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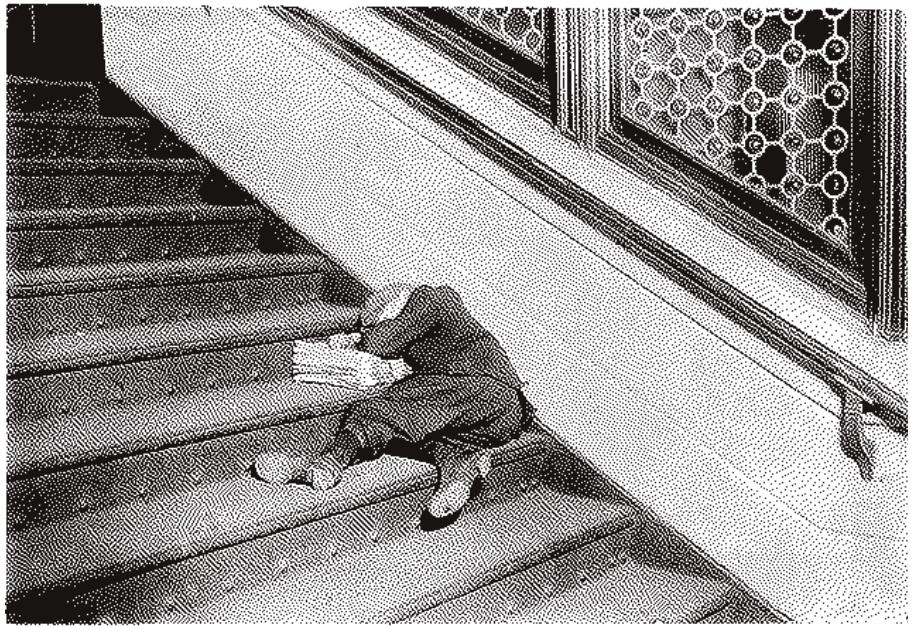

"And That's How It Was, Officer"

By Ralph Sholto

IF: WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION, JULY 1952

Uncle Peter looked me straight in the eye. "Maybe the yogis are, but I'm not."

There seemed nothing else to discuss, so I left Uncle Peter's chambers and went back to Joe's Tavern. My mind, now at ease, was filled again with thought of the honeymoon to come. I would pick up Joy and we would be off to pink-tinted lands.

But there was a slight hitch. When I arrived at Joe's Tavern, Joy was gone.

I inquired of the barkeep and he brought me up to date. "That screwy dame that can throw a guy around? Sure, she was here. She had a few drinks and then left again. She said something about having to help a friend find some bells he lost. I don't know what kind of bells they was but that dame can locate them if anybody can."

As I was about to leave the tavern, it occurred to me you would want to know the truth of what's been going on, so I'm now in the backroom writing this report which I will drop into the nearest mailbox. Then I will go out and find my bride and start upon a well-earned honeymoon. If you have any questions, they'll have to wait until I get back.

Yours truly, Homer Nicholas.

■ ■ ■

"AND THAT'S HOW IT WAS, OFFICER"

First published: If: Worlds of Science Fiction, July 1952.

Cover: Newsboy asleep on stairs with papers, Jersey City, New Jersey, Lewis Hine, 1912, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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A Gaslight zine from HOUDINI Magazine.

I moved to protest but she waved me down. "Never mind. I'll take a cab." She smiled at me sweetly. "And don't stay too long, darling. I'm sure Cora is anxious to get her clothes off."

Cora distinctly pronounced an unprintable name but Joy did not hear it. She was already gone.

I turned to Uncle Peter. "You did not answer my question."

"It's very simple. Even one of your limited brain power should be able to understand it. You see, with finishing my experiments I was not averse to doing the city a favor. Why not, I asked myself, perform them upon persons undesirable to our law-abiding populace? Cora was acquainted with Hands McCaffery and it was through him that I learned who the really undesirable people were."

"But why did you invite them to my wedding reception? I'd think you could find a more appropriate place to carry out your--"

"It was an ideal place to get the Zinsky mob together. Like your Aunt Gretchen, Mr. Zinsky has social ambitions, and he anticipated no danger at the reception."

"I can see your point."

"Also, I wanted to get back at your Aunt Gretchen. She's been very niggardly with funds lately and I wanted to highlight my displeasure in a way she would remember."

I had a fairly clear picture of things now. But I still felt Uncle Peter should be upbraided on a last point. "Uncle Peter, I think it was shameful of you to inflict those hoodlums on the monks in that monastery in Tibet. They'll be in panic."

"No. I was careful to send along two policemen to keep them in hand."

"So you're leaving for Tibet?"

"Of course. I've got to follow up and check on the success of my serum, though there is really no doubt as to its potency. Also I'll be able to achieve a life-long ambition--that of meeting the yogis from whom I should learn a great deal."

I glanced at Cora. "Are you taking her with you?"

"Of course."

"But yogis are above things of the flesh."

David Nixon, Chief of Police, Morton City.

Dear Chief Nixon:

No doubt, by this time, you and your boys are a pretty bewildered lot. You have all probably lost weight wondering what has been going on in Morton City; where all the gangsters went, and why the underworld has vanished like a bucket of soap bubbles.

Not being acquainted with my uncle, Peter Nicholas, with Bag Ears Mulligan, with the gorgeous Joy Nicholas, my bride of scarcely twenty-four hours, or with me, Homer Nicholas, you have of course been out of touch with a series of swiftly moving events just culminated.

You, above all others, are entitled to know what has been happening in our fair city. Hence this letter. When you receive it, Joy and I will be on the way to Europe in pursuit of a most elusive honeymoon. Uncle Peter will be headed for Tibet in order to interview certain very important people you and your department never heard of. Bag Ears will probably be off somewhere searching for his bells, and I suggest you let him keep right on searching, because Bag Ears isn't one to answer questions with very much intelligence.

So, because of the fact that a great deal of good has been done at no cost whatever to the taxpayers, I suggest you read this letter and then forget about the whole thing.

It all started when Joy and I finally got an audience with Uncle Peter in his laboratory yesterday morning. Possibly you will think it strange that I should have difficulty in contacting my own close relative. But you don't know Uncle Peter.

He is a strange mixture of the doer and the dreamer--the genius and the child. Parts of his brain never passed third grade while other parts could sit down and tie Einstein in knots during a discussion of nuclear physics, advanced mathematics or what have you. He lives in a small bungalow at the edge of town, in the basement of which is his laboratory. A steel door bars the public from this laboratory and it was upon this door that Joy and I pounded futilely for three days. Finally the door opened and Uncle Peter greeted us.

"Homer--my dear boy! Have you been knocking long?"

"Quite a while, Uncle Peter--off and on that is. I have some news for you. I am going to get married."

My uncle became visibly disturbed. "My boy! That's wonderful--truly wonderful. But I'm certainly surprised at you. Tsk-tsk-tsk!"

"What do you mean by tsk-tsk-tsk?"

"Your moral training has been badly neglected. You plan marriage even while traveling about in the company of this woman you have with you."

Joy is a lady of the finest breeding, but she can be caught off-guard at times. This was one of the times. She said, "Listen here, you bald-headed jerk. Nobody calls me a woman--"

Uncle Peter was mildly interested. "Then if you aren't a woman, what--?"

I hastened to intervene. "You didn't let Joy finish, Uncle Peter. She no doubt would have added--'in that tone of voice.' And I think her attitude is entirely justified. Joy is a fine girl and my intended bride."

"Oh, why didn't you say so?"

"I supposed you would assume as much."

"My boy, I am a scientist. A scientist assumes nothing. But I wish to apologize to the young lady and I hope you two will be very happy."

"That's better," Joy said, with only a shade of truculence.

"And now," Uncle Peter went on. "It would be very thoughtful of you to leave. I am working on a serum which will have a great deal to do with changing the course of civilization. In fact it is already perfected and must be tested. It is a matter of utmost urgency to me that I be left alone to arrange the tests."

"I am afraid," I said, "that you will have to delay your work a few hours. It is not every day that your nephew gets married and in all decency you must attend the wedding and the reception. I don't wish you to be inconvenienced too greatly, but--"

Uncle Peter's mind had gone off on another track. He stopped me with a wave of his hand and said, "Homer, are you still running around with those bums from the wrong side of town?"

"Who said anything about jail? I'm going to Tibet."

"*Tibet!* Uncle Peter! I won't allow it. You must stay here and face the music."

"The music is in Tibet, Homer. That's one of the reasons I'm going there. To a monastery high in Himalayas. There are some wonderful men there I've always wanted to meet--yogis who have such control over natural laws that they can walk on water and move straight through solid walls."

"But, Uncle Peter! If you want to go to Tibet, you should have thought of it before. It's too late now. You've committed murder."

"Bosh! I haven't killed anyone. The serum I discovered is one of transition, not murder. It causes the stepping-up of the human physical structure into an infinitely higher rate of vibration. Two controls are distilled into it. One is a timer that sets off the catalysis, and the other is a directive element based upon higher mathematics which allows the creator of the serum to direct the higher vibratory residue of the physical form to be put down at any prearranged point on the globe before the reforming element takes effect."

Joy said, "Oh, my painted G-string!"

I strove to absorb all this. "You mean those people weren't destroyed?"

Joy was quicker on the reaction. "Of course. I couldn't picture Uncle Peter as a killer somehow. He merely picked them up here and set them down in Tibet. Can't you understand? He just explained it to you."

Of course I didn't want to admit my mental haziness to Joy, so I skipped hastily over it and pointed an accusing finger at Uncle Peter. "But why couldn't you have conducted your experiments on a higher plane. Why did you have to consort with law-breakers?"

* * *

Joy had apparently lost interest. She planted a wifely kiss on my cheek and started toward the door. "I'm going back to Joe's Tavern," she said. "It's more fun there. When you get all this straightened out, come on over."

As Bag Ears disappeared into the street, there were tears in Joy's eyes. "He's dreaming of his bells," she murmured. "I think that's beautiful." She held up her glass. "May he find his bells. Pour me another drink."

I poured two and we drank to that.

"May we all someday find our bells," Joy said with emotion, and I was delighted to find my wife a girl of such deep sentiment. "Pour me another."

I did. "Your quotation was wrong, sweetheart," I said. "Don't you mean, 'May we all find our Shangri-La?'"

"Of course. Let's drink to it."

We drank to it and were rudely interrupted by the barkeep who said, "I hope you got some dough. That stuff ain't water."

I gave him a ten-dollar bill and--with a heavy heart--turned to Uncle Peter. "Come, Uncle," I said gently. "We might as well get it over with."

"Get what over with?"

"Our trip to the police station. You must give yourself up of course."

"What for?"

I shook my head sadly. Uncle Peter would never fry. His mind was obviously out of joint. "For murder."

He looked at Joy. He said, "Oh, my broken test tube! There is no need of--"

"I know it will be hard for them to convict you without *corpus delicti*, but you must confess."

"Let's all go over to my laboratory."

"If you wish. You may have one last visit there."

"Excellent--one last visit." He smiled and I wondered if I saw a certain craftiness behind it.

Cora voiced no objections, seemingly anxious to stay near Uncle Peter. When we got to his laboratory, he went on through into his living quarters and took a suit case from the closet.

"What are you going to do?"

"Pack my things."

"Oh, of course. You'll need some things in jail."

* * *

These words from anyone but Uncle Peter would have been insulting. But Uncle Peter is the most impersonal man I have known. He never bothers insulting people for any personal satisfaction. When he asks a question, he always has a reason for so doing.

By way of explaining Uncle Peter's question, let me say that I am a firm believer in democracy and I demonstrate this belief in my daily life. More than once I have had to apologize for the definitely unsocial attitude of my family. They have a tendency to look down on those less fortunate in environment and financial stability than we Nicholases.

I, however, do not approve of this snobbishness. I cannot forget that a great-uncle, Phinias Nicholas, laid the foundations of our fortune by stealing cattle in the days of the Early West and selling them at an amazing profit.

I personally am a believer in the precept that all men are created equal. I'll admit they don't remain equal very long, but that is beside the point.

In defense of my convictions, I have always sought friends among the underprivileged brotherhood sometimes scathingly referred to as bums, tramps, screwballs, and I've found them, on the whole, to be pretty swell people.

But to get back--I answered Uncle Peter rather stiffly. "My friends are my own affair and are not to be discussed."

"No offense. My question had to do with an idea I got rather suddenly. Will any of these--ah, friends, be present at the reception?"

"It is entirely possible."

"Then I could easily infiltrate--"

"You could what?"

"Never mind, my boy. It is not important. I'll be indeed honored to attend your wedding."

At that moment there was a muffled commotion from beyond a closed door to our left; the sound of heels kicking on the panel and an irate female voice:

"They gone yet? There's cobwebs in this damn closet--and it's dark!"

Uncle Peter had the grace to blush. In fact he could do little else as the closet door opened and a young lady stepped forth.

In the vulgar parlance of the day, this girl could be described only as a dream-boat. This beyond all doubt, because the trim hull, from stem to stern, was bared to the gaze of all who cared to observe and admire. She was a blonde dream-boat--and most of her present apparel had come from lying under a sun lamp.

Uncle Peter gasped. "Cora! In the name of all decency--"

Joy, with admirable aplomb, laughed gayly. "Why, Uncle Peter! So it's that kind of research! And no wonder it's top-secret!"

Uncle Peter's frantic attention was upon the girl. "I was never so mortified--"

She raised her hair-line eyebrows. "Why the beef, Winky? Aren't we among friends?"

"Never mind! Never mind!" Uncle Peter fell back upon his dignity--having nothing else to fall back on--and said, "Homer--Joy--this is Cora, my ah--assistant. She was ah--in the process of taking a shower, and--"

Joy reached forth and pinched Uncle Peter's flaming cheek. "It's all right, uncle dear. Perfectly all right. And I'll bet this chick can give a terrific assist, too."

I felt the scene should be broken up at the earliest possible moment. I steered Joy toward the door. I said, "We'll see you later, then, Uncle Peter."

"And you too, Miss Courtney," Joy cut in. "Make Winky bring you and don't bother to dress. The reception is informal."

I got Joy out the door but I couldn't suppress her laughter. "Winky," she gasped. "Oh, my orange and purple garter-belt!"

* * *

We will proceed now, to the reception, which was given by my Aunt Gretchen in the big house on Shore Drive. We were married at City Hall and--after a delicious interlude while the cab was carrying us cross-town--we arrived there, a happy bride and groom.

But he did not draw a gun. Instead, while I stared wide-eyed, he raised Uncle Peter's vial to his lips and drank the contents.

I will not bore you with details of his going *pop*. If you have read this letter carefully, the details are not necessary.

I turned and retraced my steps, realizing Hands McCaffery had been vicious and defiant to the last. Rather than submit to arrest, he had taken the wild animal's way out.

I arrived back in Joe's Tavern to find the barkeep had been revived and bore none of us any ill-will. This no doubt because of Joy's persuasive abilities. Cora was sulking in a booth and Uncle Peter was patching the gash on the barkeep's head.

* * *

I entered with a heavy heart, realizing, as a good citizen, I must turn my own uncle over to the police. But there was an interlude before I would be forced into this unpleasant task. This interlude was furnished by Bag Ears. After I acquainted the group with the news of how Hands had taken the easy way out, Bag Ears' face took on a rapt, silent look of happiness. He was staring at Joy. He said, "Pretty--very pretty!"

Joy said, "Thank you."

Bag Ears said, "Pretty--pretty--pretty."

Joy looked at me. "What's eating *him*?"

There was a bottle on the bar together with some glasses. I stepped over and poured myself a drink. I certainly needed it. "Bag Ears isn't referring to you, dear. He's alluding to his bells. He's hearing them again."

"Oh, my sky-blue panties! Pour me a drink."

I complied. "You see, Bag Ears is somewhat punch-drunk from his years in the prize ring. I've seen this happen before."

We sipped our brandy and watched Bag Ears move toward the door.

"That's the way it always is. When he hears the bells, he feels a terrific urge to go forth and search for them. But he always ends up at Red Nose Tessie's and she takes him home. It's no use trying to stop him. He'll hang one on you."

to go with us. He took one look at the prone barkeep, muttered, "Geez!" and headed for the back door.

"Get him," Joy yelled. "Maybe we can make a deal with the cops to fry Hands in place of Uncle Peter!"

I started after Hands and as I went through the back door I heard Uncle Peter protesting feebly. "I say now. This is all uncalled-for--"

"Don't let him get away!" Joy called. "He's got the serum!"

That cleared things up somewhat and made me even more resolute. Evidently we had interrupted Uncle Peter and Hands in the process of doing away with all the latter's enemies. With that bottle in his possession, he was a menace to the entire population of the city. A man of his type would certainly have far more enemies than friends.

Outside in the dark alley, I was guided only by footsteps. The sound of Hands' retreat told me he was moving up the smelly passageway toward Division Street. I went after him.

I am no mean sprinter, having won laurels in college for my fleetness in the two-twenty and the four-forty, and I had no trouble in overtaking the little assassin. We were fast approaching the alley entrance where I would have had the aid of street lights and could have swiftly collared McCaffery whose heavy breathing I could now hear--when disaster struck in the form of a painful obstacle. It was heavy and it caught me just below the knees.

I tripped and fell headlong, plowing along a couple of yards of slippery brick pavement on my face. I got groggily to my feet and shook my head to clear my brain. From the deposits of old eggs, rejected tomatoes and other such refuse in my face and ears, I gathered that I had tripped over a garbage can.

This delayed me for some moments. When I finally staggered out into Division Street, a strange sight met my eyes. Hands McCaffery had been apprehended. It seemed that the police had orders to pick him up because two uniformed patrolmen had him backed against the wall and were approaching him with caution. They had him covered and were taking no chances of his pulling a belly gun on them.

I am indeed fortunate to have wooed and won such a talented and beautiful girl as Joy. A graduate of Vassar, she is an accomplished pianist, a brilliant conversationalist, and is supercharged with a vitality and effervescence which--while they sometimes manifest in disturbing ways--are wonderful to behold. But more of that later.

The reception began smoothly enough. The press was satisfactorily represented, much to Aunt Gretchen's gratification. Joy and I stood at the door for a time, receiving. Then, tiring of handshakes and congratulations, we retired to the conservatory to be alone for a few minutes.

Or so we thought.

Almost immediately, Aunt Gretchen ferreted us out. Aunt Gretchen has long-since lost the smooth silhouette for which the Nicholas women are noted. She has broadened in all departments and she came waddling along between banks of yellow roses in a manner suggesting an outraged circus tent.

"Homer," she called. "Homer!"

I reluctantly took my hands away and answered her.

"Oh, there you are! Homer--I want an explanation."

"An explanation of what?"

"There is a person at the door who calls himself Bag Ears Mulligan. He has the audacity to claim you invited him to--to this *brawl* as he terms it."

I must here explain--with sorrow--that my Aunt Gretchen is a snob. There is no other term for it. It has gotten to be such a habit with her that any friend of mine is automatically a person to be looked down on.

And Bag Ears Mulligan is one of my dearest friends. Of course I had invited him to my wedding, and felt honored by his attendance. Bag Ears is a habitue of one of the less glittering places I frequent in search of lasting fellowship--Red Nose Tessie's Bar, to be exact. A place of dirty beer glasses but of warm hearts and sincere people.

"I'll see this man, Aunt Gretchen," I said with calm dignity. "He is to be an honored guest. While somewhat rugged in appearance,

Bag Ears has a sensitive nature and must be treated with understanding."

Aunt Gretchen's lips quivered. "Homer--I'm through--absolutely and finally through! You can get someone else to handle your next wedding reception. Hold it in a barn or a stable. Never again in my house."

After this tactless outburst, Aunt Gretchen came about and sailed out of the conservatory. Joy and I followed wordlessly.

Upon arriving at the front door, we found Aunt Gretchen had spoken the truth. Bag Ears was waiting there. He had been herded into a corner by Johnson, Aunt Gretchen's stuffed shirt of a butler, who was standing guard over him.

Bag Ears grinned happily when he caught sight of me and I smiled reassuringly. While Bag Ears is not too richly endowed with good looks, he has a great heart and at one time was possessed of a lightning-fast brain. However, he took a great deal of punishment during his unsuccessful climb toward the lightweight title, and his brain has been slowed down to the point where it sometimes comes to a complete halt. His features reflect the fury of a hundred battles in the squared ring. They are in a sad state, his ears particularly. They hang wearily downward like the leaves of a dying cabbage plant.

Also, Bag Ears has fallen into the misfortune of hearing bells at various times--bells that exist only in his poor, bewildered mind. But he is cheerful and warm-hearted nonetheless.

He said, "Homer, this character says I should o' brung along my invite. But I don't remember you givin' me one. You just ast me to come."

"That is true," I returned, "and you are most welcome. You may go, Johnson." I gave the butler a cold look and he stalked away.

* * *

I then introduced Bag Ears to my new bride. "This is Joy. I am certainly a lucky man, Bag Ears. Isn't she the most beautiful thing you ever saw?"

"Your not fooling, chum."

He raised the glass and grinned. "Salud."

I got to the bar just in time to knock the glass out of his hairy paw. He grunted, "What the hell--oh, a wise guy, huh?" and started over the bar.

I yelled, "It's murder. They're trying to poison you!"

"Oh, a crackpot!"

He came toward me, shaking off Uncle Peter's restraining hand. I took a step backward, thankful he was coming in wide open because I had seen few tougher-looking characters in my lifetime.

I set myself and sent a short knockout punch against his chin. It was a good punch. Everything was in it. It sounded like a sledge hammer hitting a barn door.

The barkeep shook his head and came on in. I stepped back and slugged him again. No result.

Then Joy slipped into the narrow space between us. She was smiling and, with her upturned waiting lips, she was temptation personified. The barkeep dropped his hands, paralyzed by her intoxicating nearness.

She said, "Hello, Iron Head. How about you and I taking a little vacation together somewhere."

He grinned and reached for her. This, it developed, was a mistake, because Joy reached for him at the same time. She lifted his two-hundred-odd pounds as though he were a baby and he went flying across the room like a projectile. He hit a radiator head-on and lay still.

Again I was stupefied. It seemed I knew nothing at all about this girl I'd married. She smiled at me and said, "Don't be alarmed, angel. There's an explanation. You see, my mother gave me money for piano lessons and I invested most of it in a course of ju-jitsu. I thought an occasion like this might arise sometime. Do you want to take McCaffery, or shall I do it? I doubt if he'll come to the station peaceably."

But Hands McCaffery was not to be caught flatfooted. Without his machine gun he was just an ordinary little man who didn't want

"Give!"

"All right! All right. Pete's meeting Hands at--ouch--Joe's--ouch--Tavern on Clark Street. Ouch! Cut it out, will you?"

And it was here that I detected a trace of sadism in my lovely wife. "All right," she said regretfully. "Sit up. Gee, but you talk easy."

"Just where is this tavern?" I asked. "And what is the purpose of the meeting?"

Cora's resistance was entirely gone. "In the 2800 block. Pete went there to get some money from Hands to skip town with."

Joy now spoke with relish. "Lying again. I'll have to--"

"I ain't lying!"

"Don't give us that! Uncle Peter is wealthy. He doesn't need Hands' money. Come here, baby."

"Wait, Joy," I cut in hastily. "The young lady may be telling the truth. Uncle Peter is always short of funds. You see, Aunt Gretchen holds the purse strings in our family and Uncle Peter is always overdrawn on his allowance."

"Then let's get to that tavern and find out what's going on."

It took ten minutes to reach the tavern; a standard gin mill with a red neon sign proclaiming its presence. We quitted the car and I entered first, Joy bringing Cora along with a certain amount of force, and Bag Ears bringing up the rear.

And I was just in time to prevent another murder.

As I came through the door, I saw Hands and Uncle Peter leaning casually against the bar. There was no one else in the place. The barkeep was facing his two customers and there were three glasses set before them. The barkeep held one in his hand.

Uncle Peter had just finished spiking the barkeep's drink with a clear fluid from a small vial. Uncle Peter said, "It's something new I invented. Pure dynamite. You haven't lived until you've tasted my elixir."

* * *

Hands said, "Go ahead. Drink it. I want to make sure I wasn't seeing things back at that dame's house."

The barkeep said, "Pure dynamite, huh?"

Bag Ears was of course impressed. "Golly, what gams!" he breathed. His eyes traveled upward and he said, "Golly, what--what things and stuff." He came finally to her face. "Baby, you got it!"

Joy was rocked back on her heels. Caught unawares by the open admiration in his eyes, she whispered, "Oh, my ancient step-ins!"

But she rallied like a thoroughbred and gave Bag Ears a dazzling smile. "I'm delighted, Mr. Mulligan. Homer's friends are my friends--I think--and I'm sure everything will turn out all right."

Bag Ears said, "Lady--leave us not be formal. Just call me Bag Ears."

"Of course--Bag Ears--leave us be chummy."

He now turned his remarks to me and evinced even more intense admiration for my bride. "She reminds me of a fast lightweight--the most beautiful sight in the world."

"Let us repair to the conservatory," I said, "where we can have a quiet chat." I said this because I felt that some of the other guests might not be as tactful as Joy and might make Bag Ears feel uncomfortable. Aunt Gretchen had rudely vanished without waiting for an introduction and the actions of the hostess often set the pattern for those of the guests.

As we moved toward the rear of the house, Joy took my arm and said, "Speaking of being stripped down for action--what do you suppose happened to Uncle Peter? I haven't seen him around anywhere."

"He gave his word, so I'm sure he'll come."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"I don't understand."

"I don't quite understand myself, but I feel uneasy. I remember the calculating look in his eye when he suddenly agreed to honor us with his presence. There was something too eager about that look. And his asking whether any of your friends would be here."

"Uncle Peter is basically a good follow. I think he envies me my wide contacts."

"Maybe."

"If he seemed a trifle peculiar, you must remember that he is a scientist. Even now he is engaged in some important project--some

experiment--"

"I know--we met her."

"Joy! Please!"

"--but I wouldn't think he'd have to experiment at his age. I'd think--"

I put my hand firmly over her mouth. "Darling--we have a guest--Bag Ears--"

"Oh, of course."

Safely hidden behind a bank of tropical grass, I took Joy in my arms and kissed her. Bag Ears obligingly looked in the other direction. But Joy didn't quite get her heart into it. She seemed preoccupied--I might almost say, bewildered.

"Bag Ears," she whispered to no one in particular, "and what did you say the lady's name was? Oh--I remember--Red Nose Tessie." She pondered for a moment and then smiled up at me dreamily. "Darling--I never realized what a versatile person you are--"

Bag Ears perked up. "Verseetile? You ain't just a hootin', babe. And *tough*. You should see his right."

I strove to quiet him down. "Never mind, Bag Ears--"

But Joy evinced great interest. "Tell me--"

"Babe--the kid could be the next heavyweight champ in a breeze. I mind me one night a monkey comes into the tavern rodded--"

Joy held up a hand. "Just a moment. I don't like to appear stupid, but--"

"A moke wid a heater--a goon wid a gat."

"Oh--you mean a man with a gun."

"Sure--that's what I said. Anyhow, this droolie makes a crack about Tessie's beak--"

"An insult relative to her nose?"

"Sure--sure. And Tessie's hot to kiss him wid a bottle when he pulls the iron."

"Imagine that," Joy said, and I felt a slight shiver go through her body.

"Then Homer here, gets off his stool and says very polite-like, 'That remark, sir, was in bad taste and entirely uncalled-for. I be-

The blonde looked wonderingly at Joy. "Is this guy for real?"

Joy reestablished her hold upon the blonde's anatomy. "Never mind that. All we want from you is answers. Where did Uncle Peter go? Tell me!"

"Nuts to you!" Cora replied. "He doesn't want you bothering him."

Joy applied pressure. Cora squealed but remained mute. I stepped forward. "Darling," I said grimly. "This sort of thing is not in your line. I realize this woman must be made to talk so I will take over. It will be distasteful to me, but duty is duty."

I got a withering look from my dear wife. "Distasteful? In a pig's eye! You'd like nothing better than to get your hands on her--by way of duty of course."

"Joy!"

"Don't Joy me." And with an expert twist, she flipped the struggling Cora out of the roadster, goose-stepped her across and into the back seat of the Cadillac.

"You and Bag Ears get in and start driving--slow. I'll have some answers in a minute or two."

We did as we were told and I eased the car away from the curb. I had to watch the road, of course, so could not turn to witness what was going on rearward. In the mirror I saw flashes of up-ended legs and, from time to time, other and sundry anatomical parts that flew up in range only to vanish again as the grim struggle went on.

Bag Ears, however, turned to witness the bringing forth of the answers. His first comment was, "Oh boy!"

Joy was breathing heavily. She said, "Okay, babe. Talk, or I'll put real pressure on this scissors!"

Bag Ears said, "Man oh man!"

Joy said, "Quit gaping, you moron! I'm back here too."

I gave Bag Ears a stern admonition to keep his eyes front.

"Give," Joy gritted.

"Ouch! No!"

"Give!"

Cora gave forth an agonized wail. Then an indignant gasp. "Cut it out! You fight dirty! That ain't fair!"

The blonde seemed puzzled. "You're off your crock! Pete's okay. He just entered into a little private deal to help out Hands McCaffery. I don't see where it's anybody's business, either. If he wanted your help he'd ask for it!"

It made my blood run cold to hear this girl refer so casually to the wholesale slaughter that had been going on around us. I strove to find words to shame her, but Joy cut in. And apparently my dear wife was more interested, at the moment, in the details of the affair rather than the morals involved.

"McCaffery and Uncle Peter haven't got any deal," she said to the blonde. "You lie as easily as you undress. If they had an arrangement to knock off all those parties at our wedding reception, how come McCaffery brought a machine gun along?"

The blonde had an answer. "Hands was a little doubtful. He didn't think Pete could do it--blow people into thin air just from something they et. He was willing to go along with the gag but he wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to rub out the Zinsky gang--or as many as he could hit--if the gimmick didn't click. That's why he brought the Tommy--just in case."

Joy turned to me. "It fits," she said. "I've been trying to give Uncle Pete the benefit of every doubt, but it looks as though you've got a mad dog sniffing at the trunk of your family tree."

* * *

Cora frowned. "You've got him all wrong. He's not--"

I continued with the questioning. "You are denying that Uncle Peter had anything to do with this deadly serum that disintegrates people before one's eyes?"

"I'm *not* denying it."

"Then it follows that your moral sense is so badly corroded you no longer consider murder to be a crime--"

"Now listen here!"

"In law," I went on, "the victim's standing in society is not taken into consideration where murder is involved. It is just as wrong in the eyes of the law to murder Cement Mixer Zinsky as the pastor of the First Congregational Church."

lieve an apology is in order.' And the monkey standing there with the gat in his mitt. What Homer meant was the jerk'd cracked out o' turn and to eat his words fast."

"I gathered that was what he meant."

"But the screwball raises the hardware and--wham--Homer hits him. What a sock! The goon back-pedals across the room and into a cardboard wall next to the door marked 'ladies'. He busts right through the wall and lands in a frail's lap inside who's--"

"Powdering her nose?"

"That's right! What a sock!"

* * *

Joy's eyes were upon mine.

"Darling! I didn't have the least idea. Why, it's going to be wonderful! Never a dull moment!"

I kissed my bride, after which she said, "I think I could do with a drink, sweetheart."

"Your wish is my command."

I got up and started toward the liquor supply inside the house. Joy's soft call stopped me.

"What is it, angel?" I inquired.

"Not just a drink, sweet. Bring the bottle."

I went into the kitchen and got a bottle of brandy. But upon returning, I discovered I'd neglected to bring glasses.

But Joy took the bottle from me in a rather dazed manner, knocked off the neck against a leg of the bench and tipped the bottle to her beautiful lips. She took a pull of brandy large enough to ward off the worst case of pneumonia and then passed the bottle to Bag Ears.

"Drink hearty, pal," she murmured, and sort of sank down into herself.

I never got my turn at the bottle because, just at that moment, Aunt Gretchen came sailing like a pink cloud along the conservatory walk. She was no longer the old familiar Aunt Gretchen. Her eyes were glazed and her face was drawn and weary.

Bag Ears looked up politely and asked, "Who's the fat sack?"

I was hoping Aunt Gretchen hadn't heard the question because she would fail to understand that while his words were uncouth, he had a heart of gold and meant well. And I don't think she *did* hear him. She didn't even hear Joy, who replied,

"That's the dame that owns the joint."

Aunt Gretchen fixed her accusing eyes upon me to the exclusion of everyone else. Her button of a chin quivered. "Please understand, Homer--I'm not criticizing. Things have gotten past that stage. I've merely come to report that the house is filling up with an astounding assortment of characters. Johnson resigned a half-hour ago. But before he left, he suggested a man who could handle the situation far better than he himself. A man named Frank Buck."

"But, my dear aunt," I protested. "There must be some mistake. I did not invite any unusual people to this reception. I issued only three invitations. I invited Willie Shank, who could not come because of a dispute with the police over the ownership of a car he was driving yesterday; John Smith, who could not come because this is the day he reports to the parole board, and my good friend Bag Ears Mulligan."

"How did you happen to overlook Red Nose Tessie?" Joy asked.

"The poor woman is emotional. She does not enjoy wedding receptions. She weeps."

"So does Aunt Gretchen," Joy observed.

Aunt Gretchen was indeed weeping--quietly, under the blanket of reserve with which the Nicholases cover their emotions. I was about to comfort her when she turned and fled. I started to run after her but decided against it and returned to Joy.

"Perhaps," I said, "we had better investigate this strange turn of events. Possibly our reception has been crashed by some undesirable persons."

"Impossible," Joy replied. "But it might be fun to look them over. Shall we have a quick one first--just to stiffen the old spine a bit?"

It sounded like a good suggestion so we stiffened our spines with what was left in the bottle, and quitted the conservatory.

* * *

We were in a quiet residential section now, so there was no one to interfere as Joy skillfully forced the roadster to the curb. I jumped out and leaped swiftly toward the driver's door.

* * *

The blonde sat behind the wheel with a sullen look on her face. "What is this?" she asked. "A stickup?"

"Don't be vulgar," I replied. "We are here to take charge of my uncle. This weird slaughter must cease!"

Joy was by my side now, but Bag Ears hung back as though somewhat worried about the possible consequences of our act.

I heard him muttering: "What if he can just shoot the stuff in your eye maybe? What if a guy doesn't have to swallow it--?"

Joy's gayety was again coming to the surface. Her eyes were bright and I was struck by the fact that she seemed to thrive on this sort of thing. "Hello, Blondy," she said. "Get out from behind--"

The blonde's eyes threw sparks. "Who you think you're talking to, you lard--"

"Not Truman," Joy said. "Now get--"

I seized Joy's wrist. "Angel! He's gone! Uncle Peter isn't here!" I stared at Joy in horror. "Do you suppose he inadvertently chewed some of his own gum?"

Joy did not reply. She shouldered me aside, opened the car door and surprised me by getting a very scientific grip on Cora.

"Okay--where is he? What did you do with him?"

"He's not here!"

"Any fool can see that. Did he blow up?"

"Of course not. He went to keep a date."

The blonde jerked herself loose from Joy's hold and was sullenly straightening her clothing. "I don't see why you and Pretty Boy have to stick your big noses into this. It's none of your business."

"We're making it our business."

"You don't seem to realize," I said stiffly, "that Uncle Peter is very dear to me. He has performed some horrible deeds, and as his loving nephew--"

But I did not connect. As my fist completed but half its lethal orbit, the officer blew up in my face! He went *pop*, just as so many others had gone *pop* at our wedding reception; his entire anatomy flying in all directions, to turn into a cloud of sooty smoke and mix with the elements.

I was frozen with consternation. But not Joy. Instantly she dragged me back into the car. "Don't you get it? Uncle Peter gave him that stick of gum!"

"You're damn right!" Bag Ears stated. "The old monkey's gone clear off his trolley. Maybe he plans to clean out the whole town!"

Joy, her eyes slitted, was weaving in and out of traffic so as not to lose track of the blue roadster. "It's as plain as your nose! He's hand in glove with McCaffery and that blonde is bird-dogging him around town and pointing out McCaffery's enemies. Uncle Peter is knocking them off like clay pigeons."

I was amazed at this revelation, but was also thunderstruck by the underworld jargon flowing so easily from Joy's luscious lips. "Angel," I gasped. "Where did you learn to talk like that? Those underworld terms!"

"I read all the true detective magazines I can get my hands on," she said. "They're good fun, but that's beside the point. We've got to nail Uncle Peter and nail him quick, or Aunt Gretchen will ring up a nice big zero in the social world."

"How about nailing him without me?" Bag Ears suggested. "It's nine o'clock and Red Nose Tessie never likes to miss none of the show."

"I'm sure, Bag Ears," Joy said, "that Tessie would sympathize with our efforts to keep Uncle Peter out of the electric chair."

"I doubt it," he replied dubiously. "Tessie's brother got burned in Frisco for knocking over a bank clerk and Tessie never even attended. Let him fry in his own grease was what she said about it."

"Nevertheless," Joy said, "I have no time to stop and let you out."

A fast, fifteen-block chase followed. Once we lost the blue roadster completely, but, by sheer luck, picked it up three blocks further on as it came wheeling out of a side street.

Back in the house, one thing became swiftly apparent. We had guests who were utter strangers to me. But it was Bag Ears who summed up the situation with the briefest possible statement. "Jees!" he ejaculated. "It's a crooks' convention!"

"You can identify some of these intruders?"

"If you mean do I know 'em, the answer is without a doubt, pal. Somehow, the whole Cement Mixer Zinsky mob has infiltered into the joint."

"Cement Mixer Zinsky," Joy murmured. "Another of those odd names."

"It's on account of he invented something. Zinsky was the first gee to think up a very novel way of getting rid of people that crowd you. He got the idea to mix up a tub of cement--place the unwanted character's feet in same and then throw the whole thing into the lake. Result--no more crowding by that guy."

"He was the first one who thought of it? A sort of trail blazer."

"Of course Cement Mixer is a big shot now and his boys take care of things like that. But sometimes he goes along to mix the cement--just to keep his hand in you might say."

"A sentimentalist no doubt."

"No doubt," Bag Ears agreed.

I patted Joy's hand and said, "Don't be alarmed, darling. I will take care of everything."

The situation was definitely obnoxious to me. Tolerance of one's fellow men is one thing, but this was something entirely different. These people had come uninvited to our festive board and were of the criminal element, pure and unadulterated by any instincts of honesty or decency. And it made me angry to see them wading into Aunt Gretchen's liquor supply as though the stuff came out of a pump.

They were easy to count, these hoodlums, segregated as they were. The more respectable of the guests who had not already left, were clustered together in one corner of the living room, possibly as a gesture toward self-protection. None of these elite were making any effort to approach the buffet or the portable bar at the other side of the room. And in thus refraining, they showed a supe-

rior brand of intelligence. Under present circumstances any attempt to reach the refreshments would have been as dangerous as crossing the Hialeah race track on crutches.

In fact, as I surveyed the scene, one brave lady made a half-hearted attempt to cross over and spear a sandwich off the corner of the buffet. She was promptly shoved out of range by a lean, hungry-looking customer in a pink shirt, who snarled, "Scram, Three Chins! You're overfed now."

Unhooking Joy's dear fingers from my arm, I said, "You will pardon me, but it is time for action. Bag Ears will see that you are not harmed."

I started toward the buffet, or rather toward the crowd of male and female hoodlums who completely blocked it from my sight. But Bag Ears snatched me by the sleeve and whispered,

"For cri-yi, Homer! Don't be a fool! This mob is loaded wid hardware. They don't horse around none. Start slugging and they'll dress you in red polka dots. Better call in some law."

I shook my head firmly and pulled Bag Ears' hand from my sleeve. But, his attention now turned in another direction, he held on even harder and muttered,

"Jeeps! I'm seeing things!"

I glanced around and saw him staring wide-eyed at the entrance hall, his battered mouth ajar. I followed his eyes but could see nothing unusual. Only the hall itself, through an arched doorway, and the lower section of the staircase that gave access to the second floor of the house. It appeared to be the least-troubled spot in view. I frowned at Bag Ears.

"Maybe I've gone nuts," he said, "but I'll swear I just saw a face peeking down around them stairs."

"Whose face?"

"Hands McCaffery's face! That's whose!"

"And who is Hands McCaffery?"

Bag Ears looked at me with stark unbelief. "You mean you don't know? Maybe your mom didn't give you the facts of life! Chum, they's two really tough monkeys in this town. One of them is Cement Mixer Zinsky and the other is Hands McCaffery. At the

"What'll we do?" Joy asked. "Do you want to try and keep the old goat out of jail or shall we let him go to the chair as he deserves?"

The possibility stunned me to a point where it was hard to think clearly. "Good Lord, Joy! Think of the scandal! I don't care about myself, but Aunt Gretchen would never live it down! She'd be black-balled at all her clubs and--"

"Then," Joy replied sweetly, "I'd suggest you get out and slug that cop quick and grab Uncle Peter before he makes a confession."

I had come to the cross-roads, so to speak. The necessity of a weighty decision lay upon my shoulders. Was blood thicker than water? Was I justified in breaking the law--assaulting an officer in order to keep my uncle from becoming a blot on the family name?

I decided, grimly, that one owed all to one's relatives and I was halfway out of the car. Then I paused. Uncle Peter did not seem to be making a confession at all. He chatted easily with the officer and indicated my Cadillac with a movement of his thumb. Something passed from his hand to the hand of the policeman and the latter looked toward us and scowled.

"Uncle Peter is pulling a fast one," Joy said. "The cop's coming after *us*!"

I was uncertain as how to proceed now. I watched the scowling policeman approach our car while Uncle Peter got back in with the blonde Cora and drove away.

"Are you going to hang one on him, sweetheart?" Joy asked.

"What--what do you recommend?"

"I've got a hunch that if you don't, we go to the pokey and Uncle Peter will be left free to blow up everybody in town."

I don't believe the officer meant to arrest us but at the moment my mind wasn't too clear and I accepted Joy's point of view.

I doubled my fist as the officer approached. He wasted no time in getting acquainted. He said, "How come you guys are tailing those guys? You figuring a stickup or something?"

It was now or never. I hunched my right shoulder and aimed a stiff knockout jolt at the officer's jaw. It wasn't too good a target because he had a lantern jaw and it was bobbing up and down as he munched on a wad of chewing gum.

Joy was weaving through traffic, trying to keep the roadster in sight. "Turn on the radio," she told me. "There might be some news."

I snapped the switch and we discovered there was news indeed; an evening commentator regaling the public with the latest:

"--an amazing mass phenomena which leading scientific minds have pronounced to be basically similar to the flying-saucer craze. Relative to that--you will remember--otherwise reliable citizens swore they saw space ships from other planets hovering over our cities spying on us.

"This phase of the hysteria takes an entirely different turn. It seems now that these otherwise entirely reliable citizens are seeing other citizens explode and vanish into thin air. The police and the newspapers have been deluged with frantic telephone calls. In the public interest, we have several persons here in the studio who claim to have seen this phenomena. Your commentator will now interview them over the air. You--you, sir--what is your name?"

"Sam--Sam Glutz."

"Thank you, Mr. Glutz. And will you tell the radio audience what you saw?"

"It wasn't nothing--nothing at all. That is--this guy was running down the street like maybe the cops was after him--I don't know. Then--there wasn't nothing."

"You mean the man disappeared?"

"He went pop, kind of--like a firecracker only not so loud--and then pieces of him flew all over and they disappeared and there wasn't nothing--nothing at all."

"Thank you, Mr. Glutz. And now this lady--"

"Turn it off," Joy snapped. "The blonde's pulling up."

* * *

This was evident to all three of us. "And by a cop yet," Bag Ears marveled. "Looks like they're going to give theirselves up."

It was Uncle Peter who got out of the car and approached the traffic officer standing at the intersection.

moment they're slugging it out to see which one gets to levy a head tax on the juke boxes in this section. It's a sweet take and neither boy will be satisfied with less than all. Seeing them both in one place is like seeing Truman and that music critic sit down at the piano together. And I know damn well that Hands is up on them stairs!"

"You are obviously overwrought. If I have this type of person sized up correctly, none of them would be dallying on the stairs. If this Hands person were here, he'd be at the buffet fighting for a helping of pickled beets and a gin wash. Pardon me--I have work to do."

But there was another interruption. I froze in sudden alarm when I realized Joy was no longer at my side. Just as I made this discovery, there was an upsurge of commotion at the bar; a commotion that went head and shoulders over the minor ones going on constantly. A short angry scream came to my ears, then a bull-voiced roar of agony.

* * *

The crowd at the buffet surged back and I saw a bucktoothed hooligan bent double, both hands gripping his ankle. Thick moans came from his lips.

And standing close to him was my Joy. But a new Joy. A different Joy than I had ever seen. A glorious Joy, with her head thrown back, her teeth showing, and the light of battle in her eyes. She was holding a plate of jello in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other and was shouting in outraged dignity.

"Watch who you're shoving, you jug-headed gorilla! And keep your mitts out of the herring! Eat like a man or go back to the zoo!"

With that she placed an accurate kick against the offending character's other shine-bone and aimed the beer bottle at his skull.

Joy turned and smiled gayly. "He pushed me," she said. "It's the most wonderful wedding reception I ever attended. Have a pickle."

But surprise was piling upon surprise. Again I froze as a new phase of this horrible affair presented itself.

Uncle Peter.

Clad in apron and cap, he was behind the bar serving out drinks. This shook me to the core. It was a little like seeing Barney Baruch hit a three-bagger in Yankee Stadium and slide into third base.

But there he was, taking orders and dishing out drinks with an attitude as solemn and impersonal as an owl on a tree branch.

Also, he had an assistant--his blonde bombshell. She was fully dressed now and I was struck by the peculiar manner in which this peculiar team functioned.

Uncle Peter would mix a drink, glance at his wrist watch as he served it, then turn and whisper some sort of information to the girl. She noted it down in a small book and the routine was repeated.

At this exact moment, I felt a sharp dig in the ribs. This brought my attention back to Joy, who had done the digging.

"I'm still here, husband mine. Your bride--remember? Or are you waiting for that blonde hussy to start stripping?"

"Darling, I'm afraid you're not paying close attention to things of importance. Don't you see Uncle Peter there--serving drinks?"

"Of course I see him. What of it? If the old roue feels like dishing out a little alcohol to the boys, what--"

"It's absolutely beyond all conception. Uncle Peter never does anything without a good reason. And *this*--"

My reply was cut short by a cold, brutal voice that knifed through the room and put a chill on all present. "Hold it, everybody! Stand still and don't move a finger!"

Not a finger in the room moved. But all eyes turned toward the arched doorway leading to the entrance hall. In its exact center, there stood a man--a short man of slight stature. He stood spread-legged, wearing a colored kerchief over the lower part of his face. Only his eyes were visible--icy, black, narrowed. Those eyes seemed to be smiling a grim smile. Possibly his hidden teeth were bared in a snarl. But no one cared about that. Everyone was far more interested in the black Thompson sub-machine gun he held cradled over one arm.

He toyed with the trigger, knifing the room with quick side glances. He said, "Okay. Start sorting yourselves out. You, pretty

Which was entirely true. The roadster had made a turn on two wheels and was going west.

"But our honeymoon," I said, plaintively.

"Yeah," Bag Ears repeated, "what about our--your honeymoon?"

Joy's eyes were sparkling. She turned them on me. The car lurched. She returned her eyes to the road. "Yes, darling. Our honeymoon! Isn't it wonderful?"

"But this isn't it! This isn't what people do on their honeymoons."

"Oh, you mean--but don't worry about that, darling. We'll have plenty of time for--"

"Lemme out o' here," Bag Ears moaned. "I got a date to take Red Nose Tessie to the movies."

Joy apparently did not hear him. "I wish we had all the parts to this puzzle. It looks as though somebody put somebody on the spot for a rubout. But it would seem that somebody else got the same idea but didn't know that somebody else was going to achieve the same result in a more spectacular way and--"

"I think you've figured it out most accurately."

"Some of it fits together. Uncle Peter was no doubt responsible for the Zinsky boys coming to our reception. We'll get the dope on that when we catch up with him. But the blonde must not have known what was going to happen, so she tipped Hands off that he could find the whole Zinsky mob at the reception. He decided it would be a good place to settle certain matters of his own."

"But why did Uncle Peter want them there?"

Joy glanced at me with love in her eyes. "Darling, we're going to be wonderful companions through life, but most of the fun will be strictly physical. Mental exercises aren't your forte."

"When Red Nose Tessie makes a date with a guy," Bag Ears said, "she expects the guy to keep it."

"The blonde Cora is no doubt heading for a rendezvous with Hands McCaffery," Joy went on. "And she's taking our dear uncle with her."

"Okay," Bag Ears replied. "So we mind our business and keep our noses clean and live a long time."

on Bag Ears' collar, grabbed Joy by the arm, and the three of us leaped behind a bush. The car rolled past us. We saw the blonde behind the wheel and Uncle Peter seated beside her, evidently still protesting the hasty exodus.

* * *

But the girl looked very sharp and businesslike; the way a girl would look who knew where she was going and why. The car picked up speed and swung north.

"I wonder," Joy murmured, "how Uncle Peter happened to select Hands McCaffery's girl friend as his assistant."

"She was a burlycue queen last time I heard of her," Bag Ears said. "Still is, I guess."

"That could explain it," I told Joy. "You see, Uncle Peter has--ah, facets to his personality. A tendency to admire women. Ah--"

"Women--period; isn't that what you mean?"

"Well, it would be perfectly logical for Uncle Peter to select an assistant from the stage of a burlesque theater."

"Enough of this," Joy snapped. "We're wasting time. Go get--oh, never mind! Wait here."

Joy was off in the direction of the garage and in no time at all she was back in my Cadillac convertible. As she sailed by I managed to hook a finger around the door handle and get a foot inside.

This was no mean feat, as I was also occupied in hauling Bag Ears along by the collar. I managed to deposit him in the seat beside Joy and squeeze in beside him.

"A burlycue queen, eh?" Joy was muttering. "Well, she's not so much! If she couldn't get her clothes off she'd starve to death."

"Darling," I said, "I don't think this is the sort of thing you should be doing. It's far too dangerous for a girl."

"Or anybody else," Bag Ears moaned. There was a bleak look on his face. "I don't like playing around with a guy like Hands McCaffery or friends of a guy like him. It's a good way to collect your insurance."

"She's heading for Higgins Drive," Joy observed.

boy, and the frail with the beer bottle--out of the line of fire." He motioned with the gun barrel and I drew Joy toward the wall.

"Now you, Cora--and old puddle-puss. Out of the way. And not a peep out of anybody."

No one was inclined to peep, and now the stage was set in a manner which seemed to satisfy the masked gunman. The Cement Mixer Zinsky crowd was clustered, cowering, around the buffet, staring at the machine gun as though it possessed the hypnotic eyes of a snake.

The situation was entirely plain. The masked man fully intended to break the law by committing murder in Aunt Gretchen's living room. The only moot point seemed to be whether he intended to slay the whole mob or be selective and cut down only important members. His trigger finger turned white at the knuckle.

Then Uncle Peter stepped forward to hold up a protesting hand. "You mustn't fire that weapon, my good fellow. Indeed you must not."

His matter-of-fact attitude, rather than his words, was what gave the gunman pause. He had hardly expected the display of completely impersonal bravery that Uncle Peter put on. The gunman asked, "Are you nuts, fiddlefoot?"

"Far from it. But you must not, under any circumstances, fire that gun. It will upset one of the most important experiments in the history of science. That experiment is now in progress."

"Look, brother. I came here to mow down Zinsky and his mob. And I'm mowing. The St. Valentine's deal in Chi'll look like a Sunday school binge after this one."

"Possibly it will not be necessary to use your weapon."

* * *

Uncle Peter's words, it seemed, were prophetic. At that exact moment, Cement Mixer Zinsky exploded. Not violently, or with any peril to those standing close by. Yet no other term can describe it. There was a soft pop--as though a large, poorly inflated balloon had been pricked with a pin. Zinsky seemed to go in all directions--fragments of him that is. Yet, as each fragment flew away from the

main body, it shriveled up so that there was no blood, and no bystander suffered the inconvenience of messed-up clothing. Just the *pop* and Zinsky expanded like a human bomb and then turned into dust.

As this phenomenon occurred I saw Uncle Peter nod with great satisfaction and consult a passage in the book presided over by his blonde assistant. He made a check mark in the book.

Then a second member of the buffet group went *pop*. The masked man stared in slack-jawed wonder. In fact his jaw went so slack the kerchief dropped away revealing his entire visage. He lowered his head and looked down at the gun in his hands; the gun that had not been fired.

Two more members of Zinsky's party followed him into whatever oblivion was achieved by going *pop* and dissolving into dust. Uncle Peter evinced bright interest and made two more check marks in the book.

The balance of the mob moved as one, but in many directions. They paid no attention to their own weapons as they headed for cover. One of their number exploded as he was halfway through the French doors. Uncle Peter checked him off and Bag Ears said, "Jeeps! tomorrow every juke box in town can play 'Nearer my God to Thee.'" Then he added, "Leave us blow this joint. Goofy things is happening here. I don't like it."

I was perspiring. I mopped my forehead. "A most amazing occurrence," I observed.

Joy was digging the fingers on one hand into my arm. I had been watching Hands McCaffery back crestfallen out of the living room and toward the front door, terrific slaughter having been accomplished without the firing of a shot. I turned my eyes now to follow the direction in which Joy pointed with her other hand and saw the blonde assistant hauling Uncle Peter through one of the French windows. He did not seem to be enthusiastic about leaving. In fact he appeared to argue quite strenuously against it, but her will prevailed and they disappeared out onto the lawn.

Now, with all the danger past, people began fainting in wholesale lots. Aunt Gretchen was resting comfortably with her head

braced against the brass rail of the portable bar. Those who didn't faint contributed variously intonated screams to the general unrest. And over all this brooded the dank clouds of acrid dust that had so lately been Cement Mixer Zinsky and certain members of his mob. Indeed, the scene took on a startling semblance to one of Dore's etchings in an old edition of Dante's Inferno.

"I repeat," Bag Ears bleated plaintively. "Leave us blow this joint. It ain't healthy here."

"He's right," Joy said. "A lot of explanation is wanting. There are some people we've got to catch up with. Let's go."

With that, she drew Bag Ears and me toward the French doors through which had recently passed some of the fastest moving objects in this or any other world. We made the flag-stone terrace above the drive where Bag Ears cordially grasped my hand and said,

"Well, it was a nice party, folks, and if I ever get spliced I'll sure give you a invite and I sure had a swell time and remember me to your aunt when she wakes up and--"

He was backing down the steps when Joy cut in with, "Bag Ears. Don't be so rude. You're in no hurry."

Bag Ears slowed down and allowed us to catch up with him. He gave us a sickly smile. "That's where you're wrong, babe."

"Bag Ears," Joy went on. "I heard you whisper to Homer that you know who that blonde is."

"What blonde? Me? I don't know nothing about no blonde nohow."

"Don't hedge. I mean the girl who was assisting Uncle Peter behind the bar. Who is she, really?"

"Oh--her. Everybody knows her. She's Hands McCaffery's moll. He likes 'em blonde and--"

Bag Ears was on the move again, striding in the direction of the gate. We hurried to catch up. "That babe's poison," he told us. "Any skirt that'd flock with Hands McCaffery is poison. I'll tell you kids what I'd do. If she drives south--I'd drive north. Goodbye now."

Just at that moment a big blue sports roadster pushed a bright chromium nose around the corner of the house. I took a firm grip