter beside it moves up to 2700 exactly. Wait a moment, until you're sure you have the exact reading. Then turn the second dial until the two red lines coincide, and as you do so, mark the time. The thing is set to operate the reverse cycle at three-hour intervals exactly. When you come down, you'll start a new cycle, and it might be important for us to know at just what minute we can get back to our own plane.

If you decide to try it, tell Perrin to do nothing for at least a week. If the law started experimenting on this equipment, we never could climb back. And leave word with them for Hope; tell her I'll scramble out somehow—that we will, if you decide to try your luck.

Vic

Underneath, in Hope's clear, purposeful hand, was this:

Peter dear:

Not knowing when you'll arrive, I'm going on ahead. We must give Vic a hand—mustn't we?

H.

NATURALLY, I didn't understand Vic's jargon about frequencies and light-rays, for I thought more about football than physics in college, but two things were clear to me. One was that Vic had plunged into some sort of wild experiment, and the other was that Hope had followed him. The rest didn't matter very much.

"Perrin! Mr. Butler and Miss Hope are safe. Everything is explained in this note. You and Mrs. Perrin are to leave me here, and not disturb anything. Do nothing at all for at least a week. If we aren't all back here before that time ... take any action you see fit. Understand?"

"No-no, sir. Where—"

"You understand the orders, anyway. That's all that's necessary. Close the door—and keep it closed at least a week!" I glared at him, and Perrin closed the door.

The apparatus Vic had mentioned was my first thought. It consisted primarily of four tall, slim posts, set in the form of a square, about a yard apart, and supported by heavy copper brackets mounted on a thick base of insulating material, and each post bore at its top, like a stalk with a single drooping

flower, a deep, highly polished reflector, pointing inward and downward. The whole effect was not unlike the skeleton of a miniature skyscraper.

I strode between two of the high, slim black pillars and glanced upward. All four of the reflectors seemed pointed directly at my face, and I could see that each held, not the bulb I had expected, but a crudely shaped blob of fused quartz.

THERE was nothing to be gained by examining the peculiar machine, and therefore the one quick glance sufficed. If Vic and Hope had gone this route, I was anxious to follow. I glanced down at the papers in my hand, and slowly turned the first dial on the little instrument board, narrowly watching the hand of the meter beside it, as Vic had instructed.

The hand moved slowly, like the hand of an oil-gauge in which the pressure is gradually built up. Twenty-one ... twenty-five ... twenty-six ... *twenty-seven*.

I waited a moment, conscious only of the faint hum of a generator at the other end of the room, and the quivering hand of the meter. I turned the dial back an imperceptible degree, and the hand steadied down exactly upon the numerals "2700." Then I touched the next dial.

This second dial was no more than a thin disk of hard rubber or bakelite, with a red scratch-mark on one side. On the panel itself, far to the right of the dial's zero point, was the red scratch-mark that matched it. When the two coincided—well, something happened.

I was conscious of a faint glow from above as I moved the dial slowly, so that its red mark approached the stationary one upon the panel. I glanced up swiftly.

EACH of the little blobs of quartz was glowing; each with a light of different color. One was a rich amber, one a pale green, one a vivid, electric blue, and one was fiery red. The intensity of the light increased steadily as I moved the dial.

I could not only see the light; I could feel it. It beat upon my body; throbbed all around me. I had a feeling that the mingling rays of light conflicted with each other.

It seemed to me for a moment that I was growing as light as air; that my feet were drifting off the floor, and then, as the red line of the dial came closer to the indicated point, the feeling left, and I suddenly seemed very heavy. I could hardly support my own weight; my legs were trembling with the burden; sweat broke out over my whole body; the rays of light beat down upon me fiercely, overpoweringly....

Desperately, I quickly turned the dial until the two red marks coincided. A great weight, soft and enveloping, seemed to drop upon me. The senses of sight and hearing and feeling all left me. I could only think—and my thoughts were horrible.

Then, suddenly, there was a terrific crash of sound, and my senses returned.

I looked around. It seemed that an instant before I had been standing there in Vic's laboratory, slowly turning the second of the two dials, while the four lights beat down upon my body. And now ... and now I was standing in the open, on another world. A nightmare world that words seem inadequate to describe.

THE sky was an angry, sulphurous green, pressing low upon a country utterly flat and nearly barren. The only sign of vegetation I could perceive were strange growths that remotely resembled trees—inverted trees, with wide-spreading branches hungrily nursing the black and barren soil, and gnarled, brief roots reaching out tortured arms toward the forbidding sky.

To my left, and some distance away, a vast number of blunt and ugly towers rose against the sinister skyline, but no form of animal life seemed in evidence. Wonderingly, my head whirling, whether from my strange experience or from the shock of finding myself in what was obviously another world, I do not know, I turned toward the city. And as I took my first step, there materialized suddenly out of the thin and ill-smelling air, the figures of perhaps a dozen monstrous creatures.

They were, in effect, men. That is, they had a head, a torso, two arms and two legs apiece. But they were not human. Those huge round eyes, unblinking and browless, were not human, nor were their

slitted, sunken mouths. They were not human beings; they were images of despair.

Their thin legs seemed to buckle at the knees, their arms drooped from their shoulders, their mouths sagged at the corners, even their huge ears hung down like a hound's. Their round, dark eyes, deeply recessed, were caverns of despair.

THEY were clothed in some coarse, black stuff that bristled as though loosely woven of stiff hair, and yet which was not a true fabric, for it seemed to move within itself, and scintillate, as though composed of billions of restless motes. And as the strange creatures closed in quickly, I saw that theirs was not solid flesh, but, like the clothing that partially covered them, an attenuated substance that was not quite real.

Have you ever sat close to the screen in a motion picture theatre, so that the graininess of the moving film was visible? These creatures were like such shadows, seen in three dimensions.

I retreated two or three swift steps, jerking the revolver from my pocket.

"Back!" I warned, hoping they would understand the tone of voice if not the words. "Back—or I'll pot a couple of you!"

They glanced at each other, swiftly, almost as though they understood. It seemed to me that their mouths lifted; that they almost smiled. Then they rushed at me.

I had only one box of cartridges, besides those in the cylinder of my gun. I didn't know what might be in store for me, and I took no chances.

My first shot sent one of the creatures spinning to the ground. Two more were almost upon me before I could level the weapon and pull the trigger again. I got them both.

The rest of that unholy crew were grinning, and their eyes were shining with anticipation. They closed in upon me eagerly, each apparently doing everything in his power to invite my attention. It was bewildering, and I watched them warily, suspecting a trick. There were only three more cartridges left in my gun, and I did not dare replace the fired shells for fear they would rush me when the action was open and the gun momentarily useless.

I WAS just about to risk one more cartridge when another figure materialized in the ranks of the enemy; a taller, commanding figure, with a shining jewel, perhaps a mark of authority, dangling from his corded brown throat.

The others fell back instantly, and the newcomer approached me swiftly, holding out his hands as though in supplication.

So I was to receive a cordial welcome after all! I breathed a sigh of relief, and pocketed the weapon—and instantly the dark eyes flashed angrily. I held out both hands, to show that they were empty, trying to express my willingness to be friends.

He hesitated, and then uttered a high-pitched sound that I presumed to be a word of command. Before I could free the gun again, the creatures had me, and while their flesh looked more unnatural and unreal than ever, at close range, their long fingers gripped me like talons of steel. The being which had uttered the command disappeared, and my captors led me, struggling and protesting, toward the black, ugly towers of the city.

Over the barren, rocky ground we hurried; past the wretched hovels on the outskirts of the city, and through crooked, dismal streets, toward the center of the city.

A great crowd of creatures similar to my captors hemmed us in. Before us, they thinned into nothingness as we approached, only to swarm into being in some other spot. It was terrifying; an unbelievable experience that made me question my sanity. The only vestige of comfort left me was the hope that they were taking me to Hope and Vic.

AT the entrance of one of the huge misshapen black buildings, the creature with the brilliant stone at his throat appeared as suddenly as a light flashes up in the darkness. With him were two others, each wearing a similar jewel of authority. They stood aside for us to enter, and then followed us down a long corridor which was not lighted by any device I could discern, and yet which was not

dark.

A broad door swung open, and I was thrust through the doorway.

"Pete!" shouted a familiar voice, and I scrambled to my feet. There was Vic, his red hair tousled, and his face gray with worry. Behind him, her big blue eyes brimming, her lips quivering, was Hope.

"Vic! Well, here I am. And Hope, dear..."

My voice trailed off. These were not Vic and Hope before me; they were unreal creatures, like the beings which had captured me. I could recognize the face and the figure of the woman I loved and of her brother; but they seemed to have no substance.

Hope suddenly put her arms about me. She was sobbing.

"Don't, Peter!" she whispered.

"Don't look at me like that. I know how you feel. You—you and Vic—you aren't real to me, either! We're just shadows—lost souls..."

"Buck up, Hope!" Vic's voice was kindly, yet firm and gravely commanding. "We're all right. Only—temporarily—we're Infra-Medians. Sit down, Pete, and let's talk. It may be that there's no time to lose in making some plans."

FIRST of all," I insisted, "tell me where we are; what's happened to us. Do you know?"

"Where we are? Surely. Looking at it in one way, we're less than a mile from my laboratory."

"But, Vic!" I protested. "Do you really mean that we're less than a mile from your laboratory; from our own world? If we were, we could see it; we'd bump into our own trees and houses and people; we'd be knocked down by automobiles, and—"

"Two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Old law of simple physics. Is that what you mean?" interrupted Vic.

"Why, yes."

"And a body; what's that?"

"A body? Why, matter, I suppose."

"And matter is what?"

"Anything that occupies space," I replied triumphantly. I had remembered that much from my physics classes.

"True," smiled Vic. "But let's see. It is possible to have sound and light in the same place, isn't it? We can even add other things: heat and electricity, for example. Speaking of electricity, a tremendous current of it adds nothing to the weight of the wire carrying it, and nothing to its bulk, unless we have a heating overload. Current enough to kill a thousand men, or to do the work of a million horses, weighs nothing, is invisible, and actually does nothing until released in some form or other, either by accident or design."

"True, but electricity isn't matter. Our old world is matter; I'm matter, and you're matter. Why don't we bump into things?"

"Our old world is matter, true enough, but for the rest, you're wrong, Pete, old son. You're *not* matter, any more. You're something else. In terms of our own being, you do not exist in your present form. This world does not exist. And the reverse is just as true."

I STARED at him, bewildered.

"What am I, then—a ghost?"

"Nothing of the sort. You're old Pete Grahame, a darned good half-back, and the world's rottenest scientist. Only you've been passed into another form of being, through the action of four little quartz bulbs whose periods of vibrations form a beat—but that's over your head, Pete, old son, and we'll have time to talk over details when we get back. Right now, we're in somewhat of a jam." Instinctively, he glanced at Hope; it was her danger, and not his own, that had brought that haggard

pallor to his face in so short a time.

"That's what I don't understand. What do these people—if you can call them that—want of us?"

Vic looked down, frowning.

"I'm not sure I'm right," he replied after a moment, "but if I am—they wish us to kill them. As many as possible.

"When I found myself here, I wandered nearly to the city before I was molested. When they did appear, and tried to lay hands on me, I warned them back, and finally shot one of them.

"The effect was magical. They seemed unable to believe the evidence of their eyes. They rushed me eagerly, each seeming to beg for a bullet.

"I gave them what they wanted, still hoping I could frighten them away. A great crowd formed around me, and the rabble was sent flying by a number of the men who seem to hold some office, distinguished by a jewel-like emblem around their throats. If I read their actions correctly, they claimed the privilege of death by virtue of their greater authority.

WELL, I finally decided that my gun did anything but frighten them. They were angry when I refused to do any more slaughtering, and led me here. Every once in a while one of the captains would come in and command me to kill him. I refused, for that's the only trump card I held.

"When Hope, here, acted like the foolish little kid she is, she was not even armed, and they rushed her here without delay. My theory is that these people live in a dreary world in which there is no pleasure. Their faces seem to show that. Apparently they live a very long time, and have no means of shortening that life. They are not intelligent. Things that would kill a man of our own world have no effect on them, for remember that they are not physical beings. You have seen them appear out of thin air, and dissolve in the same fashion?"

"Yes."

"That is simply their mode of transportation. They pass invisibly through the air, just as electricity passes through a wire; quickly, invisibly, silently. Then they assume their original form where they will—just, again, as electricity passes from the end of the wire exactly the same as it entered it, allowing only for voltage drops and some other factors that aren't pertinent here.

"What we must do, and right now, is to settle upon some means of getting to the proper spot at the proper time. You marked the moment of your departure, I suppose?"

"Exactly." I glanced down at my wrist watch, and noted with relief that it was still running. I observed then, for the first time, that the watch, my clothing, and even my hand, were not real; they were like the rest of the things in this monstrous state that Vic called Infra-Media. "I left at three after ten. It's now fourteen minutes of eleven—Good Lord! Less than an hour since I stood there in your laboratory!"

"Then our next chance to get back will be at three minutes after one," nodded Vic. "I wonder if there is any chance of—"

BEFORE he could complete the sentence the door was flung open, and five of the older men, led by a sixth with a larger jewel at his throat, filed solemnly into the room and motioned that we were to leave.

At the doorway, a double file of creatures closed in about us, and we were led, by long corridors and mighty winding ramps, toward the top of the building.

"Now what?" I whispered to Vic.

"I don't know. That chap with the big stone at his throat seems to be the head man of the city. I think his name is Ee-pay; the others seem to call him that. Maybe it's just a title. But what they're up to now, I can't even guess. Keep your eyes open for a chance to get away, though. How are you feeling, Hope?"

"All excited!" She tried to smile, and almost succeeded. Hope was game all the way through. "What an adventure this will be to talk about when we're old and rheumatic!"

"Good kid!" said Vic, and I pressed her hand as comfortably as I could. We turned a bend in the long

ramp we had been climbing, and came out upon the vast, level top of the building.

Thousands of the unreal creatures of this world were crowded around a vast, hideous image that rose from the center of the space; a monster so terrible that Hope cried out at the sight, and Vic exclaimed under his breath.

For myself, I seemed stricken dumb; I could only stare at this black and ghastly god of these people.

THE carved image was perhaps thirty feet in height, and represented a figure crouched upon its knees, its head bent very low and at the same time tilted at a grotesque angle so that the face smiled heavenward; the hands, palms upward, extended invitingly just below the chin.

As our party appeared, an aisle opened, and we were marched through the assembled crowd, directly toward the idol. A high-pitched, sibilant chant arose from the multitude, and a procession of very ancient beings, whom I took to be the priests of this god, came in single file from behind the black god, directing the chanting with movements of their arms. They were lighter in color than the others, and much more intelligent, to judge by their faces. Their eyes held none of the sadness which was the most marked characteristic of the others. Each wore upon his forehead a gleaming scarlet stone, bound in place by a circlet of black metal, or what looked like metal.

We paused, and the chanting went on and on, until I began to wonder if anything would ever happen. And then, at last the chanting ceased, and three of the priests moved toward us, followed by an elderly being who wore the same symbol of power or authority that I had already noted upon the creature Vic called Ee-pay.

One of the priests spoke sharply, commandingly, to Ee-pay, and the latter nodded—not agreeably it seemed to me.

“The old boy doesn’t like these other chaps; priests, I take it,” whispered Vic. “I think they’ve been messing up his plans. See; he’s motioning us to watch.”

THE priests led the old man back to the idol. Eagerly, he clambered upon the outstretched hands, and stood there facing the grinning face, stroking the polished cheeks with beseeching fingers. The priests sank to the floor, bending themselves in mockery of the image. Four times they touched their foreheads to the ground, and as the fourth gesture was completed something moved swiftly behind the lips of the image, as though a plate had lifted for a moment and dropped again.

There was a sharp, murmuring sound, as of a harp-string softly plucked. A scarlet haze of light shot forth from the mouth of the black god, and the old man stepped back sharply as though struck by some invisible agent. He would have fallen, but as he crumpled, his body seemed to soften and shatter into a scintillating cloud. An instant later there was no trace of him anywhere.

“Hm-m! The great reward for some notable service rendered, I imagine,” whispered Vic. “Those priests are wiser than the rest of this crew. They deal death sparingly, and that makes them great. They love life like a man of our earth; perhaps because they’ve found out how to enjoy it.”

“But what does the work; what killed him?” I asked breathlessly.

“Can’t say, Pete. You can’t name things here in terms of our own world. Some natural force they’ve corraled, I imagine. They control it with that shutter behind the lips of the image. Did you notice it?”

“Yes. I suppose one of the priests operates it from some hidden room. Whatever it is, it certainly does the work. And what do you suppose they want us to do now?”

THE three priests were coming toward us, smiling. I didn’t like their smiles; they were meant to be benign, but there was a cruel and vindictive twist to their lips which chilled me through and through.

“Keep your hand on your gun,” said Vic swiftly. “I don’t like the looks of these chaps.”

The priests stopped before us and their leader began a long harangue in a screechy voice which set my nerves on edge. When he had finished he held out his hands toward me, and motioned toward the waiting idol.

Ee-pay spoke up in sharp protest, and thrust himself between me and the priest. For a moment, due to this obviously unexpected interruption, everything was in confusion.

“Pete!” Vic was whispering excitedly in my ear. “Listen, Pete, I think I see through this. These priests have heard about us and our death-dealing ability. They’re jealous; they want a corner on that. Old Ee-pay figures maybe we could do him a favor in that line, and that’s why he’s arguing. The priests want to honor us for the good we’ve done—by giving us the reward we’ve just seen. So —”

Before he could finish, Ee-pay was thrust aside by a group of angry guards, and I was jerked away. Hope screamed, and out of the tail of my eye I saw both Vic and Hope struggling frantically to free themselves from an overwhelming number of guards. Vic tried to shout something, but a claw-like brown hand was immediately thrust over his mouth.

THE guards who held me, followed by the priests, made their way toward the extended palms which formed the altar of this strange black god whose favor was death. At a command from the priests, the guards lifted me to the altar and then stood watchfully below, gazing up at me with puzzled, mournful, envious eyes.

I saw the priests crouch low, and make their first beseeching bow, in imitation of the black god. Frantically, I looked about me, seeking some avenue of escape.

Below me, hemming me in, were the guards; a triple ring of them, through which I knew I could not escape. Behind me, for I was facing the multitude, was the hideous, grinning face of the idol.

The priests bowed a second time.

Both Hope and Vic were fighting desperately, but there were at least ten guards to each of them. I lifted my hand and waved a farewell, hoping that one of them at least would see the gesture and know that my last thought was of them.

Then, as the priests completed their third bow, I turned and faced the statue.

As my eyes fell upon the shutter behind the thick, grinning lips, the shutter which released the lethal force, a wild and desperate idea came to me. With a shout, I jerked the gun from my pocket and leaped aside. As I did so, I fired twice into the gaping mouth, and saw the bullets shatter the heavy shutter. Then, with the humming sound ringing in my ears like a note of death, I leaped clear, into the midst of the waiting guards.

FOR an instant, there was no movement, no sound, from all that vast crowd. Even the guards seemed stunned, and I tore my way through them with hardly a pause in my stride.

Then a shrill cry went up; a cry that drowned utterly the humming sound that issued from the shattered mouth of the idol. Blindly, the multitude surged towards the scarlet ray that dealt death, fighting their way toward the oblivion they so highly prized.

Those who had been holding Hope and Vic were surging forward with the rest, their erstwhile prisoners forgotten in their mad greed for death. The crowd jostling about me seemed blind to my presence; every eye was fixed on the altar-like hands of the idol, and the death that blew across them.

“Pete!” yelled Vic. “Coming, boy?” He was waiting for me, staving off as best he could the rush of bodies around him; shielding Hope from the savage jostling.

“Coming!” I leaned forward, butting with my head, both doubled fists working like pistons to clear a way to my companions.

“Nice work, Pete!” shouted Vic, as I joined them, breathless but triumphant. “Now for a break! Gun loaded?”

I snapped open the action and dropped in six cartridges.

“It is now. I’ll go ahead; you bring up the rear with Hope in the middle. Ready?”

“Let’s go!”

I PLUNGED on, Hope's fingers gripping my belt. Fresh multitudes were pouring up the ramp, brushing aside the five or six priests that had hurried there in an effort to stem the tide.

One of the priests saw us, and cried out shrilly to his companions. With one accord they came toward us, obviously intent upon blocking our way. I have never seen in any other eyes such anger and hatred as blazed in the eyes of those strange beings.

"Watch them, Pete!" roared Vic. "We can't take chances!" His gun roared twice from behind me, and two of the priests fell writhing, to be instantly trampled into pulp. Another reached out long arms toward Hope, and I let him have it. There was nothing else to do. He went the way of the two others.

Twice again, before we reached the ramp they guarded, the angry attendants of the idol fell before our guns. Then, hurrying down ramp after ramp, corridor after corridor, fighting the rushing mob all the way, we came at last, shaking with weariness and gasping for breath, to the deserted streets of this black and terrible city.

"Are we free?" whispered Hope, holding tightly to my arm. "Are we really free?"

"I hope so, dear. We seem to be. If we can only reach the spot where we entered this insane world before something happens—"

"How much time have we?" interrupted Vic.

I glanced down at my watch, fearful, for a moment, that it had been broken or lost in the *melée*. It was still running, apparently undamaged.

"Let's see; it's four minutes of one. That gives us seven minutes. Can we make it?"

"I think so. It's not so far, and we're nearly out of the city. We *have* to make it!"

VIC led the way, Hope and I following. Anxiously, I watched the minute hand of the watch slide toward the "XII" of the dial ... touch it ... move on....

It was not far, as Vic had said, but we were weary from our battle with the crazed mob, and the best we could force from our legs was a sort of dog-trot.

One minute after ... two....

"Here's the spot! I marked it with these three pieces of stone. Quick!" Vic swept both arms about Hope and me, holding us in a close embrace, so that we all stood within the triangle formed by the three bits of black rock.

I glanced down at my watch. It lacked but a few seconds of the moment when the machine back in Vic's laboratory would function—provided my watch was correct, and the equipment worked according to schedule.

Suddenly, Hope screamed, and I followed her eyes. A score or more of the strange beings had suddenly materialized but a few yards away, and they were closing in on us swiftly.

I tried to draw my gun. Hands reached out to grasp me; to grasp all three of us. Then darkness closed in swiftly; I was whisked upward, on and on, breathlessly. I was suddenly very heavy; I was dropping in the blackness ... there was something solid beneath my feet ... a glare of light in my eyes.

"Nicely timed, I'll say that," chuckled Vic. "How does our own material little old world look?"

"Great!" I stepped quickly away from the machine, drawing Hope with me. "Doesn't it, Hope?"

She sighed, a long, shuddering sigh, and snuggled into my arms. Vic glanced towards us and grinned.

"Come to think of it," he remarked, "I believe I'll run along and see if I can find Mrs. Perrin. I haven't had a thing to eat since noon yesterday, and I've just realized I'm hungry. Will you join me?"

"In a moment," I nodded, and Vic, being the good scout he was, hurried away.

AND the machine?" I asked a few nights later. "Still experimenting with it?" I had really come out

to see Hope, of course, but she was still upstairs, putting on the finishing touches.

Vic shook his head quite gravely.

“No, old son; I had enough. Off on another tangent now. Why—would you like to go back?”

“Not me! It doesn’t seem real now; more like a nightmare, but it was terrible enough at the time.”

“I can prove it wasn’t a nightmare,” chuckled Vic. “Come along, and I’ll show you something you missed.” He led the way to the laboratory, and unlocked a drawer, one of several, beneath the work table.

“I found this on the floor of the machine,” he said. “Didn’t notice it until later. The rays of the machine caught it and brought it back with us; made it solid matter, as we know it here. Do you recognize it?”

I nodded, shuddering. There was no possibility of mistake.

In a squat, clear bottle of alcohol that Vic had taken from the drawer was a sinister, claw-like brown hand, severed cleanly at the wrist.

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