

**Imaginative
Tales #1**

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**WANT ROLICKING,
RIBALD ADVENTURE?
THEN MEET —**

TOFFEE

by Charles F. Myers





Imaginative Tales #1

First Edition
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Get set for the zaniest time of your life!

You've never before met a girl quite like -

TOFFEE

by Charles F. Myers

A complete book-length novel

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Chapter One

STANDING in the center of the basement laboratory, Marc Pillsworth held the vial up to the light and carefully poured out a small portion of the liquid so that the measure would be exact to the final degree.

Certainly, if he had known that the thing he measured was destruction, intrigue and madness, he would have hurled the container and its greenish contents to the floor. But he did not know, or even dream . . .

Assured that the amount was correct beyond question, he turned with the vial, poised it over the small vat on the work table, and poured.

Chaos!

The room screamed with brilliant light as the vat erupted and vengefully spat its contents to the four walls. The wall at the end of the room shuddered and shrugged away a great, irregular section of concrete so that the night gushed inside and swallowed up the light. Caught in the tide of the rushing darkness, Marc felt himself lifted helplessly from his feet, hurled upward to a great height, then plunged downward headfirst.

He fell endlessly, it seemed, down and down. And the dark-

ness droned in his ears and in the pit of his stomach as he fell—deeper and deeper into a region of black strangeness. Fear grew inside him, writhing, coiling and recoiling like a great venomous snake in the depths of his stomach. He opened his mouth to scream, but the sound died in his throat as the darkness rushed inside him and caused the metallic taste of panic.

And then it was over.

He had arrived, but how and where and for what precise reason he couldn't imagine. But, oddly, it didn't seem to matter. There was no reason for it to matter now. None that he could think of at the moment. His thoughts moved so slowly, it seemed.

It was as though he had lain down to rest, limply and gently, in a soft coolness. A languor seeped through him, and he fell easily under the spell of a dreamy quietude. What could any man conceivably have to worry about when he felt like this?

Marc stretched his arms up over his head, then brought them down and clasped his hands at the back of his neck. He was suddenly swept with a mood of utmost felicity. Everything was so unreasonably wonderful! Mother, he thought, pin a rose on me! He grinned happily at his own urbanity.

And then the darkness began to pulse with a faint light which grew steadily stronger with each successive impulse. Slowly, vague outlines began to rise out of the dimness and form a horizon. And then the light became a steady glow, and the forms moved in closer and were distinct. Marc sat up and looked about him with astonished eyes.

A SOFT emerald greenness stretched beneath him in all directions, lifting softly from rise to rise in the distance, gently sloping into cool shadows. Behind him a knoll rose above the others, and along its side stretched a grove of tall feathery trees which were graceful beyond description. A soft breeze coiled through the trees trailing a shimmering blue mist, like a scarf, capriciously upward and out of sight beyond the rise.

Everywhere was a muted beauty that did not trade in harsh contrasts. Strangely, Marc could not bring himself to wonder at his being here in this impossible region; it was enough that he simply *was* here. He lay back again and gazed into the sky, noting without surprise that the clear blueness was unmarked by any brash and orthodox ball of sun.

His mind wandered free, along heretofore untrodden paths

of melody, color and form. Had there ever been a time for making worrisome decisions, for seeking the multi-sided answer to the human equation? It didn't seem likely. This is Eternity, Marc thought, Eternity is like this. Throwing his arms free, he stretched his lean length to its utmost.

Eternity ended abruptly.

"Well, I'll be damned!" a voice said distinctly. "I'll be damned and broiled over a slow flame!"

Marc swung up into a sitting position, and his eyes raked the scene behind him. He froze.

Even in that first moment of confused surprise, Marc was quite well aware that no girl had ever eyed him with such undisguised pleasure—or frank intent. Certainly no girl as beautiful as this one, at any rate. Perhaps, if she'd just done something about getting dressed . . . He'd never seen a more top notch pair of legs.

Disconcertingly, the girl had chosen to place between herself and the raw elements only a slight green tunic of a consistency comparable to that of the airy mists on the slope. Considering this, Marc felt keenly that the situation called for, in full voice, a hasty apology and the quick slam of a door; he was terribly aware that there wasn't much more between him and this alarming newcomer than the atmosphere and a very pregnant silence. He couldn't understand how the girl could be so unconcerned about it.

"I'm sorry . . . !" Marc said quickly. "I . . ."

"I'm delighted," the girl said. She smiled softly, in a way that suggested great intimacy.

"I think I'll scream," Marc said weakly, "if you're not going to."

"I'm not going to," the girl said. "Not a chance."

Marc reflected erratically that this creature, in spite of her loveliness, was surely a traveler from hell; the fires of that region danced unmistakably on the surface of her soft red hair and in the depths of her vivid green eyes. His unbelieving gaze left her pert young face and helplessly traveled the course of her supple body. It was a disturbing trip; unhurried curves moved indolently outward and took their time about coming back. And then, as the girl started forward, Marc glanced up to discover that her gaze had followed his own. He looked away sharply and was aware of a feverish sensation about the neck and cheeks.

"There's no need to blush," the girl laughed.

"There's every need in the world," Marc said uneasily. "A crying need."

"If you're embarrassed," the girl said, "you've no one to blame but yourself."

Marc turned back, careful that his gaze went directly to her face and remained there. "Are you trying to suggest that it's my fault that you're naked?"

"Of course it is," the girl said. "It's all your fault, now that you bring it up. After all, I'm your exclusive creation. You dreamed me up, curve for curve, line for line, and if the job seems a little immoderate, you should have thought of that sooner." She moved lightly to where he was sitting and lowered herself to the ground beside him. She crossed one slender leg over the other in the manner of a gem broker displaying a stock of crown emeralds on a length of black velvet. "Not that I'm complaining, you understand. Personally, especially after your bug-eyed reaction, I regard myself as a pretty piece of merchandise."

MARC flinched slightly at the directness of this self-appraisal, but found it hard to find a point of disagreement. Though the girl's nearness had done much to impair his mental processes, he was all too aware of the merchandise at hand and an unspoken invitation to feel the superior quality of the goods. He breathed deeply and edged away.

"What do you mean, I dreamed you up?" he asked.

The girl sighed despairingly. "I had hoped," she murmured, "that we wouldn't have to waste time on anything so dull as pedigrees. However, I can see that you're the fretful type." She shrugged. "I'm Toffee." She leaned back and gazed at Marc from the corner of her eye with an expression that plainly indicated that she had revealed "all."

Marc tried to think. He repeated the name several times to himself. Toffee . . . Toffee . . . Toffee . . . It didn't mean a thing to him . . .

"Well?" the girl said.

"Well?" Marc echoed faintly. The look in her eyes made him warmly uncomfortable.

"If you're going to start making passes at me," the girl said, propping herself up on one elbow, "I think I ought to say right now that there will be the usual hollow pretense of re-

sistance." She smiled slowly. "But my heart won't be half in it, and that's a fact." She reached down and smoothed the tunic over the curve of her perfectly formed hip. "I just thought I'd mention it."

"Oh, my gosh!" Marc gasped. "Do I understand you correctly?"

"If you don't," the girl said with a twinge of impatience, "I might as well pick up my drawing pencils and go home. Why are we wasting all this time and energy?"

"Don't you have any repressions at all?" Marc asked.

"Of course not," the girl answered. "That's the way you made me."

"The way I made you?"

The girl nodded and leaned toward him. "I told you, I'm Toffee." She studied his face for a moment, then sat up. "Say, don't you recognize me?"

"I've never set eyes on you before in my life," Marc said emphatically. "Maybe that's because I don't habitually frequent burlesque theatres."

"Now, look here, you withered old goat!" A flame of annoyance flickered brightly in the green eyes. "Just where do you get off, making cracks like that? I've been in the back of your mind for years. You've dreamed me up, hip, thigh and shoulder, just the way I am. Don't think you're going to get away with pretending you're above it all now."

Realization blanked Marc's expression. "You mean you're a product of my subconscious mind?"

"Now you're getting it," the girl said. She swept a hand at the slopes behind them. "This is the valley of your mind. I've been languishing in this trap for years. If I've grown a little eager in the meantime, it's only natural. It puts an awful strain on a girl to have what I've got with no market for outlet. I'm just a bundle of frozen assets."

MARC smiled, and his manner became a bit less constrained. "Then all this is only a dream, and you're strictly an imaginary figure."

"You could put it that way," the girl nodded. However, there was a note of reservation in her voice. "Of course, it works two ways really. You might say that you're only in my imagination too. Up till now, that is." She surveyed his sprawled length with critical interest. "And, believe me, you're getting

all the best of the bargain. If I'm a dream come true, you're a moaning nightmare. I'll bet you're nothing but a mess of knobs and angles under those baggy clothes of yours."

"We'll just skip my knobs and angles," Marc said distantly, "if you don't mind."

"I do mind," the girl said, looking a trifle alarmed. "I mind like all getout. Why should I want to skip the awful things? Do you mean I'm to pick them up all in a string and play jump rope with them?" She shuddered delicately. "Is that what you have in mind?"

"Of course not," Marc said. "I merely mean to say that my knobs and angles do not constitute a matter for your concern in the least. I'll be more than happy if you'll just ignore my knobs and angles altogether. Just pretend they aren't there."

"What an awful picture that brings to mind," the girl said. "Without your knobs and angles you'd be even worse than you are already. Besides they're of utmost concern to me. Heaven knows they're nothing to boast about, or even mention, for that matter, but they're the only ones handy, and I've been waiting for years to get my hands on a working set of knobs and . . ."

"That's enough," Marc broke in. "I wish you'd stop going on about your sordid-minded desires. I don't want to hear about them. And get away from me!" He started violently. "Leave my knobs and angles alone!"

But it was too late to protest. Already the girl had twined her arms tightly about his neck and was drawing him toward her.

"This," she whispered with soft intensity, "is an angle of my own."

Marc struggled for a moment under the knowing pressure of her lips, but the period of resistance was short lived. He yielded quickly to the coolness of her arms about his neck and the warm brush of her hair against his cheek. He had actually begun to aid and abet the effort before it was over. Toffee released him and leaned back.

"That," she said, "is the introduction offer, merely, a sample to bring the product to your attention. The objective, in case you're somewhat hazy, is to create a large and steady demand for the brand."

Marc was more than hazy. "Oh, my gosh!" he breathed. "I feel completely demoralized!"

"Fine," Toffee said blandly. "It takes a heap of demoralizing to make a man a man. We're on the right track and pro-

ceeding with a steady speed. We'll build up steam as we go along."

"Oh, no we won't!" Marc said getting uncertainly to his feet. "We won't build up anything, you and I. We'll put an end to this dream before we both have something to regret. If I dreamed you up, I can get rid of you too."

INSTANTLY the girl was on her feet beside him. "Of all the gall!" she said. "Of all the slithering, dripping gall!"

Marc winced. "You're affecting my stomach," he said.

"And that's not all I'm going to affect before I'm through with you! I'm going to affect you from end to end and border to border! You leave me stumping it around in this air tunnel head of yours all these years, and then dream me up just to throw me over!"

"Wait a second . . . !"

"Be quiet," Toffee snapped. "Wait till I'm through. This goes on for some time." She gazed tragically into the distance and resumed in a mellowed tone: "That's all I ever was to you, a plaything to be used and cast aside when you've grown tired of me." Her voice broke with emotion. "Now that I'm old and ugly, you're ashamed of me . . . This is even better with violins."

"Stop that," Marc said. "Don't be ridiculous. There's no need for dramatics. You're far from old and ugly, and as for . . ."

But suddenly the girl had fastened herself to him for the second time. "Then you really do think I'm a little sensational after all?" she cried ecstatically. "Kiss me! I'm yours!"

"No!" Marc cried. "I didn't say that! I didn't even mention . . . !"

"Yes, you did," the girl breathed in his ear, and drew her mouth quickly to his.

"Wait a minute!" Marc objected, forcing her from him. "This sort of thing has got to stop!"

"Why, for heaven's sake? I think it's perfectly divine."

Marc stopped to consider her question. Actually, why did it have to stop? There was a reason, a good reason, if only he could think of it. And then something stirred in the far reaches of his mind and drifted slowly forward.

Julie!

"Holy smoke!" Marc cried. "Julie. I have a wife!"

"Of course," the girl said. "But what difference does that

make? I don't mind in the least. I'm terribly broad-minded. Besides, it happens that your wife isn't in this dream. Why drag her into it and spoil everything?"

"No!" Marc said excitedly. "No. You don't understand. I just remembered. There was an explosion. Julie was in the house—and a lot of her friends. Heaven only knows what happened. Oh, my gosh!" He drew away from the girl and glanced desperately around. "I've got to get out of here!"

But even as he spoke another matter rose for his immediate attention. All of a sudden the little valley had been seized with a shuddering convulsion. The greenness underfoot began to tremble violently. As Marc looked frightenedly about, the trees on the knoll commenced a weird seesawing, weaving back and forth in mad counter rhythm. Then, with a great roar of agony, the quiet valley began to crumble apart beneath their very feet. Everything dropped away into blackness . . .

Falling, Marc was only incidentally aware of the tightening pressure of the girl's arms about his neck. And then the frightened words came breathlessly, close to his ear: "Marc! Marc! Don't leave!"

"PLEASE, Marc! Open your eyes!" The imperative note of command sang hollowly in the depths of his subconscious, echoed back in some small chamber of his awareness. He stirred.

"Open your eyes, darling. Look at me."

Marc clawed at the edge of darkness, caught hold, and pulled himself upward toward the lighter region of consciousness. He struggled to the brink, caught a measure of leverage, and opened his eyes . . .

Julie's face peered down at him duskily, her blue eyes bright with fear even in the dim moonlight. A whisp of blonde hair had gone astray across her forehead.

"Marc!" she cried. "Marc!"

Marc tried his reflexes and sat up. "Julie," he murmured. "What happened?"

"Never mind, dear," Julie said. "Are you all right?"

Marc considered the matter of his all-rightness. He let his enfeebled concentration travel the circuit of his body. There were no sharp pains or ominous numbnesses.

"I think so," he said. "I think I'm all right. I had a dream . . ."

"Here," Julie said, with a sigh of relief. "Let me help you up." On his feet, Marc tested the working parts of his rangey anatomy and found them all in an operative condition. He glanced around and for the first time since his awakening realized that he was still in the basement laboratory. In the dim moonlight that filtered through the hole in the wall, it was evident that the place had been ruined. The upper end, however, leading away into the wine bins had apparently been spared. The explosion rose and happened again in his memory.

"Well," he sighed, turning to Julie, "it turned out a real bust, didn't it?"

Julie gazed at him for a long moment and suffered a nasty transformation. Her eyes no longer reflected concern, solicitude or even slight affection. To the contrary, they expressed extreme annoyance. Evidently, now that she was certain he was all right, she was prepared to blame him for all the foul acts of man since the first dawn of time.

"Just what went on down here?" she inquired with tense hostility. "Do you realize, Marconi, that you nearly blew the Daughters of the Golden Gardenia right out the front door?"

Marc's thoughts turned to a picture of the Daughters of the Golden Gardenia being blown out his front door, and he experienced a sudden glow of inner warmth.

"And what were the old hens banded together on the same roost for this time?" he asked acidly. "Getting up funds to lay linoleum in the huts of African bushwhackers?"

Julie's blue eyes grew wide with surprise. That Marc had any feeling except awe for her club ladies had not occurred to her. "Marc Pillsworth!" she exclaimed. "The coffee urn upset on Mrs. Beemer and ruined her dress!"

"The old trull's figure did more to ruin that dress than any dozen coffee urns ever could," Marc said levelly. "As a matter of fact, I'm enormously pleased it happened. It's my fondest dream come true. I've been longing to hit Mrs. Beemer with a coffee urn ever since I first set eyes on her. Right now I'm going upstairs to bed and I don't want to hear any more about it. My head hurts."

For a moment Julie stood still before him, transfixed with astonishment. Then suddenly, drawing her hand tremblingly to her mouth, she made a small whimpering sound, turned, and fled up the steps.

Marc remained where he was, listening to her hurried foot-

steps as they sounded through the upper hallway, and on the stairs leading to the second floor. There was a moment of silence, then the slam of a door. Marc shrugged.

He glanced at the ruins. The floor was littered heavily with rubble. None of the equipment had survived, that was obvious even in the dark. Well, he'd have to start all over again. He turned and started toward the steps. Then he stopped short and glanced sharply in the direction of the wine bins.

He could have sworn he'd caught a flash of movement there from the corner of his eye. He waited, peering into the darkness, but there was nothing. He smiled wryly and turned back again to the steps.

"Just nerves," he murmured to himself. And then his thoughts reverted momentarily to the Daughters of the Golden Gardenia. "Wish I'd blown the old dragons out the front door and into the gates of Hell," he said.

With that warm thought he drew a deep breath and started up the stairs. Curiously, the explosion had left him with a great sense of exhilaration . . .



Chapter Two

MARC awoke.

A drift of silver moonlight spilled through the window to the carpet and across the foot of the bed. Marc lay still and let his thoughts shift effortlessly with the warm breeze that riffled the curtains. He was curiously alert to the night, its mood and quality. There was a strange clarity here, and he had a feeling he'd been awakened to it for a definite purpose, though he couldn't imagine at the moment what that purpose might be. He listened for a sound from Julie's room across the hall, but there was none.

He pondered his exuberance at having spoken harshly to Julie after the accident. After all, he didn't really want to hurt her. They did love each other, he and Julie, and that was the plain fact of the matter. But now that he thought of it, perhaps that was just the trouble; perhaps the fact was so terribly plain that it wasn't even of interest any more.

Certainly, it had never occurred to Marc to be jealous of Julie. Never once had he been distressed at the thought that she might be flirting a hip at the stable boy while he was away at his office in town. Indeed, if the idea had occurred to him

at all, he'd have laughed at it. It was true that there was a certain amount of comfort in this, but not one iota of excitement.

Most depressing, though, was the thought that Julie, in her turn, was not jealous of him. It didn't seem to distress her in the least that, as owner and head of one of the most successful advertising agencies in the nation, he was daily in close contact with the most deadly and devastating models in the business.

Of course Julie had every reason to take confidence in her own cool blonde beauty, but on the other hand there was the thoroughly distressing thought that perhaps she felt Marc could be trusted with these gilt-edged females simply because they could be trusted with him. No man likes to feel that his wife is sure of him not because of his own sterling qualities, but because no other woman could conceivably be so desperate as to find him attractive. Julie's bland confidence in his fidelity, Marc felt, tended to make things terribly dull in the neighborhood of the parlor, bedroom and bath.

Marc looked to himself for the cause of his unhappy state of affairs. The decision was neither for nor against. Perhaps he wasn't handsome, but then he wasn't hideous either. His face actually had a rather nice angular plainness about it, and his grey eyes were undeniably kind and could, on occasion, be extremely humorous.

He was a bit too thin for so tall a man, but there was a suggestion, at thirty-three, of a liteness and youth about his figure that was not unattractive. His sandy hair at least had the virtue of unobtrusiveness without any such vulgar ostentations as polished slickness or gleaming ringlets. On careful and unprejudiced analysis, Marc felt that as an example of his sex he was neither such a one as to send a woman wilting to the carpet with palpitations or screaming to the medicine chest for the salts. The clue to the rising becalmment of his marriage, then, had to lie in another quarter. But Marc was at a loss to determine its direction. What he did not realize was that, from the outset, he had allowed Julie the exclusive management of their life together without reserving for himself even the right to veto.

THE truth was that Marc was shy with women to the point of reticence. Too busy and too earnest in the struggle to establish the agency in the early, salty days of his youth, he had simply missed all of the ordinary experiences, the fretful

trials and errors, due the average young man bent on gaining a solid footing in life's more fundamental departments. In effect, Marc had never taken the time to brace himself against the Indian hand wrestle that sex can often become in this civilized world. He could never be a rake, either at home or abroad, simply because he hadn't had time to practice.

Not that Marc didn't have the impulse for rakishness. It had merely come too late. He had always suspected that there was a more satisfactory and satisfying way of life than his, but only vaguely. There were even moments when he yearned for it desperately, without ever rightly knowing precisely what it was he yearned for.

At the time when he asked Julie to be his wife, he believed that he was at last making the proper step towards a new kind of life. After all, in spite of all the tons of fiction to the contrary, it is still not considered entirely orthodox for a business executive to marry his secretary. Marriage with Julie had seemed, to Marc, to offer the sort of life he coveted. Then, she had been as casual and convention-free a girl as any man would care to split a pint of gin with in a butler's pantry. Not that Marc ever had, however.

Even then, though, had Marc been better schooled in matters of maids, mates and matrimony, he might have recognized in the cool blue of Julie's eyes, in the precise way she carried her statuesque body, the seeds of wedded woodenness. As it was, the revelation did not occur until after their fatal moment at the altar.

The wedding ceremony had worked a magic in Julie that, to Marc's mind, was as black as pure onyx. Instantly, she had become a rigid suburban matron, corseted tightly in all the whaleboned dictates of suburban respectability. Under Julie's efficient supervision Marc had found himself settled down with a thud that was almost audible.

Julie took up club work with a fire and fervor that was truly frightening. She ran for election to committees and officerships with a wind and stamina that would have been admirable in an Olympic torchbearer. She sat on more boards than a lumber mill laborer at lunch time. Every book of etiquette written by man, woman or child found its way into her library, and she stuck to the rules with all the tenacity of an umpire on a World Series game. Worst of all, though, she took to brewing weak tea and making watercress sandwiches. Briefly, Julie

had become that odious thing: the perfectly terrible perfect wife.

If Marc grew sallow and sullen under this regime, Julie's smiling and well-modulated suggestion was that he take up a hobby and turn his mind to something constructive. To her own purposes, as well as everyone else's, she might have done better to keep her pretty mouth shut. It was this suggestion that gave birth to the basement laboratory and the madness that followed . . .

It is difficult to believe that any man of so steady a nature as Marc Pillsworth would seriously conceive the idea of chemically treating metals and other weighted materials in such a way as to make them lighter than air. Yet, that precisely is the madness that wormed its way into Marc's mind.

The idea had developed slowly. For almost a month, from his office window, Marc had watched the construction of the building across the street. The main difficulty, as the building stretched lazily upward, obviously was the transportation of the heavier materials. That was the thing that made the work so slow.

A BIT at a time, the idea took hold of Marc that the job could be immensely facilitated if only the steel girders, the sections of concrete, could be made buoyant . . . at least temporarily . . . so that they might be floated into position rather than lifted. Eventually came the time when the idea had lain long enough in Marc's mind that it seemed to make sense. Of course it was a fantastic idea, but the really fantastic thing about it was that no little men in white jackets arrived on the scene to carry its originator gently but firmly away to some quiet institution.

And yet time proved Marc to be not quite so mad as he seemed. Subsequent experiments testified to his rather extraordinary if distorted vision. In a year's time, hit and miss, he had managed to reduce the weight of scraps of iron and steel by actual test . . . and this without diminishing their bulk by so much as a fraction of an inch. Of course, Marc had to admit, both of these materials had clung doggedly to a nasty disinclination to actually defy the laws of gravity, but he was convinced that he was well on the way to breaking their will in the matter.

Months of paper work followed, tedious calculations, corrected formula. At last he was ready to prepare what he was positive would be his final and conclusive experiment. Ingredients were

carefully distilled and combined, in exact amounts and weights. And then, on the very night that Julie had manoeuvred the exclusive Daughters of the Golden Gardenia into her living room with an eye to arranging a society bazaar, Marc retired to his basement sanctuary, carefully closed the door, added the final chemical to the growing mixture, and blew the bejesus out of everything. If the laws of gravity had finally been broken it was only by virtue of rude detonation. The experiment, in its major aspect, was a dud.

All these things passed fluidly through Marc's mind as he lay awake gazing into the silver clarity of the night. He wondered at his own serenity in the face of so much disappointment and could not account for it. A strange faith in the future, un-nourished by tangible fact, had begun to grow within him, a definite, thriving growth sustained by the night and the moonlight.

How could he know it was the weed growth of violence?

Then Marc stirred, turned his head at a listening angle. The night was no longer silent; the stillness had been broken by a strand of distant melody. Faintly, a voice had begun to sing, weaving a curious, indistinct thread of song into the illusive fabric of the night. For a moment Marc wondered if he only imagined it, but when he covered his ears with his hands, the melody stopped. He listened again. Slowly, the song grew louder, more distinct.

Marc sat bolt upright in bed. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said.

He was sure of it; the singing was actually coming from somewhere inside the house. And if the voice had a strange, illusive quality it was only because it was patently alcoholic. Obviously some drunken woman was lurching below stairs singing her vaporish head off. Marc threw back the covers and swung out of bed. What if his harshness had driven Julie to drink!

In the hallway outside his room, Marc paused to listen. The voice was gaining wind and growing louder by the second. Marc started indignantly; the song, if he wasn't mistaken, was at least badly soiled if not downright filthy. It had something to do with the lurid misadventures of a loose moraled sturgeon named Gussie during the spawning season. At least it couldn't be Julie. Fumbling with the sash of his robe, Marc went to the stairs and marched determinedly downward.

In the lower hall he paused by the door to the living room to take a sounding. Sighting on a distant burp, he started to-

ward the rear of the house. He had just passed the study when the singing suddenly stopped. Marc stopped also, waiting for the voice to continue. He moved slowly in the direction of the kitchen, careful that his own footfall did not disturb the silence. The kitchen, brilliant with moonlight, was uninhabited. Marc slipped back to the hallway and waited. Suddenly a new series of sounds were unleashed on the night; the clinking of bottles, a light giggle and a subdued hiccough.

MARC, certain now of his destination, whirled about, went to the basement door and threw it open. No longer cautious, he stepped into the darkness and started down the steps with a tread that bespoke his outrage.

There was no question in his mind; some neighborhood swain, in an amorous mood, had enticed the giggling and subnormal object of his sordid affections to the wine cellar. No doubt the pair were fairly wallowing in depravity amongst the bins at this very moment. The cheek of the young devil! And the girl! Getting drunk on wine that was not hers and singing about it! Certainly she was no better than she should be, and probably so much worse as to be beyond conception.

Marc quitted the steps, picked his way over a heap of rubble and presented himself solidly in the ragged patch of moonlight that described the hole left in the wall by the explosion. He planted his feet ominously apart and doubled his fists.

"All right, you two," he said in a level, distinct voice. "Show yourselves. If you're in any condition."

The silence filled in quickly in the wake of his voice. Marc pursed his lips and peered into the deep shadows of the wine cellar.

"If you don't come out," he said, "I'll damn well come in here and drag you out. How would you like that?"

Then he started as his question was answered with a muffled giggle.

Marc bristled. "Very well," he announced, "here I come!"

He strode to the wine cellar and presented himself firmly in the doorway. "One last chance," he said. "Are you coming out?"

He waited in the ensuing silence, suddenly assailed by a strange feeling of indecision. Then he cried out with dismay as a slender arm suddenly darted out into the moonlight and coiled gracefully about his neck.

"Now, just a minute!" Marc gasped.

But the arm did not hesitate. Tightening about his neck, it drew him toward the darkness. Instantly, a pair of warm lips pressed down on his own.

Marc struggled to free himself, but the mouth was extraordinarily tenacious. And another arm had joined the other about his neck. Then Marc freed his mouth and sputtered with objections.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

A winey breath impressed itself on Marc's nostrils. "Don't you know?" a voice murmured softly. "You should."

"Let go of me," Marc said stiffly.

"Not in a million years," the voice replied huskily. "I'm going to stick to you like skin. Forever and ever and ever and . . ."

"We'll see about that," Marc grated. "Whoever you are, you're trespassing. In more ways than one."

Reaching up he grasped the arms about his neck and attempted to disentangle them. They only tightened their hold. He tried to duck under the arms, but they moved downward as he did. For a moment Marc and his amorous captor crouched together in the dark, literally cheek by jowl. The other giggled.

"I'll bet we look terribly funny," she said.

"Stop that damned giggling," Marc fumed. "Things are bad enough without that."

He had decided on a strategy to free himself. In one quick movement he straightened up and stepped backwards. It might have worked perfectly if he hadn't stumbled over a piece of wreckage. As it was he suddenly sprawled backwards and fell to the floor in the exact center of the patch of moonlight. His winey companion, true to her promise, accompanied him in his downward plunge with skinlike precision. She landed against Marc's chest with a sigh of satisfaction.

"May I take this as capitulation?" she asked. "Or was it only an accident?"

"Don't be so disgusting," Marc said. Then, gazing upward, he suddenly blanched. His mouth fell slack. The girl had loosened her hold on his neck and was sitting up, gazing down at him. In his confusion Marc didn't even notice that the thing she was sitting on was his stomach. The girl was the same one in the dream. The girl was Toffee!

"Oh, Lord!" he moaned. "You're . . . !"

"Of course," Toffee said brightly. "I made it. I'm here."

"Then this is really a dream," Marc said dazedly. "I'm still in bed asleep. I only dreamed I woke up and came down here."

"Wrong, son," Toffee said briefly. "This is no dream. This is for real."

MARC stared at her in disbelief. "Wait a minute . . ." he breathed. Then he reached out a hand, touched her, and quickly drew it away.

"That's the general idea," Toffee said.

Marc drew back with a gasp. "You're really here!"

"I have other ways of proving it," Toffee said. She leaned toward him.

"No!" Marc cried. "But . . . but . . . how . . . !"

Toffee smiled. "It's very simple. You've projected me through your awareness. I guess I must have made quite an impression on you in that dream. Heavens knows I tried, but I didn't think I was really getting any psychic cooperation. Anyway, I managed to stick to the conscious part of your mind instead of the subconscious, and you projected me into reality."

"Oh, no!" Marc gasped. "No! This can't happen! I didn't mean it! You've got to go back!"

"Too late now," Toffee said. She removed herself from Marc's middle and plumped herself down beside him. "There's no use fighting it. You can't control it. Of course I'll disappear and return to your mind whenever you go to sleep. You'll stop projecting me then. But I'll be right back again the moment you wake up." She sighed happily. "I'm so tickled I could pop."

"Don't!" Marc cried. Anything was easily within the realm of possibility now. "What am I going to do with you?"

Toffee cast him a sidelong glance. "I could make a list of suggestions," she murmured, "and we could run through them in the order named. And if there are any terms you don't understand I'll explain them."

"Holy smoke!" Marc said, staring at her. "Haven't you any sense of decency at all?"

"None worth mentioning," Toffee answered. "Should I have?"

"No one ever needed anything worse," Marc said emphatically.

Toffee glanced curiously about her. "This place is a mess,"

she commented. "Is your whole world as shabby as this?"

Marc shook his head, explained briefly about the explosion.

"I don't understand about human beings," Toffee said. "The minute they get their hands on anything they have to start changing it so that it serves a purpose exactly opposite what it was intended for. What goes up must come down, what goes down must come up. You're all perfectly mad, all of you. Are you happy that you've managed to make heavy things light?"

"What?" Marc asked absently.

"I asked you if you were happy now that you've managed to make all that stuff behave contrary to its nature, rather indecently I might add."

"What are you talking about?" Marc asked.

"All that stuff floating around on the ceiling," Toffee said. She pointed.

Marc whirled about to gaze in the direction she indicated. Then he sucked in his breath with a sharp gasp. Toffee had spoken the truth. Slowly, the rubble was rising from the floor of the basement to the ceiling. Some of it had already described the full journey and was hovering about the ceiling. Chairs, pieces of desk, desk drawers, fragments of equipment, scraps of metal were bobbing about next to the ceiling like apples in a washtub on Hallowe'en. Marc suddenly felt very lightheaded. In a matter of minutes the world had become an unfamiliar place; reality quickly slipped away from him and he was caught for a moment in a spell of moon-splashed madness.

"My God!" he whispered. "I did it!"

"You certainly did," Toffee said. "Now how are you going to get all that stuff down again?"

UNEXPECTEDLY, Marc jumped to his feet, made a quick lunge toward a small black book that was rising rapidly toward the ceiling. But he was too late; it moved beyond his reach and came to a solid rest against the ceiling.

"Damn!" Marc said.

"What is it?" Toffee asked.

"The book that I recorded my formulas in," Marc said. "I have to have it. When this gets out . . ."

Toffee rose to his side and placed her arms around his neck.

"For heaven's sake!" Marc said. "Can't you think of anything else?"

"It's difficult," Toffee said. "But at the moment I'm trying to help you. Lift me up and I'll reach the book for you."

"Oh," Marc said. He held his hands down for her to step into, then boosted her up. As she rose above him he was surprised at how light she was. He glanced up. One hand on his shoulder, Toffee was stretching the other toward the wayward book. She didn't quite make it. She glanced down at Marc.

"Hold steady," she said. Then she let go of his shoulder and stood upright, depending entirely on his hands for support. She reached out, caught hold of the book, and smiled down at him. It was just as she was bending down again that she lost her balance.

In the next instant Marc's head and shoulders became the center of what seemed to be a dozen flailing arms and legs.

In an effort to save the situation, Marc stepped back and held out his arms, just in time for Toffee to strike him solidly on the chest. In the tangle that followed they both tumbled to the floor. When Marc looked up Toffee was once more seated comfortably and safely on his stomach. She looked down at him and laughed.

"Does it strike you that a certain monotony has come into our relationship?" she asked.

"It strikes me that a certain pain has come into my stomach," Marc wheezed. "Would you be kind enough, I wonder, to take a seat elsewhere for a change? Or am I going to have to wear you like a watch fob from now on?"

Toffee eyed his midsection with scorn. "If you think that shriveled bladder of yours is so comfortable, you just ought to try sitting on it sometime."

"That would make an interesting spectacle," Marc commented acidly. "If I'm not comfortable to sit on it's probably because you landed on me so hard you're on my spine. Get off."

"A pleasure," Toffee said and slid to the floor beside him. "Here's that silly book of yours." Without thinking, except to express her contempt for Marc's central region as a seating arrangement, she tossed the book in his direction. The book described a small arc toward Marc, then promptly swooped upward in rapid ascent.

"Oh, my gosh!" Marc said. He sat up and grabbed just in time. "Let's not . . . !"

Suddenly he stopped as a series of footsteps sounded on the floor above.

"Julie!" he hissed in a stage whisper. "My wife!"

"Marc!" Julie's voice called distinctly. "Marc! Where are you? What was all that noise?"

Marc turned to Toffee. "Go!" he said. "Vanish!"

Toffee gazed blandly on his distress. "I can't" she said, "unless you go to sleep, of course. I couldn't if I wanted to. Which I don't."

"Oh, Lord!" Marc groaned. He stood for a moment, torn.

"Marc!"

Julie was approaching the basement doorway now.

"I've got to go," Marc rasped. "You stay here. Promise?"

Toffee smiled and nodded. "Sure," she said. "But you'll come back, won't you? Because if you don't I'll stir up enough hell down here to raise the dead."

"I'll come back," Marc promised desperately, and started rapidly toward the steps.

"Just a minute," Toffee said. She held her arms out to him. "Kiss me goodbye."

"No," Marc said.

"I'll scream," Toffee said coolly. "I'll yowl like a banshee."

Marc went quickly back to her. "It's not as though I won't be right back. Just a little while . . ."

"That's all right," Toffee murmured. She slid her arms smoothly around his neck. "This is just so you won't forget."

"Marc!" Julie called from upstairs. "Where are you? What are you doing? Answer me!"



Chapter Three

MARC stepped into his room and closed the door, but gently, leaving it still open just a crack. He listened. Across the hall, Julie went into her room, closed the door. There was an interval of silence, then the sound of restless movement inside.

Julie's manner downstairs had been tentative, apprehensive and almost frighteningly gentle. She had seemed to believe Marc's story about investigating noises but she had asked once too often if he was feeling well, if the explosion hadn't left him with a terrible headache.

Marc closed the door all the way, went over to the bed, and sat down to wait; she'd settle down in time and then he could return to the basement. He looked around absently and as his gaze passed the window he noticed that the first faint wash of day had come into the sky outside. He reached to the nightstand, picked up a cigarette and lit it. He took a deep draft and blew the smoke out thinly, thoughtfully. With worried bewilderment he considered the fading night's absurdities.

It was as though, in creating the explosion and upsetting the laws of gravity, he had thrown all the processes of the uni-

verse out of kilter—as though all the natural laws were balanced precariously one atop the other, so that when one was broken or removed, all the others came tumbling down to shatter at your feet in consequence. A readheaded dream could come to life and laugh and sing and guzzle your wine and raise hell in general all over the lot. Things that were never meant to could begin to float through the air. It was a disconcerting state of affairs just to contemplate, let alone experience. Nature had certainly gone on a bender tonight and no mistake. If these things could happen what else might not be possible? Marc dreaded to think.

If Marc had been able to look into the unknown regions beyond the universe he might have had a quick answer to his question. But not a reassuring one . . .

* * *

In a timeless, unboundaried place, an entity sat cross-legged on a drifting piece of atmosphere and gazed with jaundiced and disconsolate eye toward the regions of Eternity. He looked unhappily on the undiscovered planets whirling and drifting in the distance and said an extremely vulgar and basic word. He plucked a handful of atmosphere from the piece on which he sat, untangled his long legs from beneath his misted robes, and, in a modified way, drop-kicked it into the hereafter. He repeated the word.

George Pillsworth, the spirit of Marc Pillsworth, was bored to the socks with the world beyond. He frowned, and the face of Marc Pillsworth expressed disfavor. He leaned forward and dangled his hands between his knees, and it was the lean body of Marc Pillsworth that dangled. There, however, the resemblance rocked to a jarring stop.

The message vibrations came trembling across space again, but George didn't bother to listen to them. It was probably just the message center at its eternal business; probably another relay broadcast forwarding the same old answers to the same old mediums down on earth. The question came constantly for the upper level spirits: Are you happy, Uncle Howard? Are you happy, Sister Martha? Always the same silly question. The devil of it was that no one was ever allowed to give them a truthful answer; the News Control Board took care of that. The answer was always the same . . . probably recorded, George suspected . . . transmitted from the message center: I am in a beautiful place. I am very happy.

Very happy, indeed. In this place? George didn't know about the Kingdoms; maybe they were all right, but this place was . . . Well, no, it couldn't be that. But why didn't they tell the truth for once: I'm in the dullest place in time, and if I had any blood I'd open my veins.

THE thought of transmitting such a message to those bothersome earthy mediums pleased George immensely. That would rock them back on their heels and stop their silly questions. He leaned back on his atmosphere ledge and smiled for the first time in several days. Then suddenly he sat up as the transmitted vibrations grew more intense, and his own name sounded across time.

"George Pillsworth! George Pillsworth! Report instantly to the High Council! Instantly! Shake a leg, you shabby spook!"

George's expression was instantly troubled. "Now what have they found out about?" he sighed.

George paused to recount in his mind more recent sins. Last week he had heard that humans often became quite rich by distilling spirits and had tried the process on a few of his friends. He had come close to narrowing the circle of his acquaintances to a positive noose. But they'd already had him on the carpet for that. All in all, a muggy affair. He shrugged resignedly, dissolved and concentrated his impulses toward the Council Chambers . . .

An instant later George rose through the grey mists of the Chamber. He looked tentatively at the Council and quickly averted his gaze; to an entity, the Council stared back at him without affection or beauty. George cleared his throat nervously.

"George Pillsworth, spiritual part to the mortal Marc Pillsworth, reporting as instructed," he said.

"And not a moment too soon," the Head commented bleakly. "Face the Council, please. If you've the gall."

Guardedly, George raised his eyes to the Council. The sight was not heart-warming. The Council, under the very best circumstances, was not attractive. In a nasty mood it could be inconceivably ugly. Comprised of five members who prided themselves on being only concerned with the most profound matters of Eternity, the Council was not given to pursuits of vanity. It looked like hell and was proud of it.

The Head had not been misnamed. An entity who function-

ed entirely on an intellectual plane, his body had dwindled through the years while his head had become enlarged. Now he was the proud possessor of the biggest, shaggiest, most formidable top piece extant. The others were of a similar stamp, but to a lesser degree. Two of them had fairly well developed arms and shoulders but they did their best to hide the fact beneath their robes since it was a clear indication of inferior mentality. The one who was unfortunate enough to be cursed with rather a good set of legs was obviously to be regarded as not much of an intellect at all, a mere messenger boy or literally a leg man. To face the Council, then, was quite a lot to ask. Almost too much, as far as George was concerned.

"He's got the gall for anything," one of the armed intellects commented nastily. "Remember when he was caught selling bogus passports to ascending spirits?"

George blanched. He wished they would concentrate on the present and stop dragging up the past.

The Head cleared his throat with a formidable rattle. "I think we can adhere to the matter at hand without involving personalities," he said. "The fact that the Pillsworth entity is a spirit of the utmost depravity has already been established in this Council so often that the whole subject begins to take on the aspect of a broken record. We'll come to that later if we must." There was another clearing of the throat. "The entity will approach the Council."

"Forgive me, your honor," one of the minor members of the Council intercepted. "But do you think that's really wise? I know it's part of the prescribed procedure, but mightn't we leave it out, just this once? I don't trust him a step nearer than he is already."

"I don't trust him that close," another of the members put in. "Couldn't we reverse the procedure and have him go away from the Council?"

The Head nodded. "You have a point there," he said. He looked at George, "Pillsworth, retreat three steps backward and stand at attention."

"I meant go away altogether," the member murmured disappointedly. "I was hoping we could forget the whole thing."

GEORGE took three steps backwards and assumed what he supposed could pass for a position of attention. He tried to look alert.

"Is this correct, sir?" he asked.

"The entity will remain silent until requested to speak!" the Head thundered. "We'll tell you when you're wrong. Oh, brother!"

"Yes," said one of the others. "For heaven's sake don't let him get started. He'll be talking us into giving him a down payment on the acres of Heaven."

"Yes," the Head agreed. "And now to the business at hand." He regarded George with even less approval than before. "It is the custom of the Council to advise and instruct every entity before he or she is released to the world below. He is to be charged here with his allotment of ectoplasm and called upon to swear from memory to the ten fundamental oaths as set down in the Haunter's Handbook and Guide. Do you feel that you are prepared for the ceremony, Pillsworth, or would you like to request a delay for study and contemplation?"

George shifted excitedly. He could hardly contain himself. This was the moment for which he had been waiting through all these eternal years. At last he was to be released to Earth. His heart fairly sang. From all he'd heard, Earth was precisely the place where his talents and aptitudes would find their proper market. He was so choked with emotion he could hardly answer.

"I am prepared," he said weakly.

"However," the Head continued with new emphasis, "there is considerable doubt as to the status under which you shall be released to the Earth . . . that, not going into the Earth's fitness to rise to the occasion of your arrival. It appears that your earthly past, Marc Pillsworth, has departed life, but there is a small degree of uncertainty about the whole affair. It is known that Marc Pillsworth was caught in a violent explosion in the basement of his home, and since then his cosmic radiations have broken. It is possible, considering the nature of the explosion, that there may be a chemical interference involved here if the chemical processes of Pillsworth himself have undergone some sort of change. However, it's not likely.

"At any rate, no request for reservations has been received under the name of Pillsworth in any of the upper planes, and this has caused us to be uncertain. Still, we cannot risk the possibility of a slip-up. When a mortal dies his haunt must be dispatched instantly to his friends and loved ones. It's always been that way." The Head eyed George and suddenly looked sad. "It just happens that the Pillsworths are unlucky."

"I will endeavor . . . " George began earnestly.

"Silence!" The Head bellowed. "We know what you'll endeavor to do, you devil. Anyway, it has been decided, against all reason and better judgment, that you shall be dispatched to Earth as per schedule. But only on a probationary and exploratory basis. In other words, it will be your mission to go to earth and determine whether Marc Pillsworth is really dead or not. If he is, you will remain and perform your duties according to the code. If, however, he proves still to be alive—and let me emphasize this—you will depart the earth and return instant. And not a moment later. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," George offered timidly.

"And now," the Head continued, "there is the matter of your character. If it deserves the name. Actually, you are the most characterless spirit I have ever had the displeasure to encounter. In you are combined all the base qualities which we strive so hard to fight in this region. Sometimes I find myself looking on you as a sort of trash dump in which are collected all the vile qualities which we have managed to cleanse from the other spirits. But that's only desperate rationalization. How you happen to be as you are I have never been able to figure out. It appears that for every virtue your earthly part has acquired you have embraced an additional evil. At any rate, you are no angel, and that's the very least I have to say on the matter.

"The point is that we do not dare to hope that you will stick to the accepted and orthodox procedures of haunting, let alone be even the least bit of consolation to Pillsworth's survivors. We only ask—no, we demand—that you do not disgrace the fine traditions of haunting. It will be plainly understood that you may be recalled and punished at any time should you get so far out of line as to be an embarrassment to us. In other words, Pillsworth, watch your step. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," George said mildly. He gazed down at his toes, dissolved them nervously. "Yes, indeed, sir."

"Very well, then," the Head said. "You will prepare to take the oath by swearing from memory to the ten rules. Raise your right hand." He turned to one of his colleagues on the bench. "If this isn't a hollow mockery, I've never seen one," he muttered.

The favored entity nodded. "As hollow as Aunt Maggie's bustle," he said. "And twice as tacky."

George raised his right hand and solemnly lifted his eyes in a heavenward direction. The ten rules, transcribed there sometime before in hopeful anticipation of this moment, had remained quite legible on the sleeve of the atmospheric robe.

FULLY dressed now and returned to the edge of his bed, Marc watched the first faint beginnings of night's evolution into day. Since he had kindly been spared any knowledge of the other force which had been released by the explosion in the basement, his thoughts concerned themselves with the staggering circumstance of Toffee and the buoyant debris. He rose, crossed to the door, and listened for any sound from across the hall. It was quiet there now.

Leaving the door, he went to the bureau at the far side of the room, cautiously opened the top drawer, careful to keep his hand over the opening, and caught the little black book as it gained freedom and shot upward. He put it in the breast pocket of his jacket and fastened it there by claspings his pen over it. Then he crossed quickly to the wardrobe, took out a light top-coat, draped it over his arm, and returned to the door. He paused again to listen, then shoved the door open and stepped silently out into the hallway.

In the basement, at the bottom of the steps, he paused and glanced tentatively about, braced himself against an attack from the redhead. He waited a moment, then called Toffee's name.

There was a moment of quiet, then a slight rustling as Toffee appeared from the shadows of the wine bins. She raised her arms above her head and stretched with a languorous yawn. In the grey light of early morning her apparel, or rather the lack of apparel, was even more startling than it had been during the night. Marc glanced quickly away and held out the coat.

"Here," he said distractedly. "Put this on. And button it up all the way down."

Toffee looked at the coat without interest. "What for?" she asked with bland innocence. "And, besides, how can I button it up and down at the same time?"

"Never mind," Marc said. "Just cover your nakedness."

"My nakedness?" Toffee said. "Why in the world would I want to cover it? What's wrong with it? I have a perfectly divine nakedness. I'll match my nakedness with yours any time . . ."

"No!" Marc broke in. "Don't go on."

"Well, with anyone's nakedness, then, if you're going to be

edgy. I haven't anything to be ashamed of."

"If you did," Marc said bitterly, "you wouldn't have the decency to be ashamed of it. Put the coat on and stop wasting time."

Toffee shrugged bewilderedly and took the coat from his outstretched hand. "Oh, well," she said, slipping it on, "if you are going to make a scene about anything so silly. Where are we going?"

"I wish I knew," Marc said wearily. "Anywhere away from here. Obviously, you can't hang around here where Julie will run into you."

"No," Toffee said mildly. "I suppose not. Though it would be fun to see her reaction. Might do her a world of good." She waved a hand at the wreckage clustered on the ceiling. "What about that? What are you going to do about your experiment?"

Marc shrugged. "I have to think about that later, when I've got you out of my hair."

Together, they proceeded to the hole in the wall. Marc lifted Toffee out, then boosted himself after. Toffee reached down to give him a hand.

"Don't look so glum," she said. "Nothing really awful has happened. Not yet."

"Be quiet," Marc said.

He led her to the garage at the back of the house, cautiously lifted the door and indicated a large green convertible. "Get in," he instructed.

"I am your slave," Toffee said with mock subservience. "Take me where you will." She got into the car.

Mincing slightly, Marc slid into the seat beside her. "Be quiet," he said. "Let's try to get out of here without waking up Julie."

IT was unfortunate that Marc, in his haste to remove Toffee from the premises, did not have the foresight to raise the top of the convertible. With that one small act of protection he might have secured a clean getaway. As it was, with him, and Toffee exposed and plain to the eyes of the world, he threw the convertible into gear and back out of the garage toward just about the most slipshod escape ever enacted by man.

As the car slid smoothly down the drive, Marc switched off the ignition so that it might coast soundlessly past that part of the house which held the window to Julie's room. It was precise-

ly at this point, of course, that tragedy befell. The black book twisted itself lose in Marc's pocket and suddenly shot upward.

"Oh, good grief!" Marc said. He put on the brakes.

As he and Toffee watched, the book sailed higher, flitted a bit to one side and lodged itself in a cross-section of trellis precisely next to Julie's window.

"What are you going to do?" Toffee whispered.

"Climb up and get it, I suppose," Marc said wretchedly. "I can't leave it there." He got out of the car, then turned back. "Don't you make a move while I'm gone."

Toffee nodded vigorously and pulled the collar of her coat up around her face. "I'll be positively furtive," she giggled.

Marc made his way to the trellis, tested it with his foot, and started up. Several feet up, he paused to listen. Then, reassured, he continued upward. A moment later he was within reaching distance of the book. He sighed with relief.

Down in the car Toffee watched without great concern. However, she was anxious to be away; it was dull just sitting there. She looked around for some way to hasten matters. It was then that she conceived the idea of starting the car so that they could continue their flight the moment Marc returned to the ground. She glanced at the profusion of knobs on the elaborate dash board, thoughtfully selected the prettiest, and twisted . . .

It was in the same moment that Marc reached for the little book and caught hold of it, that the early morning suddenly thundered with a booming rendition of "Anchors Aweigh!" performed by a marine band. All at once, drums throbbed, cymbals clanged and bugles blared with all the crashing enthusiasm that a hundred healthy seagoing men could muster.

Marc whirled about, clinging to the trellis, and stared down at Toffee in horror. But Toffee was too busy frantically twisting knobs to notice. The music swelled and became louder as windows began to fly open all over the neighborhood. On the trellis, Marc was assailed with a chill feeling that there were eyes on the back of his neck. As he turned about, his nose came within a fraction of brushing Julie's.

"Oh, Lord!" he moaned in belated prayer.

"Marc Pillsworth!" Julie shrieked, leaning further out the window. "What are you doing? Have you lost your mind?" Then her astonished gaze moved to the car and Toffee. "Who is that woman?"

Marc glanced distractedly down at Toffee, as though seeing

her there for the first time. "That's nobody," he murmured feebly.

And the next instant it seemed that he had almost spoken the truth, that indeed the car, Toffee and the pounding radio had never actually been there at all. As a unit, as Toffee's frantic hand quickly selected another button and pressed it, they all shot backwards out of the drive and out of sight. Toffee's shriek of dismay was added discordantly to the moan of a naval tuba and the scream of racing tires. Marc glanced desperately at the stunned, sleep-stained faces peering from the houses across the street and shudderingly closed his eyes. With the others, he waited for the sound of the crash. But it did not come.

"Marc Pillsworth . . . !" Julie began, then stopped as Toffee and the green convertible suddenly reappeared as swiftly and sensationally as they had departed. Still traveling backwards, the car shot into the drive with a spray of gravel and headed toward the house like a thing possessed. Toffee was wildly manipulating the wheel on a hit or miss basis.

"Help!" she screamed.

"Turn right!" Marc yelled from the trellis. "Turn right!"

Automatically, Toffee followed instructions. She grasped the wheel with both hands and pulled to the right. The car swerved, crashed over a flower bed and headed for the lawns. There, pawing turf like a reversed bull, it described a wide circle and started back for the drive.

Toffee waved elatedly to Marc over her shoulder. "Now I've got it!" she cried. "It's easy!" Apparently, she did not realize that she had learned to drive backwards, that there was another way of directing the mechanism.

Racing the car to the area in front of the garage, she whipped it around down the drive again. She looked up at Marc.

"Jump as I come past!" she yelled.

"Who is that?" Julie shrieked finally recovering her voice. "Answer me! Marc Pillsworth, stay right where you are!"

"Jump!" Toffee yelled. "Now."

Marc landed on the seat beside Toffee and felt himself borne as if by the wind itself, down the drive.

The band swung into a booming arrangement of "Don't Give Up The Ship!" as, hind bumper first, they skidded into the street and sped away . . .



Chapter Four

THE towers of the Wynant Hotel, a snobbish establishment whose austere front hulked over the general public with stoney aloofness, marked the center of the city.

Within, the Wynant shed upon its cowed clientele all the warmth and home-like comfort of a walk-in freezing unit. The personnel had obviously been trained to regard the paying guest as a fraud, a vandal and a momentary fugitive from social and moral levels so low as to be mainly inhabited by gophers.

As to decor, the Wynant had permitted itself only a single divergence from the completely austere. In the center of the vast foyer there was a fountain and pool, topped with the marble figure of a woman in the final stages of dishabille. The lady in question, however, was of a classic pedigree and, therefore, her condition of undress was permissible; one was allowed to look upon her classic charms without fear of suspicion from the bell-hops. If the guests of the Wynant, who stayed there mainly for the dubious purposes of prestige, felt a certain affection for the lady of the fountain, it was because she, in her classic security, was accomplishing for them the very thing they had always longed to do themselves; she had presented herself solidly in

the very center of the Wynant and caused an area of dampness thereupon. It did not matter that the lady clutched her nakedness to her in a fit of modesty; the guests of the Wynant knew what she really had on her mind and loved her for it with a devout intensity.

Marc had always considered the Wynant a veritable bully of a place, and this opinion was generally shared by a multitude of others. On the one occasion when he had gone to the Wynant to attend what was unanimously conceded to be the most stultifying businessmen's luncheon in the annals of human commerce, he had vowed never to set foot in the place again. However, there always comes a time to break even the most solemn of vows.

It was logic of a sort that caused Marc to bring Toffee to the Wynant; if there was any atmosphere chill enough to conquer the irrepressible redhead's wayward disposition, the Wynant had just such an atmosphere to offer in aces and spades. It was Marc's rather naive thought to banish Toffee to the more elevated regions of this spiritual salt mine and leave her there until, out of sheer, screaming boredom, she made up her mind to disappear to the place from whence she had come. Thus he would be free to make his peace with Julie and set his house in order in the several ways that it now required.

Noting the doorman's glance of disapproval as they entered, Marc carefully jockeyed himself into a position in front of Toffee so that she might be hidden from view. The top coat, several cuts too long both in the sleeves and the skirt, did little to give the girl an air of refinement. As rapidly as he could, Marc led her across the broad foyer to the desk at the opposite side of the room. Toffee flapped obediently along behind him, but her gaze moved curiously toward the fountain and its unclad mistress.

"Is that one of the guests taking a bath?" she asked innocently.

"Certainly not," Marc said. "It's a statue. That fact is quite evident."

Toffee's eyes narrowed suspiciously on the statue. "She looks awfully lifelike to me."

"Don't worry," Marc said. "You won't have to take your bath in public."

"I wasn't worried," Toffee said absently.

THEY proceeded to the desk and were instantly greeted by a clerk of a precise black-and-white perfection. Though the man was shorter than Marc he still seemed to look down on him from a great height.

"Yes?" he asked with a slight reptilian hiss.

Marc had prepared his story in advance. "I'd like a suite for my niece," he said.

The clerk regarded Marc's "niece" and her costume and notched up the last small measure of slack in his eyebrows.

"I'm Marc Pillsworth," Marc said hopefully, "of the Pillsworth Advertising Agency."

The clerk regarded Marc with a cool steadiness that indicated all too plainly that anyone engaged in advertising, in the opinion of the Wynant, was nothing more than a not-so-high-class ballyhoo artist. Then he glanced down at the polished surface of the counter as though expecting to see three shells and a pea suddenly appear there.

"And your niece's luggage?" he asked.

"My niece was in an accident," Marc said quickly. "Her luggage was lost, burned. She's in town to replace the things that were destroyed."

"I see," the clerk said, obviously mulling over the very interesting fact that Toffee had managed to be caught in the accident in nothing but a gentleman's topcoat.

"It was so embarrassing," Toffee put in tragically.

"I daresay," the clerk said sourly. He turned back to Marc. "I'm afraid the hotel is completely filled."

Marc sighed. Now he would have to discover some other disposition for Toffee. But suddenly he was too tired to even think. All at once he was overcome with such a feeling of fatigue that he could hardly restrain himself from leaning down to rest his head on the desk counter. He was exhausted beyond belief. He tried to turn away, but he hadn't even the strength for that. And then his eyes began to play tricks. As he looked at them, the clerk, Toffee, the desk blurred and became hazy. He felt that he was slipping into unconsciousness but he had no sensation of falling. Rather, it was as though he were simply floating away from reality. Reality dimmed, faded away and was gone . . . Then suddenly everything jumped back into place with startling clarity. It was as though he had traveled a long, long journey in a space of seconds.

"Marc!" Frightenedly.

It was Toffee who had screamed, and Marc turned quickly toward her. Then he came close to screaming himself. Something had happened to the girl. She had grown so terribly short all of a sudden! And the clerk too. Neither of them rose to a height quite even with his waist. They were both staring up at him in open-mouthed horror.

"What's happened to you?" Marc gasped.

"To us!" Toffee cried. "It's you! What are you doing up there?"

"Up where?" Marc asked. Then suddenly he glanced about him, and his breath made a startled rattling sound at the back of his throat.

At once, Marc could neither deny nor believe what he saw. A dreadful confusion crowded his senses as he regarded the space of thin air that stretched between his feet and the floor. Impossibly he had elevated to a height of about three feet. And he was still rising!

"Oh, Lord!" he yelled.

"Please keep your voice down," the clerk said desperately. "It's bad enough what you're doing, without yelling about it. If this is some advertising stunt . . ."

"Keep my voice down?" Marc said unhappily. "I can't even keep myself down!"

"It's the explosion!" Toffee cried with sudden realization. "All that stuff floating around in the basement! Now you're doing it, too!"

"Oh, my God!" Marc cried. The exclamation was prompted simultaneously by the terrible realization of his condition and the fact that even while they had been talking he had risen an additional foot into the air.

"I'm going higher!"

THE clerk steadied himself uncertainly against the counter. "Please, sir!" he quavered. "You'll have to stop that at once. I'll give you a room, a whole floor, if you'll only stop!"

"You shut up, you quivering ninny," Marc gritted. "Do you think I actually want to do this sort of thing?"

"I don't know," the clerk said uncertainly. "I can't think why you should. I'm sure I'd hate it myself."

"Here!" Toffee yelled. "Take my hand! I'll pull you down!"

Marc reached out to Toffee, but too quickly; the sudden

movement caused him to veer away from her. He drifted to one side, revolved helplessly, then moved away.

"Help!" he yelled. "For Pete's sake, help!"

Toffee stood staring at him, too terror stricken to move. She watched, transfixed, as he soared drunkenly across the broad foyer, apparently marking the tide of the air conditioning.

"Oh, Mona!" she murmured. "He's sailing like a kite in an autumn wind!"

Up till this time the foyer had remained blissfully deserted, but this was not a condition destined to endure. At the worst possible moment, just as Marc drifted wordlessly past the doorway, a company of diners entered from the dining room. Four in all, two men and two women, they walked into the room, stopped, observed a figure going past overhead, floating lazily in mid-air like an agonized leaf on the tide, and fell into a tense silence. All four of them stared hauntedly into space for a time. Then one of the ladies, of a lesser fortitude than the others, reached out and took her companion's arm in a death grip.

"I could have sworn I saw . . . !"

The man, a portly individual with a grey senatorial mane, reached out and, without hesitation, clapped a hand over the lady's mouth.

"No, you didn't, dear," he said quietly, "we just won't speak of it."

Together, the four turned and silently filed back into the dining room.

"I'd like to enquire about the brandy sauce," the old gentleman said through clenched teeth. "I may sue this place before I'm through."

In the meantime, Toffee had taken out in hot pursuit of Marc. "Grab something!" she panted, running along beneath him. "Grab something and hold on!"

The words came dimly to Marc through the pounding panic in his mind, but he obeyed them automatically. He reached out and felt frantically for something to take hold of. He had risen by now to a height of about eight feet and was circling toward the fountain. It was destiny that guided him to the statue.

He caught hold of the stone lady and grappled to make his grasp firm. If at this point in the proceedings the mistress of the fountain did not reach out and slap Marc it was more because she was made of stone than because of the place where he grabbed her. The effect bordered narrowly on the obscene and

became even more questionable as Marc took a toe hold on the lady's mid-section. It was precisely at this moment that the elevator doors directly across from the fountain slid open and a delegation of conventioning club ladies arrived.

As a unit the ladies quitted the car, started forward, then stopped short. Twenty-two well-padded bosoms rose and fell sharply and twenty-two discreetly tinted mouths opened on a single gasp of horror.

"Would you look at that!" one of the ladies blurted.

"I'm trying not to," another answered in a shocked whisper. "What is he trying to do to her?"

"I shudder to think. But look where he's got hold of her!"

"I can't," another moaned, closing her eyes tight. "It's too awful! If anyone ever grabbed me like that . . . !" Her voice shuddered away into silence.

"Police!"

SO soon did the others pick up the cry, there was no way of telling which of the ladies had started it. Suddenly, the foyer shrieked from end to end and top to bottom with a call to all officialdom to come and defend the honor of the besieged statue. The ladies, milling frantically among themselves, were screaming themselves into a fair frenzy.

At the fountain Toffee was lending her voice to the general confusion. The sight of Marc clinging to another woman, whether of stone or flesh, did not set well with the redhead.

"You stop that!" she snapped from the edge of the pool. "You let go of that marble huzzy before I come up there and knock her block off!"

"Don't be silly!" Marc called back unhappily. "She's not real. Besides, I can't let go!"

"I don't care about that," Toffee said. "What burns me up is what you're probably thinking up there."

"Good grief!" Marc cried. "I'm not thinking anything!"

"Oh, no?" Toffee sneered. "No man on earth could grab a woman the way you've grabbed that one and not be thinking something."

"Stop blathering nonsense," Marc said furiously, "and do something. Help me get down from here."

"You bet I will," Toffee said grimly. And with that she stepped lightly to the wall of the pool, peeled off her coat and stepped down into the water.

"No!" Marc yelled. "No!"

"Oh, my land!" one of the club ladies shrieked above the others. "Now there's a naked woman swimming around in the pool!"

"It's probably that poor statue trying to get away!" one of her sisters replied.

As Toffee swam toward the pedestal and the statue, the doors of the Wynant became crowded with shoving spectators who had been attracted by the din inside. The foyer began to fill rapidly. Behind the desk, a door opened and the manager of the Wynant ran to the desk clerk. He was a plum-cheeked, small man with dark hair and, at the moment, an extremely florid complexion. He grabbed the clerk by the shoulder and swung him around.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. He glanced toward the statue. "Who is that man up there? What is he doing? And that woman?"

The clerk trembled under his grasp. "I don't know," he said weakly. "I told them they couldn't stay here."

"Do something!" the manager piped. "This isn't a fun house!"

"Would you swear to it?" the clerk pleaded.

It was just as Toffee had reached the pedestal and was starting upward toward Marc and the statue that the elevator door slid open for a second time, and Mrs. Arbuthner-Wright, a small invalid of advanced years and means, manoeuvred her wheelchair into the tumultuous foyer. Mrs. Arbuthner-Wright had occupied the Wynant penthouse suite for almost twenty years now. Starting across the foyer, she braked her chair to a sudden stop and observed the activity at the fountain with an interested but unperturbed eye. She turned to the manager.

"Well, I'll be damned," she commented dryly. "It's about time this place got a floor show." She looked back at the statue. "You've got to give him credit for spunk. But I'll lay odds on the statue."

But the manager did not hear her. He only knew that the impossible had happened; the reputation of the Wynant had been placed in jeopardy. It had to be stopped at any cost. Shoving the trembling clerk aside, he dodged around the end of the desk and forced his way through the crowd to the brink of the pool. He climbed quickly to the wall of the pool just as Toffee reached Marc and went determinedly about the business of trying

to dislodge him from his curvesome anchorage.

"There's no cause for excitement!" the manager yelled, turning to face the crowd. "It's really nothing!"

"Maybe you call it nothing," one of the club ladies snorted with fiery indignation.

"No! No!" the manager yelled. He held up his hands for quiet. "Listen to me! You don't understand! Nothing wrong is going on here!" It was better to defend these demented vandals than have the good name of the Wynant soiled. "These people are only cleaning the statue!"

"Oh, yeah!" a small, shabby-looking man sneered. "That statue'll never be clean again as long as she lives!"

THE manager glanced wretchedly behind him and shuddered as he realized that current activities did nothing to substantiate the lie he had just told; never had so many pairs of grappling arms and legs combined themselves in one place to give such a glaring picture of pure, wanton abandon. With Marc clutching the statue, and Toffee clutching Marc, the statue seemed to be clutching herself with a new desperation that could never possibly have been achieved by mere chiseled stone; the poor dumb thing seemed suddenly to realize that not only her modesty but also her honor was at stake.

"Let go of her, you debauched floater!" Toffee hissed in Marc's ear. "Let go of her before I tear you apart!"

"I can't," Marc panted, hanging on for dear life. "Do you want me to get spiked on the chandelier?"

"Better that than atrophied to this naked trollop!" Toffee said.

"If I were that statue," one of the club ladies whispered, "I'd never be able to face my friends again."

"Oh, I don't know, lady," said a rather dapper but vague-looking gentleman. "You know how statues are. They're always standing around without any clothes on and leering at each other. In that statue's crowd this sort of thing is just child's play."

"What kind of children play like that?" the woman snapped.

"What kind of children? Do I look like the kind of a man who goes around prying into the affairs of children?" He drew himself up. "Lady, are you trying to trap me into an argument about children?"

In the meantime the manager had turned his efforts from

the outraged crowd to the entangled couple clinging to the statue. "Come down from there!" he bawled. "Come down this instant!"

Almost as though at his command, the struggle on the statue came to an abrupt end. Marc, with a cry of warning, suddenly lost his grip and lurched to one side. Toffee tightened her hold on his neck and clung fast. In the next instant, entirely under the pull of Toffee's weight, they plunged together downward and into the pool below. There was a murmur from the crowd. Then there was a brief scream from the manager as, in jumping to avoid the splash, he lost his footing and joined the pair in the water.

The crowd watched tensely as the three heads disappeared beneath the surface of the pool, then soggly reappeared. A murmur of comment rose throughout the room, then suddenly silenced with a gasp.

One of the heads was not behaving at all as it should; it not only reappeared, but continued to move higher and higher into the air dragging its lank and dripping body after it.

Slowly, Marc rose entirely out of the pool, hovered for a moment, and then came to rest, his feet resting lightly and exactly on the surface of the water. The soaking he had just received had provided him with enough extra poundage that his buoyancy had been somewhat tempered but not entirely destroyed. A smothered cry of dismay echoed around him as he stood blandly on the surface of the pool, then leaned forward to knock the water out of his ears.

The other two heads swiveled about to regard him with contrasting degrees of interest. For a moment the manager stared at Marc, then slowly sank out of sight again beneath the green obscurity of a lily pad.

Toffee turned graciously to the sea of gaping faces around her.

"Give me a hand someone," she said.

"Not me, lady," a man near the edge said. "With the company you keep, I wouldn't give you so much as a clipping off my fingernail."

Toffee glanced around for a volunteer, then suddenly dived down to join the manager beneath the lily pad.

Help was on its way at last and it wore a dark blue uniform. For the first time since its erection the lofty ceiling of the Wynant echoed back the firm and hurried tread of flat feet.

Across the room Mrs. Arbuthner-Wright wheeled her chair back into the elevator and smilingly plucked at the operator's sleeve.

"Remind me to renew my lease on the penthouse this week, Joe," she said. "After twenty years this place is beginning to be interesting."



Chapter Five

MEANWHILE, Julie Pillsworth had not only lost her poise, but a shocking amount of bodily moisture; a good full-lunged cry in the private confines of her bed had done nothing to erase the memory of her husband disporting himself loosely about the landscape with a strange redhead under the very noses of their neighbors.

Julie dared not draw any conclusions concerning the affair of the trellis; there were too many emotions involved, and she, having formed her marriage on what she firmly believed to be a solid foundation of logic and sound theory, was not practiced in the ways of emotion. Suddenly, emotionally, Julie was in a strange land without a guide, at a ball game without a program, up a creek without a paddle. Briefly, she was no end confused and upset.

Perhaps Julie might have eventually reached the right conclusion and even done the right thing, for in the back of her mind was the vague feeling that Marc's sudden burst of misbehavior was the result of some obscure failing in herself. She might have, that is, if May Springer and Jewel Drummer hadn't appeared on the scene just as her thoughts were turning in that

direction.

May was a small, bird-boned, heron-faced woman with a voice as slight and chirping as the mentality which it served. Jewel was the other side of the picture: dog-jawed, thunder voiced and overwhelmingly double-breasted. These two had long since elected themselves to be Julie's "best friends," and now that Julie was in trouble, they had come to help. In short, this was just the chance they had been waiting for.

The three women watched tensely as the maid left the tea things on the table and departed from the living room through the hall. Julie instantly returned her tear-stained face to her handkerchief. May and Jewel exchanged a look and hitched themselves forward in their chairs in the manner of a pair of ditch diggers rolling up their sleeves to go to work.

"I wouldn't hesitate a second," May piped. "I'd start divorcing the bum right now. The time to let him have it is the first minute you hear about the other woman. And, honey, you *saw* her! I did too for that matter. When that awful clatter started, and I looked out of my window and saw your husband with that woman . . . ! Well! I'll testify, honey! They'll never shut me up."

"Me too, dear," Jewel put in heavily from beyond the rolling hills of her bosom. "Of course I didn't actually see anything, but I heard it all. The only thing for you to do is just close up the house and go to Reno while it's all fresh in your mind. And let your lawyer do the talking. Remember that."

"I know you feel better, now that you've decided," May said. "Jewel and I will help you get your affairs with the house straightened up." She leaned forward and tapped Jewel lightly on the knee. "Won't we, Jewel?"

Julie looked up moistly from her handkerchief. "But I *haven't* decided," she wailed. "That's just it; I can't seem to decide anything. Marc has never done anything like this before. All of a sudden he just blew up the basement and started acting strange. I just can't get over the feeling that maybe it's partly my fault somehow . . ."

"Ridiculous!" Jewel snorted.

"Of course!" May chimed.

"Oh, I don't know," Julie said hopelessly. "I just have a feeling that Marc isn't to blame, that something strange is happening to him, and he can't help himself. Maybe he needs me very badly right now."

"What's happened to him isn't so strange," Jewel pronounced. "It's just that lousy male chemistry at work. The devils all get that way sooner or later. Men are just a bunch of brutes, all of them. If there's anything mysterious about all this it's only how you manage to feel so damned charitable about it."

Albeit unwittingly on this occasion, Jewel, in all her history of premeditated lies, had never spoken a greater untruth. There was something far more mysterious going on than just Julie's feeling of charity. It wanted only a trip to the basement to be discovered.

The thing that was taking place in the subterranean regions of the house was stranger than either truth or fiction and twice as paralyzing.

THE fact of the matter was that George had finally arrived on earth. Starting logically at the beginning, with the first principle of haunting as set down in the Guide, George had descended to the place of his earthly part's untimely demise. Here, according to the rules, there were certain procedures of investigation to be followed; but George was far too excited with his sudden condition of release to be bothered with those. Like a giddy school girl with her first party dress, he could hardly wait to try on his ectoplasm. Even in this, however, there were difficulties involved.

Unfortunately, as George saw it, the process of ectoplasmic materialization depended largely upon the concentration of the entity involved; first he had to thoroughly picture in his mind the earthly form that he was to assume, and then, from that mental image, shape his earthly manifestation. The trouble was that George's powers of concentration had never been anything to brag about.

George's observance of the human form had always been extremely sketchy at best. Faced with the problem of shaping such a form for himself, he was somewhat at a loss. Pressing his memory to the limit he could only recall that there were such things as arms, legs, head and torsos, but the exact number and arrangement of these appointments completely escaped him. Try as he would to think, nothing very clear came to mind. Finally, in desperation, he decided just to give it the old trial-and-error and make it up as he went along. He might have done better to find himself an anatomy chart.

George decided on an arm and a hand to begin with; they seemed a rather utilitarian item to have in the event that you wanted to go around picking things up. He gave his thoughts over to that appendage.

The process worked with surprising facility. In the very next moment an arm, neatly tapering off to a hand, promptly appeared, balanced on the elbow, on the basement floor. George looked at it and felt a thrill of pride at the accomplishment; it didn't matter that the thing was rather starkly at loose ends with itself.

Glowing with the success of his first venture, George decided on a head as the subject of his next efforts. Without a moment's hesitation, but several feet above the arm, a head appeared in thin air, bearing a duplicate face to the one of Marc Pillsworth. It was wonderfully lifelike. It turned, looked down at the arm, and frowned.

Now George wasn't so sure; somehow things didn't seem to be shaping up quite as he'd expected. He shrugged. Probably matters would be improved when everything was more connected together. He thought for a moment and remembered the matter of legs.

A moment later a leg and accompanying foot popped into being, but oddly it appeared in a position near the head, a bit to one side with the foot leading off rakishly toward the ceiling.

The head turned and regarded this phenomenon with worried interest. Definitely, things weren't balancing out at all well. But what was there to do but to go on with it now that it had gotten this far? And then the head smiled; George had remembered. There should be two arms and two legs in place of just one. In the grisly moment that followed, the arm on the floor was joined by a mate, as was the leg hovering in the air by the head.

The head peered with unwarranted pride from between the floating legs and smiled on its accomplishments. Now George felt he was really getting somewhere. There remained only the torso to be materialized. George thought about this and wished it into being.

THE picture that followed was lurching madness. Somehow a body had appeared, blanced upside down on its elbows, in the very center of the basement floor. And if that wasn't enough, the head had apparently been severed and placed, for the sake

of pure frightfulness, between the knees.

George, now that the body was complete, recognized the error at once. With a blush, he dissolved the head from between the knees and concentrated it down towards the shoulders. The scene instantly became more sane. Now there was a complete and perfectly formed man standing on his elbows in the center of the basement. For a moment he remained rigidly upright, then he wavered and fell flat on his back.

George gazed elatedly down his long length for a moment, then laughed and sat up. Of course! Now everything was just as it should be. He didn't know how he had come to be clothed, and he had no idea that he was wearing an exact duplicate of the suit Marc was wearing, but he considered himself to be a rather natty specimen. All in all, George couldn't have been more pleased. He got to his feet, saluted his new existence with a rather expertly executed jig step, and looked about . . .

After a casual search of the basement, just to make sure that the corpse of Marc Pillsworth was no longer kicking around anywhere, George directed his attention to the wine bins. If he noticed the floating debris on the ceiling he didn't know that it constituted a condition that was in any way unnatural. He selected a bottle from one of the shelves, opened it, and took a swallow. Immediately, he was overcome with a feeling of enormous disappointment; this couldn't possibly be that whiskey stuff that mortals seemed to miss so much in the upper world. Whiskey, according to report, could cause a poor man to be rich, a peasant to be king. Certainly this drab liquid was far too pallid for that kind of magic. George replaced the bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He glanced around at the stairs across from the bins and went over to investigate.

He stopped at the foot of the steps and listened. Distantly, there were voices above—and, therefore, mortals. George decided that now was as good as any other time to plunge into things; perhaps he could pick up a few pointers. He started up the steps, then stopped thoughtfully.

Perhaps it would be better not to burst in upon these mortals in a state of complete materialization; it might be just a bit too much for them. Maybe it would be better to break the news of his arrival gradually, let them just suspect for awhile and give himself time to grow on them. That was the ticket; he was sure that even the High Council couldn't find anything wrong with

that idea.

George held one foot out before him and dissolved it. Then taking the next step, he repeated the process with the other foot.

Causing himself to disappear a bit at a time he rose slowly toward the world of the mortals . . .

“THERE’S no use hiding in your handkerchief,” May Springer said. “The sooner you talk to your lawyer, the sooner you’ll stop crying.”

Julie looked up uncertainly. “Maybe you’re right,” she said. “But I don’t know. Oh, I don’t know anything!”

“What you need,” Jewel said emphatically, “is a drink to give you courage. We all do.” She turned to May. “Run out to the bar, pet, and bring us a bottle. This damned tea isn’t doing any of us any good.”

May, accustomed to acting on Jewel’s command, followed instructions. She left the room in the direction of the study and in a moment was back with a bottle and three glasses.

“That’s the stuff,” Jewel said heartily. “Clear out those tea things and put ’er down. I’ll pour.”

With everything arranged to her satisfaction, Jewel filled the glasses with a quick and lavish hand. She handed brimming glasses to May and Julie, then raised her own glass to propose a toast.

“To divorce!” she boomed. “And the damnation of husbands!”

Julie raised her glass, but only half-heartedly. Then without even tasting the drink, she placed it on the table in front of her.

“There’s nothing like whiskey to open the mind and the pores so that the poison can get out,” Jewel announced loudly. “It’s wonderful stuff.”

It was just at this moment that the invisible George drifted expectantly into the room. He stopped short and pricked up his ears. Whiskey! The very thing he was looking for, and here were mortals fairly wallowing in the stuff. He observed the ladies with an eye mainly to the glasses in their hands. Then he noticed Julie’s glass, languishing on the table. It was a circumstance that plainly wanted mending. George drifted quickly forward.

For a moment George only stood regarding the drink covetously. Then he returned to observe the ladies. Since this was to be his first manifestation before an audience he felt he should

make the most of the materials at hand. Considering the ladies in turn, he decided that he disliked Jewel Drummer the most. He waited carefully until that turret-faced matron was looking in his direction, then lifted the glass with a broad flourish. Even to George the effect of the drink suddenly flying from the table and into the air seemed rather arresting.

To Jewel the effect was downright terrifying. Her glass raised to her lips, she suddenly started, misdirected her aim and poured the entire drink into her yawning bodice. With horrified reflex she jolted out of her chair and hurled the glass from her. As the glass crashed against the opposite wall, George tossed off his drink and replaced the glass on the table.

In unison, Julie and May turned puzzled eyes on the palpitating Jewel.

"The glass!" Jewel blurted in tones of terror. "The glass!" Then suddenly she gulped and sat down again as the bottle, like the glass, leaped lightly from the table, upended itself over the glass, filled it, then replaced itself.

"The bottle!" Jewel boomed.

"She wants the bottle," May told Julie. "God, what a thirst that woman's got! Did you see her knock off that drink? And now she's yelling for the bottle. She's fairly lusting for the stuff. Give her the bottle, dear, before she starts breaking the furniture."

Julie quickly snatched up the bottle from the table and held it out to Jewel.

"Here, dear," she said, "take it."

Jewel pressed frightenedly against the back of her seat.

"Take it easy!" she screamed. "Don't bring it near me!"

"She fights the stuff all the time," May told Julie confidently. "Of course I've never really been sure before, but I've suspected all along."

"I must cling to my reason," Jewel babbled desperately to herself. "I mustn't give way!"

"What's that, dear?" May asked soothingly.

"Maybe we should pretend nothing's happened," Julie suggested anxiously. "You know, just go on talking and pay no attention to her."

"It might help," May agreed.

FOR a moment the two ladies engaged in frenzied and meaningless conversation, cautiously watching Jewel from the

corners of their eyes. Jewel, her eyes riveted with terrible fascination on the table, seemed to have gone into a trance.

In the meantime, George, for his part, was suffering the pangs of disappointment. To all intents and purposes, except for a certain feeling of inner warmth, he was feeling much the same as always. The liquor had failed to perform the miracle he had expected. But perhaps that was only because he hadn't had enough. Once more he reached out toward the glass and lifted it from the table.

With a final bellow of madness Jewel heaved her bulk from the chair and bolted from the room.

"God in heaven!" she roared from the hallway. "Let me out of here!"

May rose unhurriedly. "I guess the struggle was too much for her," she said mildly. "You just stay where you are, dear. I'll take her home. Poor Jewel. She'll need someone to talk to, to confide in, and I'm her best friend." Then in an undertone: "I've always thought she belonged in an institution anyway. I'll call you later."

When they had gone, Julie relinquished her spirit to the quiet atmosphere of the room. She had worried and cried, she felt, until she hadn't any emotion left in her. Now she only felt numb. Then she started slightly as a muffled gurgling sound briefly broke the quiet. She glanced around quickly, but there was nothing. Then the doorbell rang. She turned her attention toward the hallway as Marie passed through to answer the door. After a moment the maid returned to the living room.

"There are a couple of gentlemen," she reported. "They say they're from the government and must see you."

Julie was pensive for a moment; she couldn't imagine why anyone from the government should want an interview with her. She shrugged.

"All right, Marie," she said. Then she glanced at the bottle and the glasses on the table; not quite the proper fittings for a chat with the government. "I'll see them in the study."

She rose and started from the room. Then suddenly she heard a small scraping noise and turned back quickly. For a moment she stood still, staring at the table. Could the bottle actually have been moving just as she turned around? But of course that was silly.

Just nerves, she told herself, and continued into the hallway. After introductions, Julie led the men to the study, gave

them seats and took a place opposite them. She would have known they were from the government even if she hadn't been told; with that careful, unrevealing look, they only needed an official stamp of certification on their foreheads.

"Is there something I can do for you?" she asked.

"Well, we're not exactly sure," one of the men said. "However, we have reason to believe you can." He cleared his throat. "To get directly to the point, we are interested in an explosion which we believe took place on these premises last night."

"Oh, dear!" Julie said. "Have the neighbors complained?"

"No, Mrs. Pillsworth, nothing like that. You see, we have mechanical means of knowing about explosions. There is a device in existence which records the precise time, location, magnitude and nature of even the slightest explosion anywhere on the Earth's surface. One was recorded here last night. The nature, however, was undetermined and that's why we decided to investigate."

Julie nodded. She told them of Marc's basement laboratory and his experiments to make heavy substances lighter than air. She explained about the explosion.

"The experiment was a complete failure, I guess," she concluded.

"I see," the man said. "Would you mind, though, if we took a look around in the basement anyway?"

"No, I don't mind," Julie said. "But judging from what I saw down there last night you won't find anything but a lot of rubble."

"Of course," the man said. "But we can't take a chance on a possible new type of explosive. It might be of military interest. Just in case, Mrs. Pillsworth, do you know where your husband kept his notes on the experiment?"

Julie thought for a moment. "In a little black book, I believe," she said. "He just left it lying around loose down there."

The man nodded and got up. "We'll have the maid show us where it is," he said. "Thank you very much."

WHEN they were gone, Julie leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. She was so weary, just from talking to people. Then she sat up quickly. She could have sworn she'd heard something out in the hall, a furtive noise, as though someone had cautiously let himself in the front door. She got up and went to the doorway of the study.

"Marc!" she called, then suddenly froze where she was.

Never had she seen two uglier customers than the ones that were now cowering before her in the shadows of the hallway. Two very dark little men with gross black beards, thick-lensed glasses and derby hats. They seemed to be exact duplicates of each other, as though the same awful mistake had happened twice. Their eyes shifted nervously before Julie's horrified gaze. They looked precisely like a pair of spies.

"Who are you two?" Julie asked uneasily. "What are you doing here?"

The two shifted uncomfortably, glanced at each other. Finally the one closest to Julie spoke.

"I'm Gerald Blemish," he said, and nodded toward the other. "This is my twin brother, Cecil. Of course those names are entirely fictitious, but we haven't used our real ones for so long we've forgotten them. Then, on the other hand, maybe those are our real names only we just don't know it. We came with the men from the government."

"Oh," Julie said relieved. "You're with the government too."

"Oh, no," Gerald Blemish said. "Heavens no. We just followed them in. We're spies."

"Spies?" Julie said incredulously. "Oh, dear! With government men right in the house?"

"Oh, we follow them everywhere," the brother called Cecil said. "We find things out faster that way."

"I can see where you would," Julie said. "Haven't they ever caught you?"

"Oh, yes. They catch us all the time. That's one reason they like to have us around; we're handy in case they want to arrest someone and don't know who to arrest." He glanced at his brother and sniggered noisily. "They think we're harmless."

"We've been arrested in so many shake-ups," Gerald offered, "we're known as the Double Malts to some people. We photograph very well in the newsreels. You know, being taken into custody with our hats over our faces. That's why we wear hats, just for pictures."

"Oh, yes," Cecil put in. "As a matter of fact, we used to be in the movies professionally. We played spies exclusively. Because we look so awful. In fact that's how we got started as spies. After seeing us as spies on the screen all the time, everyone got to believe we really were spies. No one would come near us."

Gerald nodded. "When we went to call on anyone, people refused to answer the door."

"It sort of depressed us at first," Cecil said. "And then, on top of that, the movies stopped using us. The vogue in spies turned to beautiful women. They said we were old hat. That put us out of work. But there wasn't anything else we knew how to do. No one would believe we weren't spies so we just had to go on being them."

"I see," Julie said, feeling that she had wandered into a world of complete madness. "What country do you spy for?"

The brothers glanced quickly at each other, then lowered their eyes to the floor. "That's just the trouble," Gerald said in saddened tones. "We don't work for anyone. We're unsponsored. No country will hire us because we look so much like spies. Other spies refuse to be seen with us."

"I don't wonder," Julie said. "With faces like yours. I wouldn't want to be seen with you, and I'm not even a spy."

THE dreadful brothers looked up with unexpected happiness. They smiled on Julie crookedly from the corners of their mouths.

"Oh, I'm so glad you said that," Cecil said. "We were afraid we were beginning to lose our looks. Do you think we're really vile? You're not just saying that?"

"I think you're perfectly horrible," Julie said with a feeling of delusion. "And I mean every word of it."

"You're wonderful to say that," Cecil drooled unattractively. He reached inside his coat and drew out a soiled piece of paper. "Would you like the secret to the atom bomb? I know it's kind of old stuff, but maybe you'd get a kick out of just having it to show your friends. We've had it for years now, only no one would take it from us; they wouldn't believe it was real. Take it as a token of our appreciation."

Julie backed sharply away. "No, thank you."

"We've stolen all kinds of plans and formulas and things," Cecil said. "Even secret recipes. But everyone acts like you do; they won't let us give them a thing. Our room is filled with secret papers. We could overthrow any government in the world just like that, if someone would just take us seriously."

"That's too bad," Julie said.

"The trouble is we've got no reputation; we've never done anything terrible enough to get a break."

"Yeah," Gerald slurred, "That's the trouble. But we'll make it yet. We'll do something perfectly monstrous one of these days and then we'll be in. We've got ambition and talent."

"I'm sure you have," Julie said.

"You're very nice to encourage us like this," Cecil said. "And we won't let you down either. We're very good at our trade. Would you like to see us skulk?"

"Skulk?" Julie said. "How do you mean?"

"Oh, just skulk. You know, slither and sneak around and things like that." He turned to Gerald. "Let's show her, huh?"

"All right!" Gerald said. "I'm ready."

"Now wait . . . !" Julie began, but before she could say anything more the two had disappeared into the shadows, and suddenly the hallway and the room behind her were filled with strange furtive scurrying sounds. As she turned to look behind her in the study, she saw one of the frightful brothers dart soundlessly from beneath the desk and disappear behind the drapes at the window. The other peered at her momentarily from behind a chair. They moved around the room with a rapidity and stealth that was maddening. They were everywhere.

"Stop that!" Julie cried. "For heavens sake, stop it!"

Instantly the two brothers returned before her, grinning breathlessly.

"Isn't it sinister?" Cecil asked. "Doesn't it just make your spine crawl?"

"I think mine has already crawled," Julie said. "I wouldn't be surprised to see it scuttling out the door under its own power at this very moment."

"We could skulk all day and never get tired." He held out a sheaf of papers. "I got these out of the desk."

Julie took the papers timidly. "Don't you think you ought to spy on the gentlemen down in the basement now?" she suggested. "They're probably wondering what's keeping you."

"That's right," Gerald said. "Well, we'll sneak along now. It's too bad we haven't more time. We'd show you how we lurk. Everyone says we're the best lurkers in the business."

AND SUDDENLY the two were gone, faded into the shadows. Shaking her head, Julie turned back to the study to replace the papers in the desk. Then she stopped as a sharp scream of terror came from the kitchen; the awful brothers had evidently

discovered Marie.

Julie was just returning from the desk when the telephone rang. Without waiting for Marie, who was probably in no condition to talk at the moment anyway, she continued to the hallway and answered it herself.

"Mrs. Pillsworth?" a male voice inquired heavily. "This is the police."

"Police?" Julie said. Her first thought turned instantly toward Marc. "My husband! Has something happened to Marc?"

"I'll say, lady," the voice replied. "He's been arrested."

"Arrested? What for?"

"Well, I don't know how to tell you, lady. It sounds silly, and you ain't going to believe it, but he was run in for attacking a statue."

"Attacking a statue!"

"That's what the description says. That an' a lot more that I can't repeat on the telephone. It seems like him and this little redheaded hellcat . . ."

"Oh!" Julie broke in frigidly. "So she's mixed up in it, is she!"

Then suddenly the look of anger faded from Julie's face and became one of pure astonishment. As she had been talking, her attention had been drawn to the living room doorway by a movement there. Now her eyes wide, she stared at a bottle suspended in thin air. Even as she watched, it moved a bit, tilted inquisitively, almost as though it were eavesdropping.

Julie closed her eyes tightly and turned away. She had to get a grip on herself before her nerves gave way completely. She tightened her hold on the telephone.

"You tell my husband," she said, "that he can rot in jail for all I care. I'm going to Reno."

She hung up, passed a trembling hand over her forehead. For a long moment she stood perfectly still. Then, slowly, she turned and forced herself to look at the doorway. As she stared, her face draining white, the bottle tilted smartly and emptied the slight remains of its contents into thin air. There was a moment of electric silence, then the hallway resounded from end to end with the rumblings of an unrestrained burp.

With a smothered cry, Julie sank limply to the floor . . .



Chapter Six

“OH, MY WORD!” the judge said, lifting haunted eyes from the report. “Do you mean this Pillsworth fellow actually did all that to a statue? Before witnesses? It fairly makes my hair stand on end.”

“He did that and more,” the prosecuting attorney said. “Pillsworth is no ordinary man.”

“Either that,” the judge said, “or that statue is no ordinary statue. Where is this fellow? I can hardly wait to get a look at him.”

“No, Your Honor,” the attorney said. “I didn’t mean that. Actually, nothing happened to the statue.”

“Put up a good fight, did she? Good for her.”

“What I mean to say,” the attorney went on patiently, “is that the statue is perfectly all right.”

“Stout girl,” the judge nodded. “I give that statue real credit. There aren’t many women, stone or otherwise, who could go through a seige like that and come out on the right side of things. That statue has got guts. If she were here now it would give me great pleasure to shake that statue’s hand.”

The attorney cleared his throat dryly. “Can’t we drop the

statue, Your Honor?" he suggested.

"After everything else she's been through!" the judge exclaimed. He narrowed his eyes indignantly on the attorney. "Really, sir, do you think that's the human thing to do?"

"I don't mean drop her literally," the attorney protested. "I mean couldn't we just sort of lay her aside for a bit? What I'm getting at is . . ."

"I know perfectly well what you're getting at," the judge broke in hotly. "You can just forget it. I'm beginning to wonder if you're any better than this Pillsworth fellow."

"That's what I wanted to tell you about," the attorney said quickly. "Pillsworth claims he had to grab hold of the statue to keep from floating away into space. He says he's lighter than air."

"My word!" the judge said, thoroughly scandalized. "Does he really? I'm surprised he has the nerve to try to pull a thing like that in court. And the girl? What about her? I understand she was swimming around without any clothes on."

"Well, actually, she had on a sort of shift affair. But it looked like she was naked when she was wet. At best, she's a wild citizen. Seems to regard this whole affair as a sort of picnic. I understand she broke out of her cell last night."

"Oh, dear!" the judge said. "I hope it doesn't leak out. How did she manage it?"

"No one knows," the attorney said. "The girl won't tell. The door was still locked and everything was in order. When they found her this morning she was romping around in the wardrobe and had rigged herself out in a dress from one of those burlesque strippers who were brought in."

"A pretty taste in clothes, eh?"

The attorney nodded. "When the burlesque girl saw her in it, she told her to keep it; said she looked so much better in it than she did herself, she was throwing in the sponge."

"Sponge?" the judge said. "Throwing it in where? Do you mean this stripper threw a sponge at her?"

"I was speaking figuratively," the attorney said patiently.

"I understand that," the judge said with an air of testiness. "You have to speak figuratively when you're going on like this about strippers and such." He laughed foolishly. "I get it; I'm not so old. But about this sponge, was it wet or dry when the girl threw it?"

"I don't know," the attorney said desperately trying to cling

to some small thread of logic in the conversation. "It wasn't mentioned when I heard about it."

"Well, I don't suppose it really matters," the judge said. "A sponge doesn't constitute a deadly weapon either way."

JUST AT that moment one of the doors across the room opened and Toffee appeared before the court. She was followed at a safe distance by an extremely harrassed-looking police matron. The redhead was a study in glitter and pink flesh. Three sequined butterflies garishly highlighted the strategic portions of her anatomy without running any grave danger of obscuring them entirely. A vaporish material dusted with spangles provided a skirt of sorts. It was a dress that fairly begged for blue lights, slow rhythmed music and unrestrained whistles. Toffee presented herself to the court with a spectacular flourish, then turned peevishly to the matron.

"You make another grab at me with those horny talons of yours," she warned, "and I'll flatten you down even with your arch supports."

The matron backed away, afrighted. "Then you keep your hands off those zippers," she said. "They don't allow monkey-shines in the courtroom. And just you wait till the judge hears about you breaking out of your cell."

Toffee smiled enigmatically. She knew the matron would be deviled with that mystery for the rest of her days. And even if the wretched woman ever discovered the truth, she'd never believe it, though the explanation was simple enough. Being a product of Marc's consciousness, Toffee naturally could not exist when he was asleep. So, as she had promised, when Marc had finally fallen asleep, Toffee had disappeared from her cell to return to the valley of Marc's mind. However, when Marc awoke in the morning, she had instantly reappeared. She had simply chosen to rematerialize in the wardrobe rather than her cell.

To Toffee's mind there was really nothing so terribly mysterious about that. Choosing to ignore the matron altogether, she turned her attention to the judge. She waved a hand to the august person of the bench and started forward.

"Here, you . . .!" the matron began.

Toffee swung around menacingly. "Stand your ground, Bertha," she said. "You may wind up wearing those false teeth of yours as a necklace." She turned back to the judge and smiled. "Well, here we are," she greeted airily, "wild-eyed and bushy-

tailed!"

The judge made an indignant choking sound. "Now, look here . . .!" he said.

"I am looking there," Toffee said. "And it's a great disappointment to me."

"Young lady!" the judge roared. "Do you want to be charged with contempt of court?"

"Maybe I'd better warn you, judge," Toffee said coolly. "Don't bully me; I may forget myself and pull a zipper. That would crab your act something awful. Besides, if you charged me for all the contempt I've got for this court there wouldn't be enough money to pay the bill."

"Well!" the judge snorted. "Of all the . . .!"

"You're turning purple, son," Toffee observed mildly. "It's not half becoming, either."

The court audience became tensely hushed as the judge reared back in his seat and opened his mouth. But the eruption failed to come.

Just at that moment the door at the far end of the room opened and Marc, accompanied by a guard, stepped into view. His progress to a position before the bench was not marked with any noticeable tendency toward levitation. Toffee, the judge, the court spectators regarded him with undisguised interest. Marc directed his gaze self-consciously toward his toes.

ONLY THAT morning Marc had made a remarkable discovery; that food tempered his buoyancy and made it possible for him to remain secure to the floor without clutching to anything for anchorage. Whether this was a permanent condition or not, he didn't know, but still it had been a relief to know that he would be able to make his way before the court without appearing on the ceiling.

However, though mightily relieved, Marc was not as elated at this development as he might have been; there were other things to plague him. Julie's message that she was going to Reno, for instance. And the court's probable decision; they were bound to conclude that he was either a criminal or insane or both before they were through with him. He felt that he might just as well drift off into eternity and have it over with as spend the rest of his life locked up, separated from Julie. He raised his head and glanced apprehensively at the court audience.

Julie wasn't there. But he hadn't really expected that she

would be. However, a number of people involved in the affair at the Wynant were in attendance, including the manager and the clerk. Also, there were a pair of the most evil-looking male twins Marc had ever set eyes on. Heavily bearded, wearing thick-lensed glasses, they looked to him like nothing so much as a pair of those spies you used to see in movies. Marc shuddered and turned back to the judge, which was no improvement over the unattractive twins. The judge lifted his gavel.

"The court is now in session!" he thundered.

"And high time, too!" Toffee sang out in agreement.

The judge leaned on the gavel and brought it down solidly on his own hand.

"Damnation!" he bellowed.

"Such low talk for such high places," Toffee commented dryly, turning to Marc.

Marc glanced down at her brief costume and a look of pain assailed his already troubled features.

"Be quiet," he said, almost pleadingly.

"Yes!" the judge said, nursing his hand. "You be quiet!" Then he turned and gazed malevolently at the gathering in general. "The air of insanity which has crept into this court will dissipate itself instantly or I'll clear the hall. I'll clear out the whole kit and kaboodle of you, even the defendants." He turned back to Toffee. "I may clear out the defendants anyway."

The court settled into a state of heavy quiet, and though the air of madness which the judge had spoken of with such great passion had abated, there was the feeling that it was only holding itself in abeyance, that it might reassert itself at any moment with a vengeance. The judge cleared his throat and settled his glasses on his nose.

"Your Honor . . ." the prosecution began.

"Shut up!" the judge snapped peevishly. "I want no lengthy speeches from you. This case is plain enough without any highfalutin' verbage from any legal eagles."

The judge elaborated, going on at some length about the degree and quality of the silence he wished from all concerned. No one noticed that the door to the courtroom had quietly opened, permitted the passage of a quantity of what appeared to be merely fresh air, then gently closed again.

IT HAD been a cruel night for George; the ways of earthly civilization had dealt with him without temperance or human-

ity. The poor ghost, having eavesdropped on Julie's telephone conversation, had begun to have a horrible suspicion that Marc Pillsworth was still alive and that he, George, was on earth under false pretenses. George had been distressed at this; here was a set of circumstances that the High Council wouldn't even begin to approve.

Gathering that the mortal in question was in the hands of the police, George had finally . . . and with all the best intentions in the world . . . decided to check this appalling piece of information for himself on the bare hope that there might have been some mistake.

Placing himself, rather invisibly of course, in the hands of the rapid transit system, George had received the ride of a lifetime. He had covered the length and breadth of the city several times over without ever arriving at his destination. It was all too much for George's powers of comprehension. He had been shoved, stepped on, pushed and sat on by humans almost beyond the limits of his endurance. Now, bruised and beaten, he had finally arrived at the place he sought. He gazed on the courtroom without enthusiasm, sighted Marc and drifted disconsolately forward, his hopes withering as he moved.

"Of course," the judge was saying, "this case on the face of things, is so silly I blush to be trying it in this court. Actually, it belongs in an asylum." He fixed Marc with a cold stare. "Do you still contend, Pillsworth, that you were clinging to that statue solely for reasons of security? In other words, do you persist in the mad delusion that you were floating through space?"

"Yes, Your Honor," Marc said earnestly. "You see, I have been engaged in an experiment . . ."

"Enough!" the judge snorted. "Don't go on about it. It's too disgusting." With a forefinger he pressed his glasses to the bridge of his nose. "That settles it. The only thing for you to do, Pillsworth, is to prove your point to the court. In other words, demonstrate that you really are . . . uh . . . buoyant. Briefly, either you float, here and now, for the court or you go to the pokey and wait for a mental examination. And let me warn you against any mechanical devices."

"But, Your Honor!" Marc protested. "Only this morning I discovered that . . ."

"Float!" the judge demanded. "Go on. Float!"

An expectant quiet ensued as Marc stood miserably before

the bench. Several photographers moved quietly forward, shifting fresh bulbs into their cameras. Toffee turned to Marc anxiously.

"Go on!" she hissed. "Show the old goat!"

Marc looked at her unhappily. "I can't!" he whispered.

During this interval, looking remarkably haunted for a ghost, George arrived at a position between Marc and Toffee. He gazed on Marc's face and frowned; there was no question about it, his mortal part had played him a foul trick; Marc was still alive. George was undecided as to how to meet the situation. His inclination was to stick around just for revenge, but there was the warning from the Council. Then, too, there was the possibility that Marc might tick off at any moment; after all, living in this earth world was an extremely perilous business from all that George had seen of it. In that case, everything would be all right. Weighing the pros and cons of the matter, George turned to regard Toffee for the first time. Instantly his mood brightened.

There was hardly anything that George could see about Toffee that he didn't like, and he could see virtually everything. Particularly, he admired her taste in clothes. Clearly, here was a girl who had a bit of flair and imagination. However, the small piece of metal sticking out untidily at the waist offended George's sense of perfection. That didn't belong there, he was sure of it. As George reached out to pluck the offending blemish he had no idea that with the mere flick of a finger he was about to touch off a roaring panic.

IN THE moment that followed there was a small zipping sound which was instantly followed by a startled gasp, as Toffee, to the electrification of all present, suddenly stood before the court bereft of two of her most valuable butterflies and all of her skirt. There was a bit of silence after that, followed by a sudden flash of a camera, a sprinkling of half-hysterical applause, and one small scream.

The judge, starting from his chair to lean across the bench for a better view of the performance, reverted to his former shade of purple. His face bloated with rage, he was rendered incapable of anything more coherent than a furious sputter. Amazingly, Toffee seemed to share the judge's feelings in the matter. She whirled on Marc with eyes that glittered.

"Of all the shabby stunts!" she stormed. "Trying to stall

for time by making a show out of me! You lousy sensation-alist!"

"What . . . ?" Marc began innocently.

But it was too late. Already Toffee had doubled her fist and wound up for the pitch. The next thing Marc knew he had been dealt with harshly in the vicinity of his nose. He lost his footing and sailed backwards.

Toffee watched the results of her handiwork with satisfaction. However she was somewhat astonished at how heavy Marc had been in the felling. The truth of the matter, though, was that she had knocked down not one Marc Pillsworth but two. George, caught at the side of the head by Toffee's elbow staggered backwards, tripped over a chair, and fell sprawling on his back.

Marc landed heavily on the floor, skidded crazily out of sight under the table, struck his head smartly against a leg and lay inert. In the same second, the matron reached a restraining hand toward Toffee, then started back with a cry of fright; the girl had suddenly vanished. Simultaneously, George, in a fit of confusion and surprise, fully and completely materialized himself.

All this happened in the flick of an eyelash.

As far as the court was concerned the incident was fairly simple: Toffee had knocked Marc to the floor, then fled the room. All eyes turned toward George under the misapprehension that he was Marc.

The judge beat out a deafening thunder with his gavel.

"Order!" he screamed. "Order!"

The court quieted. The matron ran forward to the bench.

"She's gone!" the harried woman cried. "She's just disappeared!"

"Good!" the judge said. "And for heaven's sake don't go looking for her. I hope I never set eyes on that girl as long as I live." He turned to look evilly at George. "Get to your feet," he commanded.

George looked up at the judge and blanched; for a moment he was afraid he'd been recalled to the chambers of the High Council. He got quickly to his feet.

"All right now," the judge said with deadly steadiness. "Float!"

"Float?" George asked.

"Yes, of course, float," the judge snorted. "That's what

we're all waiting for, isn't it? Are you going to float or aren't you?"

George shrugged. There was certainly no accounting for the tastes of these mortals. He couldn't imagine why this man was so insanely anxious to see him float; it seemed to mean the world and all to the poor devil. However, George supposed it would be best to humor him. He settled himself squarely on his feet, closed his eyes, and concentrated. Slowly he began to levitate from the courtroom floor.

When he had risen to a height of about eight feet, he stopped, opened his eyes, and looked down. A sea of widened eyes and opened mouths gaped at him. An excited murmur went through the court. The judge rose up out of his seat like a great gulping porpoise, then fell back heavily.

"Lord love a lobster!" he gasped.

GEORGE gazed on these reactions with amazed satisfaction. Obviously these mortals were pathetically easy to please; if a simple demonstration of levitation could cause this much concern, just think how they'd react to some of his other accomplishments! The ham bone popped out in George's restrained soul like an internal rash.

With a small formal bow, first fore, then aft, the self-dazzled spook sat down with a flourish, placed his hand comfortably behind his neck, and stretched out with suspenseful deliberation. Then, dangling one foot lazily in space, he dissolved his head.

As a low moan issued through the courtroom, one of the photographers nearest this dreadful scene turned to another of his kind.

"You know, Harry," he said in a controlled voice, "I've been thinking. You and me, we've been in this racket an awful long time now."

"Yeah," said Harry. "An awful long time."

"Yeah. Maybe too long. It's no kind of a life for a man with any kind of sensitivity, you know. It's liable to take a bad effect on a guy after a while."

"I know what you mean," Harry said thoughtfully. "You get around too much, see too many screwy things. It might begin to give you a sort of distorted view like."

"Sure. It could even get so bad you could get kind of unbalanced. Maybe it would start with you seein' things that

aren't real."

"Uh-huh," Harry nodded. "Maybe like guys floatin' around in the air without they've got their heads on. Or something like that. Not that I've ever seen no such thing, mind you."

"Of course not. Who would see a crazy thing like that unless it was somebody goin' bugs or somethin'?" The photographer laughed falsely. "It's funny to think a thing like that could happen to a guy."

"Yeah," Harry said. "It's a real laugh. What say we get the hell out of here?"

"You bet! Let's run like the devil!"

Together, the men dropped their cameras to the floor, turned, and ran as fast as they could out of the court room.

Meanwhile, a new groan of horrified amazement had gone through the room. George, in an effort to demonstrate to his audience the very last measure of his paralyzing talent, had introduced a new and even more arresting wrinkle to his performance. Alternately dematerializing and rematerializing in rapid succession, he was blinking on and off like a neon sign.

The judge took one look at this nerve-twisting innovation and rallied to a final effort. He reached for his gavel and brought it down feebly on the bench.

"Dismissed!" he whizzed. "Dismissed! I dismiss everything. For the love of Hannah, *dismissed!*"

Suddenly the court broke into pandemonium. The traffic to the doors was disordered and chaotic as the members of the audience trampled each other to be out of the place. In front of the bench George perceived regretfully that he had lost his audience, dissolved himself for one last time and sank slowly down to the floor.

Beneath the table, Marc roused himself and sat up to rub his head. As he did so, Toffee instantly appeared beside him.

"What happened?" he asked vaguely.

"How should I know?" Toffee asked tartly. "Just when things were getting interesting you passed out and dissolved me." She glanced from beneath the table. "Now it's all over."

She crawled out from beneath the table and gathered the scraps of her costume which had remained abandoned on the floor. As she quickly zipped everything into place, she looked around.

"The judge went away without even saying goodbye," she said injuredly.



Chapter Seven

MARC and Toffee swung quickly out of the courtroom and started down the corridor. They were not entirely certain that they were officially allowed this break from the smothering embrace of the law, but since it was love that was totally unrequited they felt perfectly justified in nipping it off as cleanly and quickly as possible. Besides, neither was in a mood to ask questions.

Marc frowned deeply. The future, in view of past events, was not reassuring. He wondered what night it was that he had lain awake and felt a happy anticipation at strange and wonderful things about to happen. It didn't seem possible that it could have been only night before last; it must have been years and years ago in view of all that had happened. Certainly, in a most disturbing way, the strange and wonderful things had come to pass, but the feeling of happy anticipation had been shot to hell in its very beginnings.

How could things possibly have gotten themselves into so incomprehensible a snarl in just the space of a few short hours? Only a day and a night had passed and now, here he was with a divorce, an irresponsible redhead, a criminal record and sev-

eral volumes of unfavorable publicity on his hands. And to top it all off, though he was subject to the laws of gravity at the moment, he had taken to floating about in the air like a demented balloon. Also, he had the forbidding feeling that he might revert to a condition of buoyancy at any given moment.

Marc sighed heavily and cursed the day he conceived the idea of the basement laboratory. If there was any small comfort remaining to him at all it came only from a patently comfortless cliché: things couldn't possibly get any worse. He didn't see the courtroom door swing mysteriously open behind him, waver for a moment, then swing shut again.

Neither did Marc see the horrible Blemish twins following behind him and Toffee in the corridor shadows. His attention, instead, had been drawn to the two men in double breasted suits who were shoving their way toward him through the crowd. Though Marc was certain that the two, regardless of what their business might be, could be the bearers of only bad tidings, he hadn't the will left in him to try to avoid them. One more worry, added to the multitude he already had, would hardly be noticed. Taking Toffee's hand, he stopped and waited resignedly for the two to catch up to them.

"Mr. Pillsworth?" the first man nodded.

"Could there be any doubt?" Toffee said dully.

The man glanced at Toffee, startled a little at her costume, then returned his gaze firmly and resolutely to Marc.

"We are with the Federal Government," he said. He nodded toward the courtroom from which Marc and Toffee had just departed. "I'm sorry we didn't get here sooner; we could have saved you all that trouble."

"Now it's the Feds," Toffee murmured. "More cops . . . more courtrooms . . . more judges . . . more questions . . . wurra, wurra."

No one paid any attention.

"We've been to your home, Mr. Pillsworth," the man went on. "We've gone over your laboratory very thoroughly, and it's our opinion that you've turned up something that could be of great interest to the government. In a military way. Your wife explained to us that your intention was to facilitate construction, and I suppose, in a way, you've succeeded. However in the process, you've also discovered an explosive of most extraordinary properties."

"How was Julie when you saw her?" Marc asked.

"Mrs. Pillsworth was most cooperative," the man said acknowledging the interruption. "However, she was quite busy while we were there. I gathered she was closing up the house, taking a trip somewhere."

"Did she say when she was leaving?" Marc asked anxiously.

"I believe she said this evening," the man said. "I supposed you knew all about it. Anyway, to get on—in our opinion you have stumbled across a new type of bomb that is so advanced as to make the H bomb completely obsolete. Briefly, it is easily possible that a bomb could be made of your formula and constructed in such a way as to be detonated by the final chemical. It could be used to wipe out whole cities, to wipe them off the face of the earth without a trace. Every stick, stone, human being and piece of mortar could be made to simply rise and disappear from the earth's surface within a matter of minutes. That's rather a terrifying secret to hold entirely in your own possession, Mr. Pillsworth."

"Yes, indeed," Marc said absently. "Terrifying."

"In other words, for the sake of national security, the government cannot possibly allow you to have your discovery all to yourself any longer. I'm sure you can understand that. We would like to talk to you and go over your formula in private. Your notes are still intact, aren't they?"

MARC'S hand went automatically to the inner pocket of his jacket where he had secured the notebook. He nodded.

"Oh, yes," he murmured.

"Good. Then suppose we go to one of the . . ."

"I'd like to go home first, if I may," Marc broke in. "I have to see my wife before she leaves. It's very important. And there are a few extra notes in my room at the house. I could get them all together . . ."

The man hesitated for a moment, then finally nodded. "All right," he said. "After all we're the only ones who know about this. Only let me caution you not to talk to anyone."

"I won't say a word," Marc said, and nodded toward Toffee. "She couldn't say anything; she doesn't understand any of it."

"Fine," the man said. "Then will it be all right if we come to your house this evening?"

"That'll be fine," Marc said quickly, anxious to be free of

them. "I'll see you then."

Marc and Toffee watched the two men disappear down the corridor and up a stairway.

"Terribly morbid pair, aren't they?" Toffee said. "It's enough to make your flesh crawl, all this talk about wiping out cities and people and things."

"It's their business, Marc said.

Toffee glanced behind her. "I don't like to mention it," she said in an undertone, "but there are a pair of perfectly loathsome little men back there, and I think they're following us. For my money they look exactly like spies. They seem to skulk, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Marc said. "I saw them in the courtroom. Probably they're perfectly harmless. Anyone who looked like that would have to be. Anyway, I haven't time to worry about any skulking; I've got to get home. Let's get out of here."

"Am I going with you?" Toffee asked.

Marc nodded. "I've decided it's the best way. We'll just sit down and tell Julie all about you."

"She'll never believe it," Toffee said. "If she does, she's a lot crazier than I think she is."

"She'll have to believe it," Marc said earnestly. "If worst comes to worst, I'll knock myself out and she can see you vanish and reappear for herself."

"We could ask the neighbors in too," Toffee observed wryly. "We could serve punch and do it as a sort of parlor entertainment."

"Don't be silly," Marc said. "Come on."

"I'm game," Toffee murmured. "I just wonder if Julie's up to it, that's all."

"Maybe I should call her first," Marc said, catching sight of a row of phone booths at the end of the corridor. "Just to make sure she's there."

"You might check on the condition of her heart, too," Toffee said. "Just as a precaution."

They started forward and had nearly reached the booths when Marc suddenly stopped short.

"Now what?" Toffee asked.

Marc inclined his head to listen. "Do you keep hearing footsteps?" he asked.

"Sure," Toffee said. "All over the place. With these mar-

ble floors . . . ”

“No, not those,” Marc said. “Right behind us. I keep hearing someone walking right behind me, but there’s no one there.”

“Well,” Toffee said slowly. “I didn’t want to be the first to mention it, but . . . ”

SUDDENLY, they were both silent, their eyes intent on the floor and a cigarette stub that had begun to behave with shocking abnormality. Still alight, as it had been dropped, it suddenly crushed itself out flat against the floor and ceased to smoke. It was for all the world as though someone had stepped on it to put it out, and yet there wasn’t a human foot within yards of the thing.

“Oh, my gosh!” Toffee breathed. “Do you suppose that thing realizes what it can do to a nervous system with a trick like that?”

“What do you suppose it is?” Marc asked.

“It’s a cigarette stub,” Toffee said. “And it’s gone mad. It’s completely out of its head. Let’s just pay it no mind, treat it with complete contempt. Maybe it’ll crawl away and do its odious little stunt for someone who likes that sort of thing.”

“You may be right,” Marc said without the slightest tone of belief. He turned away, but his gaze remained furtively on the flattened stub. Since there was no further disturbance, he pulled himself together and started toward one of the phone booths. Toffee watched after him with careful intensity.

But if either of them thought they’d had the last of madness from inanimate objects, they were woefully mistaken. The phone booth was next to become possessed. It was as though the hulking enclosure had been waiting in prey for Marc. No sooner did Marc stick his head inside the booth than the doors, without any visible guidance, snapped shut, caught him by the neck, and held him fast. Toffee started back with a cry of pure surprise.

“Help!” Marc wheezed from inside the booth. “Help!”

It was a moment before Toffee was capable of action, but she did her best to make up for lost time. She started forward to the attack with a vengeance. But no sooner had she come within reaching distance of the booth and the door than she was mysteriously and invisibly thrust back. She renewed her efforts but was only repelled for a second time. She paused

to consider the door, the booth and her own emotions, rapidly approaching a blind rage.

It was just as she had braced herself and hunched angrily forward for the third attack that the woman came out of the booth next to the one in which Marc was trapped. She took one look at the determined redhead and drew her own conclusions.

"Hold off, honey!" she screamed. "You can have the booth! I'm through!"

But Toffee had already hurled herself forward in a head-long, firm-jawed lunge. The woman screamed shrilly and departed the booth and the vicinity with the speed of a deer in season. In the next split second Toffee collided with Marc's invisible captor. There was a dull thud, a small skirmishing, and then Toffee apparently bearing her opponent to the floor with her, went down in tangled triumph. The door of the telephone booth flew open and Marc dropped to his knees, gasping for air.

George, thoroughly humiliated at having been bested by a mere whisp of a girl, became emotionally confused, lost control, as before in the courtroom, and completely materialized. He looked up at Toffee sprawled untidily across his chest, and flushed.

"You didn't have to knock me down," he murmured woundedly.

Toffee glanced down at her defeated adversary and started with amazement.

"Marc!" she cried. "How did you get down there?"

At the phone booth Marc was still panting for breath. "Did you expect me to come out of there dancing a rumba?" he asked peevishly.

Toffee whirled about. "Marc!" she yelled.

"Stop screaming my name at me," Marc said. "All I want is . . . !"

HIS voice retreated down his throat with a gurgle of surprise as he caught sight of George.

"Wha . . . !"

Toffee turned from one to the other. "Which one of you is which?" she gasped confusedly.

"I'm me," Marc murmured vaguely. "Who's he?"

Toffee sprang away from her perch on George's chest.

"Oh, mother!" she cried.

"Well," George said resignedly, getting to his feet. "I suppose that I might as well admit it, now that you've found me out." He turned to Marc. "I'm your ghost."

"*Ghost!*" Marc and Toffee sang it out together. As Marc sprang to his feet, they closed in on George, crowded him back defensively into one of the phone booths.

During all this, the incident had attracted several innocent bystanders who were now looking on with baffled interest.

"What have they got in there?" one official-looking gentleman asked another. "Did you see?"

The other shook his head. "I think they said it was a goat."

"A goat? What on earth are they doing with a goat in there? Do you suppose they have the beast talking to someone on the phone?"

"If they have," the second replied, "it had better yell for help. They were crowding the poor thing something awful. On the other hand, maybe they just wanted to milk it. If it's a modest goat it might be reluctant about being milked right out here in the middle of the hall."

"I know I would," the first gentleman said, "if I were a goat. I wouldn't blame it a bit. It's shocking, just the thought of it."

"They're doing the best they can," the second gentleman reminded. "I can see where a reluctant goat wouldn't be the easiest thing in the world to get along with."

"Just the same, I don't approve," the first man said. "Not even a little bit. If the goat is shy, they shouldn't bring it out in public to milk it like this."

"Maybe they're trying to teach it social poise," the second man suggested.

"I don't care," the first said. "Livestock should be left at home. Someone should speak to the Health Commissioner about this!"

The second man shook his head with mild amusement. "That shouldn't be difficult for you," he said. "You are the Health Commissioner. Or did they get you in the last clean-up?"

The first man looked at him sharply. "The devil you say!" he exclaimed. He thought about it for a moment. "By heaven, you're right. Sometimes I forget. I thought I was the Water Commissioner. Haven't been to my office for weeks

to see what it says on the door." He started away, then turned back. "Why don't you come in and complain to me about this goat? It wouldn't look right if I complained to myself, would it? My secretary would think it was odd."

Meanwhile Marc and Toffee had wedged themselves into the doorway of the telephone booth and were staring incredulously at George.

"Well," George said uneasily, "haven't you ever seen a ghost before?"

"I should hope to tell you I haven't" Toffee said fervently. She looked at George with suspicion. "How do we know you're a ghost? Can you prove it?"

"Do I have to?" George said unhappily.

"It would help clear things up considerably," Marc said. "Personally, I don't believe a word of it."

George stared at them for a long moment, then sighed. "Oh, all right," he murmured. "If you insist. Of course this is terribly corny, and you probably won't like it, but it should give you an idea."

AS MARC and Toffee watched, George carefully controlled his ectoplasm, dissolved his head down to a grinning skull and issued a low moaning sound.

"Mother in heaven!" Toffee said, closing her eyes. "Stop doing that!"

George, only too happy to do so, quickly rematerialized his head. "I told you you wouldn't like it," he said.

"But how could you be my ghost?" Marc said shakenly. "I'm not dead."

"Are you sure?" Toffee said. "Personally, I feel quite dead and gone to hell after looking at that."

"But you're supposed to be dead," George said with sudden self-righteousness. "If you were any good at all, you'd be mouldering in your grave at this very moment. You were supposed to have been blown to bits in an explosion. That's why they sent me."

"Who sent you?" Marc asked.

"I'd rather not discuss them, if it's all the same to you," George said.

"Well," Marc said, "I'm alive. So you can just go back to them, whoever they are, and tell them they're mistaken."

"But I don't want to go back," George said unhappily. He

looked at Marc speculatively. "Couldn't you just sort of kick off?"

"I beg your pardon?" Marc asked incredulously. "Do I understand you right? Are you asking me to kill myself just to accommodate you?"

"Oh, you wouldn't have to do it all yourself," George said. "I'd be very happy to assist you."

"So!" Toffee cried. "So that's what you were up to! You were trying to strangle him with that phone booth!"

George shrugged sheepishly. "I didn't think I should pass up any opportunity. I'll admit it's not a very fancy way to die . . ."

"You fiend!" Marc said. "You horror!"

"Oh, please, no!" George objected woundedly. "You just aren't looking at the thing right, that's all. Fair's fair, you know. After all, I've been waiting years for you to pop off, and . . ."

"And you're going to wait a great many more years as far as I'm concerned!" Marc said.

"I was afraid you'd be narrow about it," George said dejectedly. Tears came to his eyes. "I've always had to take your left-overs. Your second name, even. I couldn't call myself Marc, because that was the name you wanted. I had to take George. It's unjust."

"Well, don't go on about it," Toffee said. "There's no use blubbering."

"You might just as well go away," Marc said firmly. "I'll be damned if I'm going to pop off, as you so picturesquely put it, just to please a spook with criminal tendencies." He glanced heavenward. "This, on top of everything else!"

The tears welled larger in George's unhappy eyes. He looked at Toffee and Marc and flushed at making such an open display of his emotions. To hide his feelings he sadly dissolved his head. The thin air above his shoulders echoed with a moist snuffle.

"Oh, Lord!" Toffee moaned. "He's up to his tricks again! Would you listen to that?"

"I wouldn't if I could help it," Marc said.

"Let's get away from this snivelling shade before he drives us crazy," Toffee said urgently. "I'm so upset I wouldn't be surprised if I walked out of here on my hands."

"The way he is right now," Marc agreed, "he's the most haunting ghost I've ever seen. I'll certainly never forget him."

Together, they turned and moved away from the phone booth and quickly down the corridor.

"He'll have to shift for himself," Marc said. "I've got other things to worry about."

As they moved away, out of the entrance of the building, several of the more curious spectators converged on the phone booth and glanced cautiously inside.

It was empty.

Outside, an officer showed Marc and Toffee to the green convertible which had been delivered there by the government men. Marc helped Toffee in, then crossed around and slid in under the wheel. With a look of determination, he shifted the gears and directed the car into traffic.

The sound of the shifting gears obscured the muffled snuffling sound that emanated briefly from the back seat.



Chapter Eight

MARC BRAKED the convertible to a stop at the signal and glanced worriedly in the rear-view mirror.

"They're still there," he said.

Toffee swung about in the seat and stared without subterfuge at the black sedan and its occupants.

"It's those filthy twins," she said. "Even their car looks subversive."

Marc turned his attention again to the mirror. "They may be with the government," he said. "They've probably been assigned to watch us." He shrugged a dismissal. "Anyway, they're the least of my worries."

He released the brake and started forward again on the light. He did not mention the greatest and most immediate of his worries; an overwhelming attack of weariness had come over him in the last few minutes and it was alarmingly reminiscent of the one he'd suffered yesterday just before he'd begun to float. If he was about to become buoyant again he wanted desperately to reach home and Julie before it happened. He narrowed his eyes on the blur of the traffic ahead and tightened his grip on the wheel. He knew as he did it, however, that he was

never going to make it.

Marc managed the next block without incident, and the next, but in the middle of the third, he swung the car sharply to the curb and brought it to a quick stop. In the next instant, just as he switched off the ignition, his head slumped heavily to the steering wheel. It happened so suddenly that he didn't notice the irony of his location; he had parked almost exactly in front of the Wynant. Neither did he see the black sedan pull up behind.

Toffee swung quickly toward him and gripped his shoulder. "Marc!" she called, shaking him. "What's wrong?"

There was a moment of tense silence and then, just as before, Marc revived as quickly as he had succumbed. He lifted his head from the wheel, and looked dazedly around.

"What happened?" he asked.

But Toffee was not concerned with the events of the past. "Oh, golly!" she wailed. "Look! There you go again!"

Marc glanced quickly down at the seat and suffered a thrill of horror. Toffee had spoken the truth; indeed, he was going again with all anchors cast off. He had already risen, still in a sitting position, to such a height that his knees were resting snugly against the steering wheel.

"Grab me!" he yelled. "Pull me down!"

"I am grabbing you!" Toffee cried, renewing her efforts on his shoulder. "Hang on to something!"

Marc bent forward and took hold of the wheel. The action threw him into a curious doubled-up position, so that he seemed to have braced himself against the device with his knees so that he might pull at it with both hands. To the casual passerby on the sidewalk it presented a rather intriguing problem in logic. A pair of shopgirls turned away from a window, started away, then stopped to observe the activity in the convertible with baffled interest.

"Why do you suppose he's so anxious to get that wheel off?" one asked, turning to the other.

"I can't imagine," the second said thoughtfully. "He seems terribly mad about something, though. I pity his girl friend."

"I should say. I wouldn't go out with a fellow with that kind of temper for a million dollars."

MEANWHILE the state of affairs in the convertible was swiftly becoming crucial. Marc was beginning to realize

that the upward pull on his body was even stronger than before. "Don't let me go!" he told Toffee. "Out here, it'll be the end of me!"

Then suddenly both he and Toffee looked around as a cough of expectancy issued ominously from the back seat. Before their apprehensive eyes a heavy flashlight swiftly raised itself from the floor of the car and darted menacingly forward. A chuckle of malevolent intent sullied the charged silence in the car.

"Go away!" Marc yelled. "Beat it, you homicidal haunt! George!"

But the flashlight continued forward swung upward over Marc's clutching hands, and poised itself for a smashing blow.

"No!" Marc yelled. "No!"

Then, as the flashlight started swiftly downward, Marc closed his eyes and let go. Instantly, he popped upward out of the car and continued going. The flashlight shattered against the wheel and dropped dully to the floor. George promptly went about the business of materializing himself at Toffee's side. No sooner, however, did his face appear than Toffee dealt it a stinging blow.

"You low-living spook!" she grated. "I ought to scramble your ectoplasm for you!"

George blinked at her woundedly. "Why do you always blame me?" he asked. "I'm only trying to do my job. You're being a terrible sport about all this."

"And I'm going to get worse," Toffee said hotly. She glanced frightenedly after Marc who had already risen beyond the elegance of the Wynant canopy and was closing in rapidly on the second floor.

"He'll never stop!" she cried. "He'll go up into space and explode!"

The crowd, gathering quickly about the convertible, watched Marc's ascent with stunned silence. In back of the convertible, the door of the black sedan swung open and the Blemishes, like a pair of soiled moles, arrived on the sidewalk. They forced their way to the front of the crowd.

As the brothers looked upward, their unlovely faces, as nearly as they ever would, expressed true anxiety.

Above, Marc passed the second floor and rose swiftly to the third. He seemed to be gathering momentum on his upward journey. The fourth floor drifted by. His thoughts churned. He wanted to scream, but somehow there wasn't time. And then, miraculously, he was caught in a strong draft of wind, and

thrown roughly toward the face of the building. He reached out frantically, grabbing, clutching for something to hang on to. And then his hand slapped against a window ledge, caught, and held.

Marc brought his other hand down to the ledge, found a hold and clung. He drew in a breath of relief and his whole body throbbed with the beat of his heart. As he hung there, his body continued upward, however, upending him crazily against the wall of the hotel.

Down on the sidewalk, the Blemishes were instantly inspired to action.

"Come on!" they yelled. "Let's fish him in!"

Toffee looked at the two men. She was in no mood or position to question any source of aid at the moment, no matter how questionable it appeared. She turned to George with cool hostility.

"You make a move out of this car," she threatened, "and you'll be only a ghost of a ghost when I get through with you." Then, swinging the car door open, she joined the dark Blemishes in a streaking dash toward the entrance of the hotel.

ON THE FIFTH floor of the Wynant, Mrs. Hunter Reynolds sat rigidly in her bathtub and stared with fixed horror at the face which had just appeared upside down at her bathroom window. An old belle of the old South, Mrs. Hunter Reynolds had ventured into the North expecting only the worst. Now the worst had happened.

The shaken lady gripped the sides of her tub and tried hard to prevent herself from sinking to a watery grave. She closed her eyes and reasoned sternly with herself; it was all a trick of the imagination; even a damnyankee head couldn't do the disgraceful thing this crazy head was doing. And then her eyes flew wildly open as the room suddenly dinned with a shouted plea for help.

At this point Mrs. Hunter Reynolds had a plea of her own to shout. "God in heaven, sir!" she said, trying desperately to maintain some last shred of dignity now that all decency was gone. "God in heaven, stop invadin' my privacy this way. I ask it in the name of the South."

"Help me!" Marc panted. "Come pull me in!"

Mrs. Hunter Reynolds started in her tub. "You're speakin' to a lady, sir!" she gasped. "Please go away. My water's get-

tin' cold."

"I can't help your water," Marc said unhappily.

"Sir!" the southern lady cried. "I'm not askin' you to help my water. I'm askin' you to leave my water entirely alone."

"Delighted," Marc wheezed. "I wouldn't touch your water with a ten foot thermometer. I'll close my eyes if you'll just give me a hand."

"If I give you a hand, sir," Mrs. Hunter Reynolds said coolly, "it will be across your insultin' damnyankee mouth. If you don't leave instantly I'll call my husband, the Colonel."

"For heaven's sake, call him!" Marc implored. "He can help me."

"It's more likely he'll whip you within an inch of your life." Mrs. Hunter Reynolds said stoutly. Swirling about in her suds, she faced the doorway, prepared to scream, then turned back to Marc.

"First, sir," she said. "Would you do me the pleasure of tellin' me if you are a whole damnyankee or only a damnyankee head?"

"I'm a whole damn . . . I'm whole," Marc said.

"Thank you, sir," Mrs. Hunter Reynolds said with a slight bow. Then she opened her mouth wide and screamed with unbelievable feeling and vigor.

"Hunter!" she shrieked. "Hunter! There's a whole damnyankee invadin' my privacy!"

Even before she had stopped screaming the door to the bathroom burst open and Col. Hunter Reynolds charged into view, obviously prepared to defend southern chivalry to the end, if necessary. Needing only a julep in his hand to complete the picture, he was a fair caricature of all southern colonels.

"Damnyankee, did you say!" he thundered.

"There!" his wife said, agitating her bath water. She pointed dramatically to the window.

"Gad!" the Colonel snorted. "That's the damndest damnyankee I've ever seen. He's upside down, isn't he? Gave me quite a turn for a second there. But it looks like he's had quite a turn himself." The Colonel chuckled foolishly at his own pleasantry.

"I'm the one who's had the turn!" his wife snapped. "Stop that silly gigglin' and titterin', you old fool, and do something."

The Colonel considered. "Yes, yes," he murmured. "I suppose I'll have to shoot the dog; there isn't enough of him to

flog."

"My water's getting cool," Mrs. Hunter Reynolds mentioned fretfully.

"Good," the Colonel said absently. "Good. Keep it that way." He started from the room.

"Help!" Marc yelled.

The Colonel whirled about at the doorway.

"Not a word out of you, sir!" he said tartly. "Not a word!"

HE LEFT the room and almost instantly was back bearing a pair of ominous bone-handled dueling pistols. These he cocked carefully and aimed in Marc's general direction.

"Make your peace, sir," he said. He turned to his wife. "Close your eyes so you won't see this."

"No!" Marc yelled.

"Just a moment, dear," Mrs. Hunter Reynolds interrupted. "I don't like to interfere in the affairs of menfolk, you know that, dear, but don't you think we ought to keep in mind that we still have southern blood in our veins even if we are in the North?"

The Colonel observed his wife scowlingly. "How do you mean?" he asked.

It isn't southern courtesy to shoot a man when he's a sit-in' target."

The Colonel turned it over in his mind. You're quite right, dear," he said finally. He turned to Marc. "Sir, would you mind movin' about a bit out there so I can shoot you in honor?"

"I can't!" Marc gasped. His arms were so tired, and his head so thick with blood, that he didn't care much at this point whether he was about to be shot or not. "Shoot me in cold blood," he said. "To hell with your honor."

The Colonel turned questioningly to his wife. "Should I?" he asked. "You heard what he said about my honor."

Mrs. Hunter Reynolds was hesitant. "Suppose the news got out around back home?" she said. "Folks would say you weren't a real southern gentleman anymore. They'd say you'd been tainted by the North. You'd never be able to hold up a julep in public again."

"For the love of heaven!" Marc moaned. "Either help me or shoot me, only make it snappy."

"Better not risk it," the Colonel decided. "I've got to have a moving target."

The bathroom became quiet with the heavy stillness of impasse. Then there was a ripple from the bathtub as Mrs. Hunter Reynolds brightened.

"I know!" she cried. "If the target can't move, why don't you? Wouldn't it be all right that way? You could rush about a bit and when you've got up your speed turn and shoot him."

The Colonel was silent for a minute, seeming to picture his wife's suggestion in his mind. Finally he nodded. He turned to Marc.

"Is it all right with you, damnyankee?" he asked.

"Anything's all right with me," Marc said hopelessly. "Go ahead. I don't even give a damn anymore."

The scene that followed established a new and fascinating high in sheer insanity. Girding his rusty loins against the first physical effort they had been forced to in years, the Colonel busily began to cavort about the room like a bloated rhino. Clumsily loping through an obstacle course of plumbing appliances, the old boy found it rough going at best. As for the Colonel's lady, she languished calmly in her cooling tub, soaped her arms, and watched her laboring husband with nodding approval. Marc, even beyond the point of mere resignation, closed his eyes and waited.

"Well," the Colonel wheezed, rushing once more to the end of the room and starting back again, "this is it!" As he ran, he trained the pistols loosely in Marc's direction. "Here I come! Ready . . . aim . . . !"

It was at this climactic point in the bathroom drama that the door burst open and Toffee, closely followed by the two Blemishes, rushed into view.

"Stop!" Toffee screamed.

In mid-gallop, the Colonel turned sharply to observe the intruders, tripped over a clothes hamper, and descended to the floor in a deafening roar of gunfire.

As a cloud of smoke billowed up around the gallant man from the South, Mrs. Hunter Reynolds turned, looked briefly at Toffee and the Blemish brothers and sank into the depths of her bath with only a small gurgle to mark her departure.

TOFFEE ran to the window, motioning the brothers to follow. She emerged through the rising screen of smoke just in time to see Marc's fingers, white with tension, slip from the sill and disappear out of view.

"He's gone!" she screamed. "He's gone!"

The Blemishes crowded beside her at the window and leaned forward. They were just in time to catch the last glimpse of Marc floating serenely out of sight beyond the rim of the building as they watched.

"Come on!" Toffee yelled. "Up to the roof!"

"What for?" Gerald Blemish said bitterly. "He's gone, now."

"Well, at least we can wave goodbye," Toffee said. She started rapidly toward the door.

"My!" Cecil Blemish said, picking his way carefully over the prone figure of the Colonel. "Look at all the water in here. The old gaffer got the water pipes, two out of two."

It was barely seconds later when the skylight door at the top of the hotel flew open and Toffee and the matching Blemishes ran out onto the roof. They scanned the distant sky as they moved.

"He's gone!" Toffee cried despairingly. "He's clear out of sight."

The brothers stopped and looked at each other without hope.

"Well," Cecil muttered. "There goes everything."

Then suddenly the trio straightened as a small voice called Toffee's name. It might have come from anywhere and it might have been any voice, it was so weak. Toffee whirled about, and instantly her gaze darted to the flagpole at the other end of the roof. There, like a flag unfurled, Marc was clinging to the top ornament for dear life.

"Marc!" Toffee screamed and ran to the pole. "Grab the rope and I'll pull you down!"

Cautiously, Marc took hold of the ropes, first one hand, then the other.

"Hold on tight!" Toffee cautioned and slowly began lowering him toward the roof. As she did so she glanced around at the twins. The two, in what seemed a rather pretty but confused tribute, were holding their hats stiffly over their hearts.

Toffee turned back to the pole, renewed her efforts, and brought Marc safely to ground. Then as he clung to the pole for security, she removed a couple of metal weights from the ropes and slipped them into the pockets of his jacket. Briefly, she kissed him on the forehead.

"You damned floater!" she breathed with relief and affection.

Gingerly, Marc released his hold on the pole and smilingly discovered that he was again stationary. With Toffee's help, he made his way to where the twins were standing, their hats still clasped to their chests.

"Retreat's over," Toffee said. "You can put the lids back on."

In unison the twins swung their hats up to their heads and held out the revolvers they had been holding under them.

"Get 'em up!" they snarled in chorus. "You're coming with us."



Chapter Nine

EVEN THE elevators of the Wynant, and the procedures attendant thereto, had a tone of delicate breeding about them. As the doors parted, ever so smoothly, the mechanism emitted a sigh of unmistakable refinement, like a great lady giving vent to a genteel yawn of boredom behind an ivory fan. In the foreground was revealed a uniformed and finely drilled operator who always stood at rigid attention on the occasion of his passengers debarkation. Thus it was, with all good taste, the Wynant guest was given every opportunity to arrive before the general public and the management with his best foot extended well to the fore. It was one of those small touches that contributed so much to making the Wynant the Wynant and vice versa.

Now, however, the procedure of the elevators, like the best laid plans of mice and mollusks, suddenly went amuck. Eyes turned and widened sharply as the elevator doors flew open with an exclamatory rasp, and not the passengers but the operator quitted the conveyance. Putting one foot forward of the other with all the earnest haste of a scared wombat, it was evident that the poor devil didn't know or even care which of them was the best; he skittered across the foyer and around the edge of

the desk with the speed and directness of a well-aimed shot.

"It's him!" the wretched man jabbered, cowering beside the clerk. "He's come back to get even with that statue!"

Meanwhile a scene of rather complex agitation had been revealed within the narrow confines of the elevator. It seemed that Marc, still increasing in the degree of his buoyancy, was no longer afforded any particular measure of security from the weights in his pockets. Even during the brief interval which had transported him from the roof to the foyer, he had levitated to the height of about a foot and was still inching upward.

Marc's companions were inclined to take a sour view of the whole procedure. Indeed, the Blemishes felt called upon to express their displeasure with firearms. Cecil Blemish aimed his gun at the small of Marc's back and sighted tensely down the barrel.

"Come down," he threatened. "Stop doing that or I'll shoot. I will, too."

"Stop that," Toffee said agitatedly. "Look where you're aiming. He's risen another four inches. There's no need to be vulgar about it."

"Oh, excuse me," Cecil said, and aimed the gun higher.

"If you two don't put those guns away and stop waving them about," Toffee said, "I'm going to snatch them away from you and beat your brains out with them. I'll admit it'll be something like hunting butterflies with a sledge hammer, but I'm willing to have a go at it. How about it?"

The twins paused in their activities and looked at each other.

"I'll bet she would at that," Cecil said.

"Those poor defenseless butterflies," Gerald nodded. "I shudder."

"And well you should shudder," Toffee put in.

Together the brothers turned to her with undisguised admiration.

"You're really mean," Cecil said. "Have you ever thought of being a spy?"

"Have you ever thought of being a dead spy?" Toffee said waspishly. "Now stop that nonsense and help me get him down. Find something to weight him down with."

MARC, ALREADY beginning to crouch to keep his head away from the ceiling of the car, looked down imploringly. "Just

get me something to eat," he pleaded. "I'll be all right if you'll only feed me."

"You see," Gerald Blemish said. "He's just being stubborn. This is all just a childish trick to get us to feed him." He raised his gun again in Marc's direction.

"Don't be silly," Toffee said. She explained to the Blemishes that food reacted chemically to temporarily relieve Marc's condition of buoyancy. "Just help me get him down, and we can get him something to eat in the hotel dining room."

The brothers were thoughtful.

"I suppose we'll have to take her word for it," Cecil said. "Anyway, he's not much good to us up there."

"I suppose so," Gerald agreed, "but personally I think he's just the flighty type."

Cecil went to the door of the elevator and looked out. Then he stepped outside and called back to Gerald to come and give him a hand.

Absentmindedly, Gerald started to hand his gun to Toffee, but at the last moment he thought better of it and put it in his pocket.

"It's hard to tell who's captured whom sometimes," he said sadly, and went outside.

In a moment the brothers were back, progressing slowly under the weight of a tremendous sand-filled cigarette urn. They shuffled to the center of the car and laboriously hoisted their cumbersome burden up to Marc.

"Here," Gerald panted. "Take it."

Marc regarded the thing without enthusiasm. "Good grief!" he said "That thing'll break my back. Can't you just get me something to eat?"

"Take it," Toffee said shortly. "You can come and get your own food. And don't drop it. Personally, I don't intend to go galloping up to the top of this hotel again after you. Next time you take off, I'll just forward your mail to the moon and let it go at that."

With a sigh of hopeless resignation, Marc took hold of the urn, and the Blemishes let go and stepped back. Instantly Marc and the urn crashed to the floor with a tooth-rattling thud.

"Ugh!" Marc said.

"There, you see," Toffee beamed. It works beautifully. Now, come on, let's eat."

And so it was that a moment later the diners in the Wynant

dining room were suddenly shocked into silence by the arrival of the most bizarre dinner party ever to venture forth in quest of food. It was not enough that a combustible-looking redhead, garrishly clad only in a few precarious sequins, had arrived in their midst, this had to be followed by a tall, anguished gentleman bent double under the weight of an enormous cigarette urn. Why either the girl or her grimacing escort had chosen to arrive at dinner in their respective conditions was beyond comprehension. With this mystery to brood over, hardly anyone even noticed the duplicate, derby-hatted, bush-bearded horrors in the background. With great unconcern the party arrived at the head of the short stairway leading to the dining room and paused grandly in full view of the entire room. No one was more stunned at the sight of this questionable quartet than the *maitre d'hotel*. If the circus had come to town this elegant and formidable gentleman had not heard of it. He hastened forward to correct what was obviously a gross mistake.

"I'm terribly sorry . . ." he began in private tones.

TOFFEE recognized the attitude instantly. "If you think you're going to put us out of here," she said, "you're going to be much more than sorry." She nodded toward Marc. "This gentleman needs food. He's weak as a kitten."

Marc looked up at the *matre de* and bared his teeth in what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

The *maitre de* glanced away with a pained expression. Then looked quickly back.

"Isn't that one of our urns?" he asked sternly.

"We only borrowed it for a moment," Toffee explained. "You can have it back when we're through with it."

"I suggest that the gentleman put it back where he found it right now," the *maitre de* said coolly.

"I can't put it back," Marc gritted breathlessly. "For the love of Mike stop bickering and give me something to eat. I'm feeling weaker by the second."

"If you'd put that urn back," the *maitre de* said with growing hostility, "you wouldn't feel so weak." He turned to Toffee. "Does the gentleman fancy himself as an ash tray? Is that it?"

"Of course not," Toffee snapped. "Give him a table."

"If I give him a table to carry will he put down the urn?" the *maitre de* asked confusedly.

"Not to carry," Toffee said. "Give him a table to sit at."

And food to eat. Stop talking like an idiot."

The maitre de became petulant. "I won't give him a table until he gives back that urn. He turned to Marc. "Give it back."

"I won't," Marc said. "I can't."

The maitre de stepped back a pace, then glanced wretchedly at the silent diners behind him. All eyes were trained incredulously on him and the unwanted foursome. He cleared his throat self-consciously.

"Please," he said, lowering his voice imploringly. "Please give back the urn and go away. Just set it down and turn around and walk out. You'll ruin me if you don't. I have a reputation to maintain. I've been known to send royalty back to their rooms for neckties before I'd give them service. A vice president fairly groveled before me once. These people are expecting something from me, and I can't let them down. Please, please go away!"

The party of four remained unmoved, either emotionally or physically. They stayed where they were, staring at the man with stoic calm and determination. The unhappy man turned desperately to Marc.

"For heaven's sake," he said, "have you developed some sort of fetish for that urn? Do you imagine yourself to be in love with it? Is that why you're hugging it in that awful way?"

"I'm not hugging it," Marc wheezed. "I'm carrying it."

"Where?" the maitre de asked bewilderedly.

"Anywhere," Marc said. "Just so long as I get something to eat. Please give me a table and some food."

The maitre de's jaw squared with sudden determination. "No," he said. "Flatly, no! I owe it to the Wynant dining room and these people here to stick to my guns. I'll give you till ten to take that urn and leave this room."

"I'd love to," Marc said weakly. "But I can't. Don't you understand?"

"Then just give the urn to me," the reluctant host said. "I'll see that it gets back where it belongs."

"No, Marc said. "Flatly, no."

The maitre de's face turned vermilion with a flush of rage. "Then suppose I just take it!" he said hotly. And with that he stepped boldly forward, wrapped his arms resolutely around the urn and began to pull. "Give it to me now," he grunted. "No use being stubborn, you know, it's not yours."

"Oh, good grief!" Toffee cried with exasperation. "Just look at them. Like a couple of crazy school kids with a dead mouse!"

She turned to the Blemishes. "Do something!"

WITH DITTOED expressions of perplexity, the brothers regarded Toffee, each other, and the problem of the besieged urn. Clearly it was time for them to take steps, but they didn't know in which direction. Simultaneously they moved forward to opposite sides of the urn, secured a hold on it, and began to pull against each other. The spellbound clientele of the Wy-nant looked on in confused wordlessness; no one could guess why the cigarette urn had become so furiously important to these struggling men all of a sudden; obviously it contained nothing more wonderful than a lot of sand and a few stubs. One gentleman, staring in entranced rapture, carefully lifted a sizable portion of steak on his fork, lifted it upward, and with preoccupied care, deposited it, complete with mushroom sauce, in the depths of his breast pocket.

Meanwhile the insane contest at the head of the stairs had arrived at a state of complete impasse. Four different energies pulled in four different directions, one balanced just enough against the other to hold the urn perfectly motionless. Other than a rapidly deepening blueness in Marc's face, there was no evidence that the men had not simply joined together to provide a grotesquely decorative stand for the urn. That this constituted a condition of utter absurdity, Toffee was the first to realize. She placed herself impatiently at Gerald Blemish's side and raised her hands to her hips.

"Just what do you think you're doing, you nincompoop?" she hissed "Let go."

Gerald looked up at her unhappily, considered, then let go. The three remaining contestants staggered drunkenly aside, still clinging doggedly to the urn.

"Show him your gun," Toffee directed.

Gerald thought about it, then bestirred himself. He went over to the maitre de and tapped him lightly on the shoulder. The maitre de looked around.

"Look," Gerald said, taking his gun from his pocket and shoving it under the poor man's nose. "See?"

The maitre de knew when he was licked. Instantly, he let go of the urn and backed away. A look of great disillusionment came into his eyes. With a soul-searing sob he turned and sat down heavily on the steps.

"You've ruined me," he blubbered. "You've deliberately

come in here and ruined my reputation. And I know who's behind it all; Felix of the Gaylord!"

"Oh, dear!" Toffee said. "Please don't do that. Don't cry. I just can't stand to see a man cry."

Cecil Blemish relinquished his hold on the urn and joined his brother at the ruined man's side. In the background, Marc sagged limply under the sudden weight.

"What's the matter with him?" Gerald asked.

"We've ruined him," Cecil explained briefly.

The maitre de shuddered with a new convulsion of self pity.

"Now, look here," Toffee said kindly. "There's no reason to go on like this. I'll tell you what. Why can't we all cooperate in this thing? We want food and you want to throw us out. Why don't we just compromise? We'll take a table and eat and then we'll let you throw us out. You can make a terrible scene, and we won't say a word." She turned to the Blemishes. "That's fair, isn't it?"

"Oh, very," Cecil said enthusiastically. "We're wonderful at being thrown out. We act cowardly as anything, we snivel."

"Oh, we snivel beautifully!" Gerald confirmed.

"Fine," Toffee said. "Why don't you do a little sniveling right now? Just show the gentleman what he can expect. It's bound to cheer him up."

TOGETHER the Blemishes descended to their knees beside the sobbing maitre de. Then, contorting their faces into expressions of despicable self-abasement, they began to make small damp sounds of cowardly beseechment. Tears began to course down their faces and into their beards. Slowly, the maitre de raised his head and looked around. Then with a cry of purest horror he leaped to his feet and bolted from the room as though pursued by a thousand devils.

"I quit!" he screamed as he disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. "I go back to the automat!"

"Poor man," Toffee murmured. "Definitely the ulcerous type." She turned to the sniveling Blemishes. "Stop that awful noise and get up."

Marc struggled forward under the weight of the urn. "I can't hold out much longer," he said.

Supremely unaffected by the horrified silence which had fallen over the room, Toffee turned, surveyed the table accommodations, and sighted a place in the center of the room.

"Follow me, men," she said.

As the strange party made its way to the middle of the room in sedate silence, heads turned everywhere to follow its progress. Marc just made it to the edge of the table. Toffee and the Blemishes seated themselves as though their arrival had been accomplished in a completely orderly manner. The Belmishes, in a formal mood, didn't bother removing their hats.

"What about me?" Marc gasped. "Am I supposed to hold this thing in my lap?"

Toffee studied his predicament through thoughtful, half-closed lids. "No," she murmured, "you couldn't do that." She glanced around, at the Wynant's markedly heavy silverware. She promptly picked up her own place setting and dropped it in Marc's pockets. The Blemishes quickly followed suit.

A moment later Marc's pockets fairly bulged with purloined silver. The other diners looked on with awed fascination.

"Have you ever seen anything so flagrant?" a woman at an adjoining table whispered. "I've heard of people stealing a knife or fork for a souvenir, but . . . well . . . cleaning out the whole table!"

"Even the salt and peppers," her companion observed, half with admiration. "Before they get through there'll be nothing left of this hotel but the hollow shell."

Toffee regarded Marc with satisfaction. "That should hold you," she said. "Unburden yourself."

Willing to risk anything by now, Marc put down the urn. He remained stationary. With an echoing sigh of relief and a loud clattering of silver, he seated himself at the table.

"Thank God!" he groaned.

The other diners, feeling that they were now in for a period of respite, turned back to their cooling meals and a general buzz of low-key conversation. It was at this moment that a waiter, just on duty and starkly unappraised of recent developments, made his entrance into the dining room, picked up a pitcher of water, and went to the aid of the newcomers. He moved forward with the light step of the happy and the innocent. Toffee saw him coming.

"May we have more silver?" she asked.

The waiter stopped short, put the pitcher of water down heavily on the table. The dining room quieted for a second time.

"What happened to the silver that was here?" he asked. "A

Wynant table is never left without silver."

"Oh, that," Toffee said. "We used all that up."

"For what?" the waiter wanted to know. "What did you do with it?"

Toffee pointed blandly to Marc. "He has it in his pockets," she said.

Marc shifted in his chair with musical unease and refused to meet the narrowed gaze of the waiter. There was a long moment of silence before the waiter turned back to Toffee.

"You mean he just picked it up and put it in his pockets?"

"Oh, no," Toffee said. "Of course not. We picked it up and put it in his pockets for him." She nodded to her dark-browed accomplices.

FOR A MOMENT the waiter stood undecided. One could almost see the desperate churnings of his mind. Finally he bent low toward Toffee in a manner of great confidence. "Since you're so open about the whole thing," he murmured, "I trust you and your friends are playing some sort of game to amuse yourselves. I assume that you intend to take the silver back out of the gentleman's pockets and return it to the table. Am I right?"

"Certainly not," Toffee said. "We wouldn't think of it."

"I'd be very pleased if you would," the waiter said a bit more firmly.

"Oh, you wouldn't be pleased at all," Toffee said. "You'd despise it. Now just run along and get some more silver."

"So you can stuff this fellow's pockets with it?" the waiter said. "If you put any more in them they'll rip off."

"We want to eat with it," Toffee said.

"How novel," the waiter said. He turned to the Blemishes and blanched slightly. "Would you . . . uh . . . gentlemen please remove your hats?"

"Now look here," Toffee said. "There's no use getting petty about this thing." She nodded toward the vacant chair on the other side of the table. "Sit down, and I'll explain everything."

The waiter gazed on her with heavy disdain. "I can't sit down," he said.

Marc, on his side of the table, had looked away for a moment, his attention caught by the frankly admiring glance of a dark, heavy-lidded lady at the next table. There was, about her an unmistakably continental air, and Marc couldn't help noticing

that her neckline had plunged and crashed somewhere in the neighborhood of the *Arc de Triumph*. He flushed and turned away.

"Oh, please," he said anxiously, to no one in particular. "Please give me something to eat."

"Can't sit down?" Toffee said to the waiter. "For heaven's sake, why not? Has something happened to your . . . ?"

"Of course not!" the waiter said quickly. "It isn't allowed. Waiters never sit with the guests at the Wynant."

"Why not?" Toffee asked. "Is there something the matter with the waiters here?"

The waiter opened his mouth to answer, then was silent with thought. "I don't know," he said finally. "I guess there's nothing wrong with us. At least I think I'm all right. I don't see why I shouldn't sit down. If I'm invited, that is."

"Then have a seat," Toffee said.

"Thank you," the waiter said with a slight bow. "I don't mind if I do." With great deliberation he turned regarding the other diners with a look of scornful defiance, then crossed around the table and sat down. "Now, about that extra silver you wanted . . . "

A gasp echoed through the room. At the far side a bejeweled matron rose from her place with a snort of outrage and stiffly departed the room. In the meanwhile Marc had turned imploring eyes to the only quarter from which he had so far received any attention at all. The heavy-lidded lady smiled slowly.

"Would you give me something to eat?" Marc asked weakly. "You have so much there and . . . If I don't get something soon I'll drift off into space."

"It is such a feeling as I have often suffered myself," the woman said in a heavy French accent. "But never for the want of food. I could not forgive myself to turn away a man with the hunger."

"I've got the hunger something fierce," Marc said.

"Of course, monsieur will pay the bill?"

"Sure," Marc agreed eagerly. "Anything."

THE LADY reached out a tapering hand to the table and picked up a piece of paper covered darkly with figures. She handed it to Marc.

Marc glanced at the total and blanched.

"Champagne is so expensive in this country," the lady said

regretfully. "And to me it is like water."

"Obviously," Marc murmured. "You must wash your clothes in the stuff." He held out his hand. "But never mind. Just give me the food."

"You have only to open the mouth," the lady smiled. "I will feed you with my own hands." Her eyes held his own with a suggestive glint. "It will be sweeter that way."

"Just give me the plate," Marc said.

The woman paid no attention. "You will drink the wine of my country from the cup of my hand, like a great, thirsting beast." She laughed throatily. "It is so that we make love with the meal."

"Doesn't it get awfully messy?" Marc asked ruefully. "Or do you wear gloves?"

"Love is never tidy," the woman breathed, leaning close to him. "Not when it is worthwhile. Love is always a beautiful, beautiful mess."

Marc, more embarrassed than enthralled at this invitation to amour among the foodstuffs, was not aware that Toffee had paused in her conversation with the waiter and fastened her eyes with brooding hostility to the back of his neck.

"And now," the French temptress was saying, "the monsieur will part the beautiful lips so Lisa can give him the food of love."

"Oh, yeah?" Toffee put in hotly from across the table. "If the monsieur parts the beautiful lips Toffee will part his teeth for him!"

Marc started guiltily. "Now, Toffee . . . !"

"Stand back from that French pastry, you philandering gourmet!" Toffee said, getting up from her chair. "When I get through with her there's going to be a lot more broken than just her speech!"

"She's only feeding me!" Marc said.

"Yeah, Toffee sneered. "The food of love. I heard her." She swung toward the woman. "I'm the dietitian around here, honey, and don't you forget it."

"I only show the monsieur how she is done in the old country."

"Well," Toffee said, "get a load of how she's done in the new one. Prepare yourself to get fractured, you Parisian petunia!"

And with that the turbulent redhead snatched the plate of squab that rested in the tapering hand of the enchantress and

carefully emptied its contents into the lady's elaborate hair-do.

"*Mon dieu!*" the woman screamed as she shot out of her chair. She swung about and eyed Toffee malevolently through a trickle of gravy. "So! The mademoiselle would be the wild-cat, eh?" She glanced quickly about for ammunition and found it on a neighboring table. Scooping a plate of soup from beneath the owner's very spoon, she turned furiously and prepared to hurl it into Toffee's face. "I have never been so insult in all my life!"

"Put that soup down, Fifi," Toffee warned, "or you're going to get insult in places you didn't know you had."

The soggy siren did as she was told, but only by accident. As she started toward Toffee, the plate of soup slithered out of her hand, looped gracefully through the air and landed upside down in the lap of a lavender laced matron. Heaving herself from her chair, the matron trumpeted her displeasure to the assemblage at large, armed herself with a pitcher of water, and entered the fray. Stepping with great dignity to the side of the beleaguered European, she heaved the contents of the pitcher in the general vicinity of her midsection. Then, with great pleasure, she threw back her head and laughed. Just in time to receive a plateful of oysters squarely in the face.

IN THE NEXT moment the entire room had entered into the spirit of the occasion. Naturally repressed, the guests of the Wynant were quick to seize upon this opportunity to give expression to their pent up feelings. Pandemonium ruled the room from end to end. Trays and diners slid across the floor together with an air of abandoned democracy. Mrs. Jones, having long resented the upward tilt of Mrs. Smythe's nose, did her level best to lower it with a sauce bottle. The action, for the main part, however, gravitated frenziedly toward the center of the room where it had started. Toffee, having applied the squab to her victim, was now gustily engaged in massaging it into the scalp, all the way to the bone if possible.

Marc, for his part, was busily engaged in reaping the spoils of the battle. He picked up an abandoned roll here, an unwanted steak there, and even occasionally caught a delicacy as it flew through the air. He stuffed himself as ravenously as a starved roadworker at a free lunch. The Blemishes remained seated at the table, thoroughly confused and disillusioned at the activities of the upper classes. The waiter merely leaned back in his chair

with an enigmatic smile and enjoyed to the fullest the spectacle of these people doing to each other what he had been secretly tempted to do to them nightly for years.

Marc, still concerned with the matter of dining, reached out for an abandoned pudding and discovered a new and still more alarming element in the fracas. Just as his hand was closing in on the dessert, the dish suddenly leaped into the air, poised itself carefully, then sailed across the room to catch a portly gentleman neatly at the side of the ear. In a seizure of surprise, as the gooey mess dribbled into his collar, the man whirled about and dealt his female companion a stinging blow across the bridge of her nose.

"Oh!" he gasped in instant regret. "I'm so terribly sorry!"

For a moment the woman only stared at him without expression. Then, with slow calm she reached out to the table, picked up a bottle of wine, carefully removed the cloth from around it, and belted her abject attacker a solid blow across the crown of the head.

"Perfectly all right, lover," she murmured as she stepped over his prone figure and started from the room. "Don't bother getting up."

Marc turned back to the table and frowned sternly.

"George," he said tentatively. "George, I know you're there, so there's no use hiding. Show yourself."

"Of course," George's voice said out of space, with malicious levity. "In a moment. Wonderful fight, isn't it?"

"George!" Marc said.

But there was only silence from the ghost. Marc gazed speculatively around, peering anxiously into the ranks of the warring diners for some sign; there was no telling what the sporadic spook might undertake in a situation of this sort. It was only a moment before the worst of his fears were realized.

There was only a slight disturbance around the cigarette urn at first, a faint billowing of the table cloth. Then, as though someone had secured a grip on the thing . . . as George indeed had . . . it suddenly lifted into the air. There was a period of shifting and balancing, then it lifted steadily upward until it was above the heads of the embroiled diners.

"No!" Marc yelled at the top of his lungs. "George! Put it back!"

Instantly all was silence in the dining room as the warring guests froze in various attitudes of combat and cast frightened

eyes upward at the floating urn. The enchantress from France, her hand clutching at Toffee's hair, was somewhat more affected than the others.

"I haf loose my reason!" she wailed. "I am departed from my wits in this land of barbarians!" Then, becoming considerably more heavy-lidded than before, she wilted quietly to the floor.

Meanwhile the urn had continued upward, paused, sighted its course, and started viciously in Marc's direction. George's plan was hideously plain; he meant to dispatch his earthly part to the hereafter by means of bombardment.

"Run, Marc!" Toffee screamed. "Run!"

Marc, however, now laden with food, silver and lead weights, was all but incapable of flight. He started forward, but only ploddingly. Loaded to the teeth with ballast, his progress was not only extremely noisome, but greatly retarded.

"I can't run!" he panted.

IN THE NEXT moment the urn had arrived at a position almost directly above him. It shuttled nervously back and forth, evidently adjusting for a direct-hit. Toffee dashed toward the table and the petrified Blemishes. She bent quickly over Cecil and snatched the revolver from his hand.

"Bombs away!" George's voice sang out jubilantly from the region of the urn. "Fire one!"

"Oh, Lord!" Marc moaned fervently. He struggled desperately to reach one of the tables so that he might take shelter under it.

And then, just as the urn plunged downward, three shots thundered deafeningly through the room. Marc was suddenly caught in a rain of sand and shattered pottery.

At the table, the Blemishes jumped to their feet and threw their hands above their heads.

"We surrender!" they yelped in unison.

Then Cecil turned around, saw Toffee, the gun in her hand. He reached out and took it from her.

"You're not supposed to have that," he said woundedly. "What kind of prisoner are you, anyway?"

"Sorry," Toffee said. "It was an emergency."

Then she ran to Marc, followed by the Blemishes, and began to scrape some of the debris from his head and shoulders. No sooner had she arrived, however, than another crisis loomed

on the horizon. The door of the dining room flew open and the manager of the Wynant, accompanied by two of the city's finest, ran inside.

"Arrest them all!" the manager screamed shrilly. "Arrest everybody!"

"Get down!" Toffee said quickly and dragged Marc with her to cover beneath the nearest table. The Blemishes followed swiftly after.

In the deathly stillness that ensued, the manager and the two policemen advanced menacingly into the room. Then suddenly they stopped as a jangling sound broke the quiet. It was as though a handful of silver had been dropped to the floor somewhere across the room. It was obvious, however, that there was no one in that direction.

"Okay, Bill," one of the policemen said. "Let's round 'em up!"

In the activity that followed no one noticed the kitchen doors swing open, quietly and slowly, to permit the curious passage of four crawling figures.

"I don't know," Toffee said, crawling over the feet of an astonished chef. "I don't know where everyone gets the idea this hotel is so elegant. I've been here only twice and it's been raided both times."



Chapter Ten

MARC AND Toffee, on their feet now and making strides as rapidly as possible, emerged from the alley behind the Wynant and hurried along the sidewalk, bound in the direction of the green convertible. At a distance, the Blemishes scurried along after them with grim determination.

Turning the corner at the end of the block, they arrived at the front of the hotel which was now the location of considerable activity. Toffee paused to watch the dining guests being escorted by the police from the hotel to several official conveyances which had arrived under the canopy.

"Come on," Marc said. "Get in the car before they see you."

Toffee nodded and followed the suggestion. Marc crossed around the car and slid quickly under the wheel.

"There still may be time to catch Julie," he said anxiously.

Toffee favored him with a sullen stare. "I almost hope there isn't," she said. "For her sake. If she didn't have grounds for divorce before, she's certainly got them now—the way you were dallying around with that French trull . . ."

"I wasn't dallying," Marc said. "I was only trying to get something to eat. Lord knows you were willing to sit there and

let me starve to death."

He switched on the ignition and started the motor.

The car was just pulling out from the curb when the Blemishes arrived in a grim dog trot and placed restraining hands on the edge of the door. Together they regarded Toffee and Marc with baleful hurt. And produced their revolvers. Marc braked the car to a stop.

"Golly," Toffee said, turning to Marc. "I forgot all about them."

"What do they want?" Marc asked

"You remember," Toffee said. "They captured us up on the roof. They think we're their prisoners." She turned back to the pouting brothers. "Look, boys," she smiled like a patient parent with a pair of fanciful and rather dreadful children, "we just haven't got time to be your prisoners right now. We'd love to, really but we've got to leave. Why don't you call Marc up on the telephone sometime and . . ."

The brothers shook their heads in doleful coordination.

"Now, why be difficult? We'd be just crazy to have you capture us some other time, but right now . . . It's not that you are not perfectly sinister and all that . . . Now put those guns away and go spy on someone else for a while."

"No," said Cecil. "Huh-uh."

"Huh-uh," Gerald echoed.

Marc leaned forward impatiently. "Look here," he said firmly. "I don't have time for any more of this nonsense. I've got to get home. Now either you get off this car or you don't, but I'm leaving."

For a moment the brothers looked at each other in sad consultation. Then, as though having reached a decision by telepathy, they simultaneously quitted the side of the car and stood back a pace. Marc threw the car into gear and prepared to leave. However, just as he was pressing down on the accelerator the whole street suddenly boomed with the sound of gunfire. The car jarred forward, then settled into a lop-sided stop. The Blemishes grinned happily on their handiwork; they had air-conditioned both tires on the right side.

ATTRACTED by the sound, one of the officers in front of the Wynant started forward, but Cecil waved him back.

"Just a blowout!" he called. He pointed to the crippled car. "We'll see that he gets fixed up."

The officer nodded and went back to his chores with the Wynant guests.

"Why, you little . . . !" Marc grated.

"Holy smoke!" Toffee broke in, staring steadily at the two brothers. "Those kids are using real bullets and everything!"

"That's what we've been trying to tell you," Cecil said mildly. "We're just as mean as we can be."

"You certainly are," Toffee agreed. "You're just about the most awful little grubs I've ever run into."

"Sugary phrases aren't going to get you anywhere," Gerald said virtuously. "Now get out of that car and come with us."

Marc and Toffee stared at each other with silent bewilderment; they were completely nonplussed. Slowly they got out of the car and presented themselves on the sidewalk.

"Now, just a minute, boys . . ." Marc said.

"Shut up," Gerald snarled. "Our car is right behind you. Get in the back seat and sit quietly."

Toffee turned and looked at the black sedan. "I wish that thing didn't look so much like a hearse," she said unhappily.

"It's going to look more like a hearse if you don't shut up and do what we say," Cecil said.

With that clammy piece of news, Marc and Toffee advanced to the forbidding vehicle in question and deposited themselves stiffly in the back seat. Cecil and his gun joined them in the back, while Gerald climbed into the front and started the engine.

"It's so embarrassing," Toffee said disconsolately as they pulled away from the curb. "That's what hurts; being shoved around like this by a pair of subnormal pygmies."

"Where are you taking us?" Marc asked. "What do you want with us?"

"None of your business," Cecil answered promptly. "And what do you care?"

"Oh, go on, Cecil," Gerald said from the front, guiding the cumbersome automobile through traffic. "Tell them. They're going to find out anyway."

"We never told in the movies," Cecil said sullenly. "It spoils the suspense. We always said none of your business and what do you care. You're just sore because I said your line."

"Go on," Gerald said. "Tell them."

"Oh, all right," Cecil said. He directed his attention as well as his gun toward his waiting captives. "I think you're familiar

with our profession?"

"Profession," Toffee murmured. "That's a laugh."

Cecil ignored it. "Then you should be able to guess that our real interest is in you, Mr. Pillsworth, and your formula. That's what we want."

"I haven't got the formula," Marc lied. "I turned all my papers over to the government."

"That's a lie," Cecil said flatly. "We're in the complete confidence of the government, and we know you still have the formula yourself. You shouldn't be so dishonest, Mr. Pillsworth; it makes a bad impression."

"Please forgive me," Marc said with heavy irony. "And what if I do have the formula? I don't have it with me."

"You can recreate it," Cecil said with confidence. "Just so long as we get it first, before anyone else does. That's the important thing. If you don't recreate it, we'll kill you. Quite dead, you may be sure. We can always find your papers. Really, the only reason we've taken you into custody, so to speak, is to keep the formula from the government. Otherwise, you're actually not important to us at all."

"What do you want with the formula?" Marc asked. "What in the world would you do with it?"

"Electrify the world," Cecil said with an unexpected intensity. "This is just the sort of thing we've always been waiting for. Your formula will give us a chance to do something really big. Everyone will be talking about it."

"About what?" Marc asked apprehensively.

"The bomb, of course," Gerald said from the front. "We're going to make a bomb from your formula, like those government men talked about."

"What for?" Marc said. "What good would it be to you?"

"What good?" Cecil said. "Are you serious? We're going to make our reputation with it. Everyone will be after us to come spy for them when we've finished with the bomb. Won't they, Gerald?"

"Everyone," Gerald agreed. "With the possible exception of the United States. Personally, I even anticipate a few offers to make a comeback in the movies."

A LOOK of eager anticipation had washed unbecomingly over Cecil's awful face. "We're going to make this mammoth bomb, you see," he said, "and we're going to float away

this whole entire city. Just like that!"

"What!" Marc started. "You mean you're actually going to . . . !"

Cecil nodded dreamily. "They won't be able to overlook us then," he said. "People will stop being so friendly and treat us with proper respect for a change. We'll just make the city disappear over night!"

"Oh, no!" Toffee said.

"Good grief!" Marc murmured. He gazed out the window at the passing city, the people, the shops, cars, skyscrapers. He tried to imagine all these things torn loose from the earth, twisting and turning into space. His mind revolted before the picture. The idea was too terrifying for words. Marc trembled with horror. That he should be the one to provide the instrument by which such a fantasy could be set into motion was too awful to contemplate.

"You can't!" he breathed. "You can't be human and even think of such a thing!"

"You see!" Cecil said, his eyes bright with enthusiasm. "You're already impressed, and we haven't even started. Of course, if you want, we'll cut you in on the deal. It would be worth it to get your cooperation." He turned to Toffee who was staring at him with unguarded loathing. "You, too."

"I'd rather die," Toffee said.

"Well," Cecil shrugged, "if you'd really rather, it can be arranged."

"It won't work!" Marc said desperately. "It's preposterous!"

"It worked with you, didn't it?" Cecil pointed out.

Marc thought back to his frenzied flight to the top of the Wynant. A chill passed through him; anything was possible.

"But why the whole city?" he asked. "Why not just a building or a retired battleship?"

"More spectacular," Cecil said. "It'll cause more comment."

"That's so understated," Toffee said, "it's below the level of reason." She looked at Marc. "They're mad," she said, "raving."

"I know," Marc said in hushed tones. "They're just mad enough."

"Oh, you bet we are," Cecil said with a sudden mood of happiness. "We're regular ogres, aren't we, Gerald?"

"Well, I wouldn't say *regular* ogres," Gerald answered.

"Would you say *irregular* ogres?"

"No," Gerald said with due consideration. "Irregular sort of suggests those advertisements. You know the ones about people who are uncomfortable because . . ."

"Just listen to them!" Toffee moaned. "They're planning on blowing up the city and they go on about it as giddy as a couple of spinsters in spring! What difference does it make what kind of ogres you are? You're perfectly abhorrent, both of you."

Cecil smiled his crooked smile at Toffee. "Thanks," he said modestly.

"Don't mention it," Toffee said. She turned away with a little shiver. Then suddenly she brightened. Gerald had just brought the car to a stop at an intersection. At the center of the street a truly enormous cop was presiding over traffic. Toffee looked back at the revolver in Cecil's hand, then at the cop. She decided to risk it. She threw back her head and screamed with all the sureness and tonal brilliance of an operatic heroine saying farewell to her lover.

"Murder!" she screamed. "Arson! Blackmail! Fire! Flood! Famine."

Then, satisfied that she had covered the field of catastrophe sufficiently to capture the attention of even the most unimaginative cop, she stopped and settled comfortably back in her seat. Noting that the cop was already on his way toward the car, she folded her arms complacently and smiled at Cecil.

"Now we'll see who gets taken into custody," she said smugly.

The cop stuck his head in the window, looked bewilderedly at Marc and Toffee, then took in the Blemishes. His face widened with a grin.

"Hello, boys," he said amiably. "What's the trouble? Read any good plans lately?"

"No, they haven't," Toffee put in quickly. "But they're trying to. Officer, arrest these two."

THE COP'S smile faded into an expression of purest astonishment. "Arrest *them*!" he asked incredulously. "What on earth for?"

"They're abducting us," Toffee said. "That's what for."

For a moment the cop just stared at her, then he threw back his head in a roar of laughter.

"Those two?" he gasped. "Abducting you?"

"That's what I said," Toffee snapped. "What's so funny?"

"That's right, officer," Marc said. "They're trying to steal a valuable formula from me."

"Of course they are," the cop said with amusement. "They're always trying to steal a valuable formula from someone. And every once in a while they actually get one. But what difference does it make? They couldn't do anything with it if they wanted to. Now why don't you just make them out a copy like a good fellow and hand it over? It'll make them happy as hell, and it won't do you any harm."

"No harm, you dumb flatfoot!" Toffee said, losing control. "Just step inside here for a minute and I'll hammer that thick skull of yours till you can use it for a serving platter."

"There's no call to get nasty," the cop said.

"But you don't understand," Marc said earnestly. "These men mean to use my formula to destroy the city. They're going to float it off into space."

The cop turned and observed Marc closely. He nodded to Gerald. "Better keep a close watch on this one," he said. "He's got some funny notions in his head. He might do you harm."

"My God!" Toffee cried. "Now *we're* crazy!"

"That's a good sign, lady," the cop said soothingly. "They say if you realize your condition and are willing to fight it there's hope of a cure."

"I'll kill him!" Toffee cried. "I'll kill him with my own two hands! Look here, you jelly-headed gendarme, these two are dangerous criminals!"

"Criminals?" the cop said. "Them? Why they wouldn't hurt a fly. Just look at their faces."

Toffee looked at the Blemishes, then came close to choking. The twins had assumed expressions of angelic innocence such as might have been equalled only by Little Eva in the moment of her ascension.

"Why, you dirty little frauds!" she hissed.

"All right," the cop said, "you'll have to get along now; you're blocking traffic."

As Gerald set the gear and put the car in motion once more, Toffee fell back in her seat, weak with emotion.

"There's one guy I'll enjoy seeing blown into space," she said. "I hope he gets air sick."

The mood in the car deepened after that, and there was silence. Gerald made a left turn and headed the car away from the center of the city. Marc and Toffee stared pensively at the passing scene while Cecil hummed a soundless tune and smiled annoyingly over private thoughts; presumably of the devastating thing he and his brother were planning to do. Evening deepened into final night and lights began to glitter everywhere. And then the incident of the door occurred.

IT WAS JUST as Gerald brought the car to a stop at an intersection that the door promptly opened itself, wavered for a moment, then closed. Unmistakably it marked George's arrival. Toffee looked up sharply.

"George?" she said, and her voice was almost hopeful.

There was silence. Gerald glanced around with a smile.

"Did you see the door open and close just now?" he asked without alarm.

"Uh-huh," Cecil said casually.

"A ghost, I guess," Gerald said.

"You two may think you're joking," Toffee said. "It really was a ghost."

"We know," Cecil said. "Gerald and I believe in ghosts. Always have. We've had quite a few of them around from time to time. At least we think we have; ghosts are hard to tell about sometimes."

Gerald turned to the empty space beside him. "Make yourself comfortable, ghost," he said graciously. "Just knock twice when you want to get out."

"You see," Toffee said to Marc. "They're getting crazier by the minute." Then she paused thoughtfully. "Or are we?"

"Pretty tough getting a ride at this time of night, I imagine," Gerald was saying chattily to thin air. "Particularly being a ghost and all." He waited but there was no answer. He turned back to Cecil. "Doesn't want to talk, I guess." Then, as the traffic ahead began to move, he shifted gears and started forward. Thus occupied, he didn't notice that his revolver had suddenly become possessed of a life of its own; he didn't see it nose out of his pocket and take flight into the air.

Toffee nudged Marc excitedly. "Look," she whispered. "He's going to help us."

Together they watched breathlessly as the gun moved fur-tively upward. Then they started with surprise and horror as

it righted itself and pointed its muzzle purposefully in Marc's direction.

"No, George!" Toffee cried. "Don't shoot! It's those two you want! They're planning to blow up the city and float it away. Liquor and all, George!"

The gun faltered, then started to turn uncertainly toward Cecil. But not fast enough. Cecil suddenly reached out and slapped it free of George's invisible grasp. The gun described a small arc into the back seat and landed in Toffee's lap. Marc, Toffee, Cecil and presumably, though there was no way of proving it, also George, all reached for the gun at once. The result was a writhing snarl of reaching arms and clutching hands. Toffee giggled dementedly.

"Stop that!" she screamed. "I'm ticklish!"

"This is no time to indulge in mad laughter," Marc grunted sharply. "Our lives are at stake."

"I know!" Toffee trilled light-heartedly. "I'm frightened sick! Only get your hands out of my ribs!"

As three sets of madly working hands rose, twined together, the gun danced wildly from the fleeting grasp of one to that of the other.

"Good grief!" Toffee said. "Even if I got hold of the thing I'd never know it; I can't tell which hands are mine!"

The hands and the gun traveled higher in the air, then suddenly one of the hands rose above the others and reached viciously for the errant firearm. It struck it, without catching hold of it, and sent it crashing to the back of Gerald's unsuspecting head. Gerald instantly let go of the wheel and slumped down in his seat. The car swerved dangerously to the wrong side of the street. Momentarily the warring factions in the back seat, now concerned with more immediate matters of navigation, disengaged their hands and forgot the gun as it fell to the floor at Toffee's feet.

"George!" Toffee screamed. "Grab the wheel!"

Apparently the ghost followed the suggestion for the car suddenly veered sharply to the left and, with a screech of the tires, darted into a gas station. George's voice echoed worriedly out of thin air.

"How do you stop this thing?"

But there was no answer. Toffee, now certain that the car was at least temporarily under control, reached down for the gun. So did Cecil. So did Marc. The struggle in the

back seat started afresh just as it had left off.

WHEN THE black sedan entered the station, Pat O'Brien, a young and stalwart Irishman with red hair viewed its arrival from within the station house and strode forward with the simple thought of serving his public. As the car sped past the pumps and circled back, Pat assumed that the driver was merely bringing the vehicle in line with the pump of his choice. However, Pat thought it somewhat queer when it continued past the pumps the second time. As it turned back for the third time, and he noticed that there was no driver and that the back seat was the scene of a life and death struggle between two men and a girl, he began to have quite a definite feeling that things were not exactly as they ought to be.

"Faith," Pat said to himself. "There's an uncommon thing goin' on here."

Then he jumped back into his enclosure as the car turned for still another swooping run at the pumps. Pat sat down on a stool to collect his thoughts in his own sluggish way. The company policy dictated clearly that the customer was always right, but Pat wasn't certain but that this mightn't be the exception that proved the rule. Then he grew more positive of it as he watched the black sedan plunge to a crashing stop against one of the gas pumps and send it tilting a bit to the leeward. Pat reached for the telephone and asked for the police.

As he waited he noted that a revolver had leaped from the back window of the car and skidded across the pavement, that the rear door of the car had flown open and three struggling figures had tumbled out. Then a gruff voice, equally as Irish as his own, took his attention.

"Faith," Pat said.

"Faith, yerself," the voice said. "And who's callin'?"

"It's me," Pat said. "Pat O'Brien."

"Is it now? That movie actin' fella?"

Pat flushed modestly. "Oh, no, sir," he said. "Just plain Pat O'Brien, down at the gas station."

"Oh," the voice said with a new note of chattiness. "There's a good lad. And how's yer dear ma, Pat?"

"The picture of health," Pat said, "even if she is down with the gout, poor soul." Then suddenly he turned away from the

telephone, his eyes drawn to the struggle by the pumps. Things seemed to have gotten quite far out of hand. The girl had taken the hose loose from one of the pumps and was swinging it determinedly at the head of the small man in the derby. It did not help matters that she had managed to trip the mechanism and was hurling gasoline in all directions. Worse than that, however, was the behavior of the water hose; all by itself it had risen in the air, like a huge, spiteful snake, and had begun adding water to the deluge.

"Faith," Pat commented darkly. "It's a terrible thing."

"Do stop repeatin' yerself like that," the voice on the telephone answered. "It makes you sound like a proper ninny, it does. What is it that's a terrible thing? Is it in a professional capacity that you're callin' me?"

"And so it is," Pat affirmed. "It's a bit of advice I crave. The company that owns this station says that the customer is always right, but I'm wonderin' if it's still true when the world's gone mad?"

"And in what way has the world gone mad, Pat?"

"Well," Pat said, "there's a girl here in the dooryard who's spittin' out gasoline all over everything."

"How's that!" the voice said. "This girl, you say, she's spittin' out gas? Do you mean to say . . ."

"With the aid of the pumps, to be sure," Pat explained fairly. "And, if you'd believe it, it's butterflies she's wearin' in the place of her clothes. They're all hollerin' and yellin' and carryin' on something frightful. It's probably the end of the world all right."

"Patrick O'Brien!" the voice said with sudden sternness. "Shame on you! It's a fanciful lad you've always been, and I've been of a mind to forgive you it for bein' a comfort to yer gouty ma, but when you start callin' up a poor tired cop like me and runnin' off at the mouth about gassy girls and yellin' butterflies . . . Shame is all I've got to say to you."

"I didn't even mention the water hose," Pat said stubbornly. "It's the end of the world, I'm confident."

"It's the bottom of the bottle!" the voice snapped. "My advice to you is to soak yer head in cold water and say a prayer that the devil doesn't take yer soul. Goodbye to you."

The telephone clicked loudly in Pat O'Brien's ear.

"Faith," Pat said sadly. "And that's the last time I'll hold conversation with the law." He slumped back on his stool and

turned his eyes to the company rules which were pasted on the wall; there was no mention anywhere as to proper procedures in the event of the world's end.

* * *

Outside, however, the struggle at the pumps came to an abrupt end as Cecil won possession of the revolver. He turned and aimed it at Marc. Promptly the splatter of gasoline stopped, as did that of the water.

"All right," Cecil said, "get back in the car and wake up Gerald."

For a moment Marc and Toffee stood motionless, gazing at the fanatic gleam in Cecil's eyes. Then slowly they turned and started toward the car. Both of them knew very surely that the little man would hesitate considerably less than a second at the act of murdering a man . . . or a city . . .



Chapter Eleven

THOUGH it couldn't possibly have been more than a couple of hours, it seemed that they had been twisting and turning through the night for eternities. Long ago the lights of the city had slipped away into the darkness behind them. Marc had completely lost track of where they were.

George, the unpredictable ghost, after a brief narrative about how he had fender-hopped his way back into Marc and Toffee's company, had drifted off into unconcerned and discordant slumber. Between snores, made forgetful by sleep, he had fully and completely materialized. If the Blemishes noted the exactness of the ghost's features to Marc's they didn't bother to comment on it; apparently the brothers, in their feverish dementia, were perfectly willing to credit anything as natural.

Gerald sped the car through a long wooded lane, then turned sharply to the right into a private drive. At last, for better or for worse . . . with the balance heavy on the less attractive side . . . Marc and Toffee arrived at the destination chosen for them by their crazed captors.

As the car ground to a stop Marc and Toffee peered fearfully out the window and were greeted by the sight of an enor-

mous, turreted old house that loomed in the night like a preposterous, rococo mountain. It was the sort of place that the newspapers would surely describe as a 'mystery manse.' Neither Marc nor Toffee felt called upon to make any comment as to the majesty of the structure or the loveliness of the gardens that surrounded it. Cecil nudged his gun in their direction.

"Get out," he said. "This is it."

"Yes," Toffee said glumly. "But *what* is it?"

In the front seat Gerald shook George and the recital of the nasal passages snorted to a stop. Blinking, George sat up, observed his state of materialization, then looked around.

"Eh?" he said. "Where are we?"

Toffee turned back at the door of the car. "You know, George," she said, "next to an open grave, I think we've found the ideal place for you to settle down. I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't meet a lot of your old friends here."

The party climbed out of the car and assembled before the old house. Then, with Gerald leading and Cecil guarding the rear, they creaked up a long set of wooden steps, crossed a littered veranda, and brought up before a formidable oak door that was easily large enough to accommodate the comfortable passage of a fat elephant with its ears flapping. Gerald produced a key and unlocked the door. As he shoved it open it swung back on a cavern of unbroken darkness.

"Look out for bats," Toffee said.

"Just step inside," Gerald said.

"Leaving all hope behind," Marc added in a whisper.

The company moved slowly forward into the darkness. Even George seemed somewhat loathe to cross the threshold, but he managed it. When they were all inside Cecil closed the door after them and relocked with a gritting sound that fairly scraped the spine. There was the sound of movement close by, then the click of a switch. Instantly there was light.

"Oh," Toffee cried in amazement. "*Oh!*"

STARING dumbfoundedly at the amazing thing that had risen before them, the three newcomers remained where they were, incapable of movement.

It was as though the hulking house had simply been scooped hollow with an enormous spoon. Where there had once been partitions and floors, there was now nothing but an area of great gaping space. The house had originally been four stories

high, now it was merely one; from where Marc and Toffee and George stood gaping, the garret ceiling was clearly visible. Within the walls of the old house there were literally acres of unbroken space. But that was only the least of it.

The place was simply crammed with strange, incomprehensible equipment, mechanisms whose purpose were completely unguessable. Enormous coils writhed sinuously, twining themselves about great metal tubes that stretched high into the air. Wheels turned smoothly within wheels that turned within wheels. At the far end of the room a great slide shot gleaming metal tracks upward into one of the turrets, and then on into the night. A panel of switches ran the full length of one wall.

"Well?" Cecil said. "How do you like it?"

"If you'll pardon the vulgarity," Toffee said, "this is the damndest shanty I've ever seen. What is all that stuff for anyway?"

"Well," Gerald said slowly, "we're not exactly sure about all of it ourselves. Of course our main interest is in that big machine in the center." He pointed to a mammoth arrangement of wheels, tubes, dynamos and levers. "We call that the production unit. With the proper adjustments you can produce almost any mechanical or chemical device known to man. With that machine alone, and enough raw materials, of course, a single man could match the output of any of the nation's largest factories. The inventor only made it just to have something to do. Actually, he was going to destroy it. Said it would make mankind useless." He turned to Marc. "There won't be any trouble making the bomb . . . or even a thousand bombs . . . with that."

"What happened to the inventor?" Marc asked uneasily.

"Oh, him," Gerald said with a note of sadness. "Unfortunately he met with an untimely end just after we met him." He nodded to the gleaming track. "He was explaining that space catapult to us, telling us how a man wearing the proper equipment could be thrown out into space, even into regions unknown to man, and live to tell the tale. He was just telling us how to work the lever when suddenly the thing went off with him in it." He lowered his eyes delicately. "If ever a man went to heaven, it must have been poor Mr. Adams. At least he was certainly headed in that direction the last time we saw him. Anyway, Cecil and I like to think he's just away on a little trip."

"How terribly sweet and sentimental," Toffee said acidly. "I suppose he wasn't wearing the right equipment at the time?"

"Alas, no," Gerald said. "Anyway, Mr. Adams was a very strange man. He had no practical sense at all. He just stayed here all alone and built all these things just to see if they really *could* be built. He had no idea of ever putting them to any commercial use. He never saw anyone or had any friends apparently. It seemed a little sad at the time that Cecil and I, both virtual strangers, were the only ones here to see him off."

"Still, he seemed lonesome for company," Cecil put in. "He was very nice to us when we came here. It was only by chance that we found him, you know. We were out this way looking for a hideout . . . we thought we ought to have since all the other spies did . . . anyway, we got lost and stopped here. Mr. Adams took us in just like we were old friends. I guess he wanted someone to show his inventions to. Maybe we really shouldn't have pulled the switch on the old man that way, but he kept saying he needed to get away somewhere . . ."

"The only decent thing to do, really," Toffee murmured.

"Exactly," Cecil said. "At first . . . after Mr. Adams left . . . Gerald and I toyed around with the idea of making mankind useless, but we decided that mankind would probably enjoy it too much, and things are moving in that direction fast enough anyway. But we always knew this stuff would come in handy someday if we waited. He turned to Marc. "And now you've come along with your bomb."

"May God forgive me," Marc said bitterly.

CECIL pointed to another catapult arrangement, smaller than the one which had launched Mr. Adams into regions unknown to men, and aimed considerably lower.

"We'll send the bomb out with that," he said. "That was Mr. Adams' first experiment with the catapult. It will direct a missile accurately anywhere in the world. In fact, at full strength, it can throw a two-ton weight around the world three times. Non-stop."

"A two-ton weight of what?" Toffee asked.

"How should I know?" Cecil asked. "What difference does it make?"

"All the difference," Toffee said emphatically. "It would be perfectly preposterous for anyone to want to go flinging a two-ton weight around the world three times." She paused. "Unless, of course, it was a two-ton weight of something you hated so much you wanted to see it going away from you three times."

"That's neither here nor there," Cecil said shortly. "The main thing is to get the bomb made as quickly as possible." He turned to Marc. "I hope you're ready to go to work?"

"Right now?"

Cecil nodded. "We plan to start tonight. Fortunately, every known chemical is on hand here. Mr. Adams was amazingly thorough. Would you rather write the formula down for us, or call out elements as we go along?"

"And let me warn you," Gerald put in, "you'd better be accurate. We're planning a test bombing, just to make sure. If it doesn't work you may have an opportunity to meet Mr. Adams in person."

Marc was hesitant. "It'll take time to scale the formula to your needs," he said. "I don't know that I'll be able to do it tonight."

"Well, we can get started at least," Cecil said. He turned to Gerald. "Don't you think we should tie them? Wouldn't it be more professional?"

"Oh, sure," Gerald said. "Only I think chains would be better than ropes. More effective. You know, like the ones we used in our last picture, *Mr. X and Madam Q*? We can chain them up and threaten them for a while."

"We haven't got time to threaten them," Cecil said. "Do we have any chains?"

"Oh, lots," Cecil said. "I'll go get them."

In the meantime, everyone had forgotten about George. Unobserved, the materialized ghost had wandered interestedly in the direction of the giant catapult. Noting the compartment provided for the human missile, he turned back and studied Marc's lean figure with thoughtful calculation. He stroked his chin for a moment, then nodded with satisfaction.

In a moment Cecil returned, dragging several lengths of chain after him. At gun point, Marc and Toffee seated themselves in chairs at the far side of the room and submitted unhappily to an iron-clad captivity. George, however, was permitted to move about freely; the brothers had quite rightly reasoned that since ghosts were notorious for romping about in chains, George would probably be quite unhampered by them. After that, cautioning Marc to get to work immediately thinking about the formula, they dispatched themselves to the huge contrivance in the center of the room and began busily setting dials and levers.

Marc and Toffee considered the current state of affairs

without heart. Toffee turned to George, who had left the catapult and had now arranged himself lazily on a nearby scaffolding. She smiled demurely.

"Nice George," she cooed. "You're going to help us, aren't you George? You're not going to leave us sitting here in these awful cold chains. We might catch cold."

George crossed his arms complacently over his chest and shook his head. "You should have been nicer to me," he said pettishly.

"If there's anything I hate," Toffee said, "it's a spoiled spook." She turned to Marc. "What are we going to do?"

MARC shrugged hopelessly. "Just stall, I guess," he said, "as long as we can, anyway."

"And then what?" Toffee asked. "Are you going to give them the formula?"

Marc shook his head. "No."

"They'll kill you."

Marc sighed. "I suppose they will. I only wish I could see Julie again, and explain everything to her."

Toffee smiled with unexpected softness. "You really do love her, don't you?" she asked.

"I guess I must," Marc said, "or I wouldn't feel this way."

For a moment they were silent. Then Toffee suddenly brightened.

"I know what!" she cried. Marc looked up hopefully. "It's so simple I don't know why we didn't think of it right away. All you have to do is go to sleep!"

"Go to sleep?"

"Sure. Don't you remember? I told you. When you go to sleep, I dematerialize. But when you wake up I'm automatically recreated through your awareness. But I can place my shots, so to speak. You see? All you have to do is go to sleep. I'll disappear and then, when you wake up again, I'll materialize somewhere else and go to the police for help."

Marc thought it over. "It's worth trying," he said. "Do you know how to get back to town?"

"No," Toffee admitted, "I don't. But the main thing is just to get out of here, isn't it?"

"I don't see how I'll ever get to sleep, though," Marc said. "With so much on my mind it doesn't seem possible."

Toffee nodded thoughtfully. She glanced around, looked at

George.

"Hey, George!" she called. "Do you know what Marc was just telling me about you?" The ghost looked up. "He said you were the lousiest ghost in the racket. He said he wouldn't hire you to haunt a rabbit hutch."

An expression of dismayed hurt came over George's face.

"Well?" Toffee said. "Are you just going to sit there and take it? He also said you wear second hand ectoplasm. If I were you I'd belt him over the head with something."

George slowly roused himself from the scaffolding and drifted down to earth. He confronted Marc.

"Did you say all that?" he asked woundedly.

Marc exchanged a quick glance with Toffee. "Well, not exactly," he said. "All I said, really, was that you can't haunt worth sour apples."

"Oh, yeah?" George said. A menacing scowl came into his face.

"Yeah," Marc said. "You couldn't scare a nervous kitten."

George's face flushed with anger. "I could too," he said.

"You and how many Frankensteins?" Marc asked.

"Why, you . . . !" George exploded.

"Go tell your mother she wants you." Marc said. "Stop wasting my time."

George whirled about, reached down and picked up a large chunk of wood. He waved it under Marc's nose. "Don't you talk to me like that!" he said.

"Beat it, you phony, before you get your sheet dirty," Marc sneered. "You're not scaring anyone."

That did it. With an unintelligible burst of wrath and hurt pride, George lifted the block of wood and brought it down on the top of Marc's head. Then suddenly he started back, his mouth agape. It wasn't that Marc had slumped, unconscious, in his chair . . . that was only to be desired and expected . . . but Toffee, with a slight rattle of her chains, had mysteriously disappeared before his very eyes.

"Oh, my gosh!" George quavered. "How spooky!"

At the same moment, attracted by the noise of the chains, the Blemishes abandoned their work and advanced rapidly onto the scene. They surveyed the empty chair with wonder, then turned to George.

"What happened?" they chorused. "What did you do?"

George looked at them helplessly. "I don't know," he said

"I hit him and she vanished. That's all."

"Good grief!" Cecil said. He thought quickly. "She must be somewhere inside the building. She couldn't get out." He turned to Gerald. "Let's hunt her out."

Just as they were turning away, Marc stirred and lifted his head from his chest. With great effort, he opened his eyes and glanced at the empty chair beside him. He smiled.

"What happened?" he asked with great innocence.

BENNY BUCKINGHAM and his partner Dippy Donahoe crept through the night in stealthy pursuit of their careers. If the two seemed to keep late business hours it was only because of the nocturnal nature of their chosen profession. Plainly, Benny and Dippy were house breakers, and if they took pride in their work and labored long to get ahead it was only a tribute to their mothers' faith in them.

Benny and Dippy were perfect partners in that they were perfect opposites. If Benny was large, Dippy was no bigger than a minute, or perhaps even fifty-nine seconds. Where Benny was an extremely homely man, Dippy was terribly dapper. There was one thing, however, that this pair held in common; neither of them was noticeably bright in the head.

Now they crept toward the Maynard mansion, burglary in their hearts, black jacks in their hands and nothing at all in their heads. When, upon arriving at the veranda, they were greeted by the sight of a shapely young redhead decked out in a set of glittering butterflies, it never occurred to them for a moment that the girl could be any other than the mistress of the house, out for a moonlight stroll in her negligee. Summing the situation up thusly, they promptly ducked down behind the balustrade. But they had paused too long; the girl had already seen them.

"Hello!" Toffee called, leaping to the conclusion that she had discovered the occupants of the house. "Hello, there!"

Benny and Dippy peered up sheepishly over the edge of the balustrade.

"My heavens," Toffee said. "I'm glad you came along."

Benny and Dippy exchanged a puzzled glance; they weren't used to being welcomed on occasions like this.

"You are?" Benny asked suspiciously. "How come?"

"I need someone to help me. I can't get in the house, and I've got to use the telephone."

"Locked out?" Dippy asked politely. He proceeded warily

to the veranda, waving Benny along behind him.

Toffee nodded. "Would you let me in, please?"

Dippy glanced uncertainly at Benny, and Benny nodded. He turned back to Toffee. "Delighted," he said. "Which door would you like opened?"

Toffee waved her hand at a long line of French windows. "Oh, any one of them," she said. "I don't care."

With a flourish, Dippy produced a small tool kit from the inner reaches of his jacket and went to work. In a moment the door was open.

"There you are," he said. "Bet you couldn't do it faster with a regular key."

"Thank you," Toffee said. "Were you just coming in?" she asked.

Benny and Dippy, mistaking this for an invitation, stood back for a moment, astonished. Then, loathe to look a gift horse in the mouth too long, they followed after her.

"Gosh, what a dame!" Dippy whispered to Benny. "She's got more guts than a fish cleaner. Or do you suppose we're losin' our menace?"

Toffee crossed the room, found a light switch, and turned it on. The most beautiful dining room she had ever seen rose up out of the shadows around her.

"Isn't it nice?" she said. "You must be very happy to have found this place. Everything's so expensive."

"Oh, we are, lady," Benny said weakly. "We're very happy." Just then the large suit case which he had been carrying under his coat slipped and thudded to the floor.

"Oh," Toffee said. "Were you thinking of packing up a few things?"

"Well," Dippy said unhappily, "yes, to tell you the absolute truth, lady, that's exactly what we had in mind."

"Well, don't let me stop you," Toffee said airily. "Go right ahead while I use the telephone." She left in the direction of the hall.

"Holy gee, Dippy!" Benny exclaimed. "Is that broad right in the head? She acts like she wants to be robbed."

DIPPY glanced around the room. "Maybe she don't like this stuff and wants to get rid of it. Or maybe it's some sort of insurance pitch. Maybe she's been out there choppin' up and down the front porch for nights, just waitin' for a couple of guys

like us to come along. It's screwy."

Benny shrugged. "Well, maybe we should cooperate with her. What have we got to lose?"

Together they went to the side board to investigate. They pulled open a drawer that fairly gleamed with expensive silver.

"Oh, boy!" Benny said. "Just look at that stuff."

"Yeah," Dippy said, and picked up a handful. But his manner was hesitant. "You know," he said, "it don't seem fair to the profession."

"Uh-huh," Benny said. "I know. Funny, ain't it? We always been complainin' about how people take such an uncooperative outlook on our trade and all, but . . . oh, gosh . . ."

"Yeah," Dippy said gloomily. "Why didn't she just go on about her own business and leave us alone? She could have at least screamed and carried on or somethin'. That ain't too much to ask from somebody you're robbin'. She's just takin' an unfair advantage of us, that's all."

"Maybe she just don't know any better," Benny suggested charitably. "Anyway, let's take some of the silver, just a little. She might get her feelings hurt and get sore as hell if we don't."

Just then Toffee came into the room and observed the scene at the side board without concern.

"Oh," she said brightly, "taking the silver, I see."

With a sigh, Dippy gently replaced the silver he'd taken from the drawer. "You see, Benny?" he said. "See what I mean? She just ruins everything. She don't give us a chance."

Benny turned to Toffee. "We were only takin' a few pieces," he said half-heartedly.

"That isn't going to do you any good." Toffee said. "If you're going to take any of the silver you'd better take it all. But, of course, that's your business, not mine."

Dippy's shoulders sagged dejectedly. "She makes me feel like bawlin'," he said.

"Yeah," Benny said. "She went and took all the heart out of it."

"I wonder if you two would mind doing something else for me?" Toffee asked. "The phone's dead . . ."

"Yeah," Benny said. "We cut the wires. I'm sorry. I wish it had been my throat."

Toffee looked at them curiously; she couldn't imagine why anyone should want to cut the wires to their own telephone. Then it occurred to her that perhaps it was their way of shutting

off the service. Obviously they were packing up to leave on a trip.

"Well," Toffee said. "I wonder if you'd mind running me into town? I have to see the police."

The shattered burglars started violently.

"You see!" Benny cried. "You see! It's a trap! She's gonna turn us over to the police."

"Turn you over to the police?" Toffee said, thoroughly confused. "What on earth for? You've been very nice to me. Your private lives are your own business as far as I'm concerned. It's very urgent that I get to the police immediately. Won't you help me?"

For a moment the two thugs just stood and stared at each other. Then Benny heaved a great sigh.

"Come on," he said. "Let's take her in, Dippy. Let's give ourselves up. After tonight I ain't never goin' to feel the same about the racket no more."

"Yeah," Dippy said. "Me neither. Come on, lady. We got a car down the road."

As they turned to leave, Toffee crossed the room to join them.

"Aren't you taking anything with you?" she asked.

The two erstwhile thieves stopped and turned to her with expressions of overwhelming grief.

"Lay off, lady," Benny said with sad solemnity. "You just ruined our whole careers. Ain't you never satisfied?"

MEANWHILE, back at the old house, the Blemishes and George, after a fruitless search for Toffee, had returned to Marc's chair. The Blemishes had fallen into a mood of dark contemplation, while George had returned to his scaffolding and his day dreams. Then suddenly Cecil broke the stillness with a snap of his fingers.

"I'll bet I know!" the little man said. "Hey, George!"

George roused himself. "Yeah?" he said.

"You say you hit Mr. Pillsworth and the girl disappeared? Just vanished?"

"Uh-huh," George nodded. "So help me, that's what happened."

"Then that's it!" Cecil cried. "I've read about it, but this is the first time I've seen it!"

"What's that?" Gerald asked.

"The girl is a thought creation! She isn't real!" He turned

to Marc. "That's true, isn't it, Pillsworth?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Marc said.

Cecil turned to Gerald. "With him awake, she's probably running around somewhere, looking for the police. We've got to do something to bring her back." He thought for a moment. "Do you remember where we put those hypodermics?"

"I'm not certain," Gerald said vaguely.

"Then run along and look for them. Hurry before she goes too far."

As Gerald hurried away, Cecil turned back to Marc with a slow smile. "This is going to work out just fine," he said. "We'll give both you and the girl a nice long sleep. I doubt she's had time to do any harm yet."

IT WAS only a few minutes later that Benny pulled the car to a stop in front of the police station.

"Well," Dippy said with muted gloom, "here it is, lady."

Toffee opened the door and started to get out. "You coming along?" she asked.

Benny shook his head. "They'd never believe it if we told 'em even. We're goin' to open up a religious liberry instead."

"Well," Toffee said affectionately. "I certainly want to thank you two for being so kind. I just hope I didn't interrupt anything for you."

Frantically, Benny threw the car into gear and it fairly leaped away from the curb. Toffee stood for a moment staring after them; she could have sworn she'd heard a strangled sobbing, sound echo back from the car as it sped away. She turned and started up the steps to the station.

She walked to the door and was just about to shove it open when her gaze went to the stack of newspapers lying to one side of the entrance. She looked at the headline; **PILLSWORTH DISAPPEARANCE SHROUDED IN MYSTERY!** She picked up one of the papers, folded it quickly under her arm, and continued inside.

Finding herself in a hallway, she paused uncertainly. Then a door at the end of the hall opened and a large man in a blue uniform moved into view. She ran forward.

"Look!" she cried. "Maybe you can help me. I want to speak to someone about Marc Pillsworth. I know where he is."

The officer swung about abruptly. "Marc Pillsworth?" Toffee nodded. "Come with me."

"We'd better hurry, though," Toffee said. "I may not have much time."

The officer led her rapidly down the corridor, up a flight of steps, along another hallway, and finally stopped before an unmarked door.

"Come on in here," he said. He opened the door and held it back for her.

But suddenly Toffee had stopped and a curious look of panic came into her eyes.

"Oh, no!" she gasped. "Oh, Marc! Not just yet!"

And then, as the officer's eyes grew wider and more frightened, she slowly faded away . . .

Back at the old house, Cecil watched with satisfaction as Marc sagged limply in his chair. He withdrew the hypodermic from Marc's arm and turned to Gerald.

"Okay," he said, "let's go to work on him."



Chapter Twelve

WITHIN the old house there was little evidence of the morning outside. Mr. Adams had boarded over the windows and now the daylight shone through only at the openings of the turrets where the tracks of the catapults reached for the sky. Even these openings, however, had heavy metal shutters which could be closed against bad weather.

For the moment everything was quiet. The Blemishes were settled at a small table, poring over several sheets of paper. George slumbered loudly on his scaffolding, while below him Marc drooped limply in his chair, held there only by virtue of the chains about his shoulders.

Then, as the patches of day at the turret openings grew lighter, Marc stirred. As he sat up, the chains made a small rattling sound. The Blemishes glanced up sharply from their studies.

Painfully, Marc lifted his head and looked out at the world around him with dulled eyes. A blurred vision of Toffee instantly swam into view. She seemed to be holding a newspaper in her hand.

"There, you see!" Cecil told Gerald. "I was right. She's a

thought creation."

"Never heard of it," Gerald said.

"Very rare," Cecil commented shortly. "Particularly one that positive."

Across the room Toffee ran quickly to Marc's side.

"What have they done to you?" she cried. "What happened?"

Marc shook his head, forced awareness into his brain. He concentrated on Toffee's words.

"Happened?" he said. Then his mind cleared a bit. "I don't know. They doped me. With a needle. They found out about you."

Toffee whirled on the Blemishes with utmost loathing. "If I had a rat trap, I'd offer you some cheese," she said. She turned back to Marc. "I should have stayed away, I suppose, but I had to find out what they'd done to you."

"Did you reach the police?" Marc asked anxiously.

Toffee shook her head.

Marc sighed. "I feel awful."

"They won't get away with it," Toffee said. She picked up the paper from where she'd dropped it on the floor. "Look. They're searching for you." She read the article quickly:

Foul play was suspected since Marc was known to be the inventor of a new explosive. It was believed that he had fallen into the hands of foreign agents and might even have been removed from the country. The search for him extended around the world.

"You see," Toffee said. "They'll find you sooner or later."

"If they don't kill us first," Marc said. "I feel dead already."

Toffee got up and went over to the Blemishes. "Just what did you little vultures do to him?" she asked angrily.

Cecil shrugged. "A little of this and a little of that," he said. "A lot of truth serum."

"Yeah," Gerald sniggered unalluringly. "Enough to get the formula out of him." He looked down significantly at the papers on the table.

Toffee stiffened. "Why, you . . . you . . . reptiles!"

Ignoring her, Cecil turned to Gerald. "I guess we don't need Pillsworth any more, do we?"

"Well," Gerald said, "we'd better keep him around until after the test. Just in case, you know. We should be able to whip out the formula before tonight if we get right to work. We can take care of Pillsworth tomorrow."

Cecil nodded toward Toffee. "What about her?"

"Oh, she's no problem at all. She'll go automatically when he does."

"How'll we do it?" Cecil asked.

FOR A MOMENT Gerald stared dreamily off into space. "We could starve him for a day and just let him drift off of his own accord."

"That would be fine," Cecil said. "Sort of poetic."

"On the other hand," Gerald said, "that wouldn't leave us any corpse to show for our trouble." He sighed. "You know very well, Cecil, that corpses always distress me, and in any line of work but ours I'd be definitely opposed to them. Still, for business reasons it would be a nice thing to have one around. You know, just tossed casually over a chair or table somewhere, where people can see it when they come to interview us for spy work. It makes a good impression."

"That's right," Cecil said solemnly. "A dead body can be impressive as the deuce when it's used to good advantage. Of course it should be in good condition. But nothing ostentatious."

"Oh, my gosh!" Toffee moaned. "They talk about dead bodies as though they were Spanish shawls!"

"Anyway," Gerald said, "let's worry about Pillsworth when we come to him. Right now we've got to get busy with the formula."

"All right," Cecil said. "Only just remember, if we decide to keep the corpse, there mustn't be any blood on it. I can't stand blood; it's so common."

At that point the brothers turned to observe Toffee with expressions of small annoyance.

"What about her?" Gerald said. "Hadn't we better chain her up again?"

Cecil nodded. "And we'd better make sure Pillsworth doesn't go to sleep. You stick by him and keep him awake while I work on the formula."

With that the brothers parted, in pursuit of their individual duties. Cecil returned Toffee to her chair and her chains. Toffee told Marc about the truth serum and the formula.

"Oh, Lord!" Marc said. "They'll destroy the city!"

"I know," Toffee said. "I know."

After that the hours wore on endlessly. Cecil busied himself with Mr. Adams' machine, adjusting dials, turning knobs, throw-

ing switches with hateful diligence. Cecil stuck to Marc and Toffee as per plan. Alternately he gave Marc food to keep him earth-bound and powders to keep him awake. In between times, he talked. He explained about the bomb shell that he and Cecil had completed during the night while Marc was unconscious.

A small chamber was to contain the final chemical. Through a device to be set when the bomb was launched, the chemical would be released into another small chamber which was adjacent to the main body of the bomb and separated from it only by a very thin metal diaphragm. In a predetermined period of time the diaphragm would be eaten away by chemical reaction. In that way all the chemicals would be united at precisely the right moment to produce the explosion.

The moment of detonation was to be timed so that it occurred in the air directly above the target. The chemicals would be scattered in a fine spray over the desired area. It was all very precise and exact.

"An old plan we stole a long time ago," Gerald explained modestly. "We were just kids then."

Toffee glanced around to see what George was up to.

THE GHOST had been curiously quiet all day. Occasionally he had wandered over to the catapult and observed it with quiet speculation, then returned to watch Cecil at his chores. Through it all, though, he had kept a careful eye on Marc and Toffee and Gerald. He seemed to have something on his mind.

It wasn't until early evening when he came over to join the group. With the air of a kibitzer he strolled to a position behind Gerald. He stood there for a moment or two, teetering nonchalantly on the balls of his feet, then reached out and touched Gerald on the shoulder.

"I think Cecil needs your help, old man," he smiled. "He's getting ready to stuff the bomb."

"Stuff it?" Gerald asked.

"Well, whatever it is."

"I can't leave," Cecil said. "He told me to stick here."

"I'll stick in your place," George offered. "I'll be positively gluey."

Gerald hesitated, but not for long. "Well," he said finally, "all right." He got up and disappeared through the forest of apparatus.

Toffee favored George with a scathing look. "Have a seat,

Judas," she said. "I only wish it were wired."

"You misjudge me," George said, sitting down. "I'm trying to help you."

"Pass the salt, Toffee said.

"I'm hurt that you take that attitude," George said. "You don't really believe that I'm so depraved as to let those two destroy the whole city?"

"I haven't heard you screaming for help," Toffee said.

"I've been waiting for the right moment," George said. "When their attention would be on the bomb and not us. Right now they think they've got everything they want, and . . ."

"They have got everything they want," Marc said futilely. "Do you know what they're planning to use for a test target?"

"Oh, that," George said. "Just the Whittle monument."

"The Whittle monument!" Marc said. "It's a landmark!"

"I think they're doing a public service getting rid of it," George said. "With that fat politician standing on top and all."

"But it'll cause a panic!" Marc said. "It may start all kinds of trouble. We've got to stop them."

"I'm afraid we can't," George said. "The bomb is almost ready now and it's dark. They're waiting to catch the after theatre crowd with this demonstration. They figure there'll be more of the international set in that group."

"The dirty little opportunists," Toffee said.

"Anyway," George said, "we can stop them bombing the city tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night!" Marc gasped.

"That's what they're planning. If this test works out."

"Dear God! We've got to stop them!"

"Exactly," George smiled. "That's why I'm here to turn you two loose."

"Beautiful George!" Toffee cried. "Hurry!"

"Let me tell you my plan first," George said. "I'll unchain you, but you've got to promise to do as I say."

"Anything, George, darling," Toffee said.

"Very well. The door is locked, as you know, and Gerald has the key with him, so you can't get out that way. The only other way out is through the catapult openings. Gerald and Cecil will be working by the small one, so you'll have to climb up the large one and get out on the roof. I'll go over and get everything ready . . . " He paused to eye Marc excitedly.

"Now, wait a min . . . !" Marc began.

BUT TOFFEE caught his eye with a glance. "Why that's wonderful, George," she said. "Hadn't we better get started?"

"Okay," George said eagerly. He got up and began working at Toffee's chains. "I knew you'd like the idea."

"But are you sure . . . ?" Marc said.

"We love it," Toffee put in quickly. I'm sorry I've misjudged you."

"That's all right," George said, releasing Marc's chains. "Now, you stay here, and I'll be right back." He disappeared in the direction of the catapult.

"What's the matter with you?" Marc asked. "Don't you realize that fiend is getting ready to shoot us off into eternity?"

"Yes, I know," Toffee said. "But we don't have to wait for him to do it, do we? We're free now. Let's get moving."

"But we haven't the key to the door. And that's the only way out."

"I know," Toffee said. "We've got to work fast. Come on."

Already she was moving toward the scaffolding, looking for something. Presently her eyes fell on a small length of pipe. She picked it up and brought it to Marc.

"I can't unlock the door with that," Marc said.

"Yes, you can," Toffee said. "Hang onto it."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"You'll know when the time comes," Toffee said. "Quickly! Get back in the shadows." Then suddenly she began to scream at the top of her lungs.

"Marc!" she wailed. "You're floating again! Catch my hand!"

Marc jumped back into the shadows completely by surprise. And not a moment too soon.

Instantly there was the sound of running footsteps and Gerald appeared around the edge of the scaffolding. He stopped, looked at Toffee, then glanced apprehensively upward. It was then, true to Toffee's promise, that Marc knew what to do with the pipe. Stepping forward, he placed it firmly on the back of Gerald's skull. With a small cry of surprise, the little man dropped to the floor. Quickly Toffee bent over him, put her hand in his pocket and brought out a key.

"Thank heavens we got the right one," she breathed. "Hurry!"

She and Marc sped for the door, dodging swiftly through

the tangle of apparatus as they ran. Behind them there was the sound of running, exclamations.

Toffee reached the door first and quickly thrust the key into the lock. Marc joined her and helped her unlock the door and shove it open. They darted across the veranda, down the creaking steps, and out into the night.

"Stop!" they heard Cecil yell behind them. "Come back!"

They didn't stop running until they had come to the end of the drive and onto the tree-lined lane. And then they paused only momentarily, to get their breath. Then they started forward again as they saw an ancient car, some distance away, pull up at the side of the road and park.

DALMER BOYDE, a pimply youth of negligible sophistication, switched off the ignition, leaned back, and glanced covetously at the voluminous charms of Floramae Davis. Inwardly he experienced a certain jolting sensation. Haltingly he reached out and placed an arm against the back of Floramae's neck in a sort of amorous strangle hold.

"Floramae," Dalmer said with passionate overtones. "I think you're every bit as pretty as a striped snake."

Floramae started in her seat with a jump that rocked the ancient auto to its very tires. Stout of heart in the face of bulls, bison or buffoons, the poor girl had one fatal fear which she could not control; she had such an abhorrence of snakes that even the mention of the word set her great frame atremble with panic.

"Snake!" she screamed. "Where?"

"There ain't no snake," Dalmer said. "I only said you was pretty."

"What a lousy time for compliments!" Floramae shrieked. "Here's this damned snake snapping at us, and you make sweet talk! You got no brains? Kill that snake and be snappy!"

Dalmer struggled to renew his grasp on the quivering girl. "I only try to say something nice and all of a sudden the place is full of snakes. Fer gosh sakes, Floramae!"

"There's more than one?" Floramae screamed. "Let go of me! Let me outa here!" She threw the door open and prepared to heave herself to the road. "What a fierce thing to do to a girl, Dalmer Boyde! Bringin' snakes on a date. It'll serve you good and right if I faint right here in the road and get squashed by a truck!"

"Aw, Floramae!" Dalmer pleaded. "Don't act so crazy

about nothin'."

"You call it nothin'?" Floramae demanded to know. "I call it a dirty trick! If you ever dast to speak to me again I'll bite you!"

"Floramae!" Dalmer said.

But Floramae was on her way. Jumping from the car, she landed solidly in the center of the road. She started forward, then stopped as two figures, a man and a woman, loomed vaguely before her in the night. It was Marc and Toffee.

"Help!" Toffee cried, running forward. "Give us a lift!" She started toward the car, but was suddenly stopped by Floramae.

"Don't get in that car, honey!" she cried. "It's spillin' over with snakes!"

But just at this moment Dalmer came bounding out of the car.

"Now, Floramae . . . !"

"Git away from me, Dalmer," Floramae growled, "or I'll kick you in the stomach!"

She started off rapidly down the road with Dalmer following plaintively in her wake. In the next moment the pair had disappeared into the night, and Marc and Toffee were alone with the car.

"Come on," Toffee said. "You drive." Then she glanced back toward the lane from which they had just come. Headlights stabbed around the bend and started toward them. "Hurry!" She got in the car. Marc followed after, started the car, and maneouvered it onto the road.

"Can't you make it go any faster?" Toffee asked. She looked around. "They'll be here in a minute!"

Marc pressed the gas pedal to the floor. The car coughed daintily and continued at a steady speed of twenty five.

"For the love of heaven!" he cried. "That's its limit!"

It was then that a shot suddenly echoed through the night, and the old car skidded across the road to a forced stop against an embankment. Toffee looked back at the approaching lights.

"Come on!" she cried. "Run!"

They scrambled out of the car and started up the embankment. They were just about to the top when they were suddenly caught in the blinding glare of a spotlight. They stopped where they were. On the road there was a squeal of brakes and the slam of a door. Cecil Blemish, his gun in his hand, stepped

into the light.

"Fun's over," he said. "Let's go home."

TOFFEE and Marc reentered the house with an air of morose finality. As they automatically took their places in the chairs and allowed themselves to be imprisoned again, Gerald appeared smirkingly from the tangled underpinnings of the small catapult. He regarded them with an air of almost personal triumph.

"Glad you got back for the launching," he said. "You're just in time."

Marc glanced fearfully toward the catapult.

"Listen," he said earnestly. "You don't realize what you're doing. The disappearance of that monument could easily start another war. Such small things can sometimes."

The brothers stared at him with rapt attention. For a moment Marc thought he had actually begun to impress them. Then Gerald turned to Cecil.

"Just think, Cecil!" he simpered. "Another war! We'd be in great demand as spies! Do you think it's too much to hope for?"

Cecil shook his head. "Certainly not. Now that I stop to think about it, if this bomb doesn't do it, the one tomorrow night is sure to."

"Let's fire the bomb!" Gerald cried. "Right now!"

But Cecil hung back for a moment. "What's happened to that traitorous spook?" he asked.

Gerald shrugged. "Dematerialized so we couldn't tell him to his face what we think of him. He's drifting about somewhere. Anyway, forget about him. Let's launch the bomb."

The two hurried off to the catapult. There, they argued briefly about which of them would officiate at the switch, but finally Cecil won the honor by drawing his gun on his brother. He stepped up to the switch and took hold of it. A thick silence of mixed expectancy took the old house.

"No . . . no . . . " Marc whispered, then watched with haunted eyes as Cecil's hand brought the switch suddenly downward.

There was a loud hissing sound and then an indistinguishable flash as the bomb shot up the track and out into the night. After that the silence returned, but with a new quality now. After a long interval, Marc and Toffee started in their chairs

as a distant rumble echoed back from the night.

Marc closed his eyes and waited for the old house to stop trembling . . .



Chapter Thirteen

LORD ASQUITH gazed out across Whittle Square and sighed an impeccable sigh that brought a new thinness to his lips, a greater flare to his aristocratic nostrils. It was evident that his Lordship had recently been in attendance of something quite odorous.

"I have never witnessed anything so abysmal," he told Lady Asquith with dry authority. "That play has as much chance for a prolonged engagement as . . . as" He flicked his case at the Whittle monument and its bronzed tenant at the top. ". . . as that chap up there has of flying to the moon. Even Sir Lawrence couldn't have saved it."

"Quite," Lady Asquith affirmed. "I'd rather be struck dead than attend another of these wretched American productions. May the fates deliver me."

At that very moment there was a deafening roar, as all the world seemed to explode before them. The night suddenly burned with a sullen light, and the pavement beneath their feet shuddered. In the trembling silence that followed, Lady Asquith, under the terrifying impression that the fates were doing their best to oblige her in her wish to be separated from the

American theatre, emitted a small cry and promptly fell into a swoon at her husband's feet. Lord Asquith gazed down at his fallen lady with sad perplexity.

"Oh, dear!" he said. Then he shrugged. "But I suppose you really did bring it on yourself, old girl." Then suddenly struck with a horrifying thought, he glance quickly in the direction of the monument in the square. He started back with a cough of horror.

"Lord above!" he cried.

Across the square, though the night elsewhere was starkly clear, the monument had become engulfed in a heavy mist. Even as Lord Asquith watched, the fog seemed to disappear, but in a most peculiar manner. It was as though the vapors were being absorbed into the marble of the monument itself. And then, staggeringly, the entire structure began to slowly rise.

"Gad!" his lordship gasped. "The old bloater's setting sail!" He removed his glasses and wiped them quickly. "And taking his monument with him! Cool!" He started sharply as a hand fell to his arm.

"Hallo!"

He whirled about to find a pallid-eyed, slightly vaporish little man staring down at Lady Asquith with baffled concern.

"She just resting?" he inquired thickly, "or did somebody hit her?"

His lordship glanced down at his wife. "She's been struck dead by the fates," he explained pleasantly. "She rather asked for it, you know."

The small man gazed on Lord Asquith with beaming admiration. "That's what I like about you English," he said. "You cover your emotions so well. How do you do it?"

But Lord Asquith didn't answer. Suddenly he was too busy giving vent to an emotion that wasn't even thinly veiled, let alone covered. As he caught sight of the monument pulling away from the earth and bobbing upward like a cork in water, he reached to the street lamp for support.

"Look at that thing leap about!" he gasped.

The little man looked and joined his lordship at the lamp.

"Gord!" he groaned, closing his eyes tightly. "I've had a snootfull in my day, but never anything like this!"

BY THIS TIME, others along the street had begun to recover sufficiently from the shock of the explosion to notice that

something terribly strange was going on in the vicinity of the Whittle monument. A chorused cry of stunned surprise moved, in chain reaction, along the street and rose to a babble of hysteria.

In this rising tide of excitement, a taxi driver, unaware that he had gotten himself caught in anything more than an after theatre jam, directed his vehicle into the square, proceeded to the center, then glanced out the window to signal for a turn around the monument. He glanced, looked away, then glanced again. He shoved the whole upper portion of his body out the window and stared with blinking incredulity at the rising monument. He forgot completely about the taxi and the lady passenger in the back.

A greater scream rose through the crowd as the taxi toured complacently across the square, over the sidewalk, and lodged itself crashingly in the aquarium fitted window of a seafood restaurant. The driver remained oblivious to all but the uprooted monument, even as the windshield gave way before a deluge of salt water and flopping fish. Not so, however, his passenger who suddenly found herself staring nose to nose with a gimlet-eyed mackerel, who was peering up at her rather evilly from inside the front of her dress.

With a scream that echoed to the very heavens, the lady hurled back the door of the taxi and leaped to the sidewalk. There, before an enchanted group of onlookers, she began to clutch at herself with all the mad frenzy of a native dancer engaged in ceremonial rites dedicated to the god of human fertility. Reaching low within her dress, she withdrew the floundering fish and hurled it from her with a vengeance.

The fish looped high through the air and landed neatly on the thin chest of the still unconscious Lady Asquith. Her ladyship, however, had apparently been lying at her husband's feet, just waiting for a fish to take to her bosom. No sooner did the mackerel arrive, than she made a small whimpering sound and sat up. The fish dropped soggily to her lap. Her ladyship looked down at the fish, and it in turn looked up at her. Then with an exchange of horrified shudders, fish and lady simultaneously flopped over to their sides and lay inert.

Through the babbling crowd, two officers arrived on the scene in a manner of great haste. Running to the front of the crowd, they stopped, observed the rising monument with a start, and exchanged looks of complete confusion.

"Lord a'mighty!" the first cop exclaimed. "The thing's gone

and pulled itself up by the roots!"

"I can't look," the second cop said, turning away. "It fair makes my skin crawl!"

"What can we do? We ought to take steps."

"There's a good idea," the second cop said fervently. "Let's get out of here. Let's run!"

"In front of all these people?"

"We could pretend we were after somebody, and just happened by this way."

The first cop nodded. "That's what we'll do! Draw your gun!"

Assuming expressions of great heroism, the two drew their pistols and brandished them frantically over their heads.

"Stop thief!" they yelled in chorus, and ran frantically through the crowd and away into the night.

AND SO, the sensational affair of the Whittle monument found its beginnings. An hour later, the news had traveled to the far corners of the earth. Teletypes rattled, and cables hummed. The nation's thinkers quitted their beds in the early hours of the morning to apprise the land of their thoughts on the matter.

The morning paper, which Gerald brought back to the old house from a nearby village, presented a fair cross section of world opinion on the incident. Only Russia had no thoughts to vouchsafe on the question of buoyant monuments.

"There is more to this matter than the mere loss of a valued landmark," Gerald read aloud. "This may be the insult direct to every red blooded American, the final jab at his pride and sense of independence. For a long time our enemies have done everything possible to discredit our American heroes, and it would appear now that they are even willing to go to the extreme of removing their monuments. That they have chosen to employ a hideous secret weapon to accomplish this monstrous end, clearly indicates an intention to spread fear and panic throughout the nation. When the UN meets tomorrow . . ."

"You see?" Marc said unhappily. "You see? This thing could easily touch off a war. You fools!"

Gerald's smile, as he put down the paper, was mindful of an actor reading his notices after a successful opening night.

"We've done it at last!" he sighed.

"I always knew we would," Cecil said complacently. "Wait 'til tonight."

Ecstatically the two got up and left, intent on the preparations for the coming disaster.

"Those two haven't got a decent impulse to split between them," Toffee said.

"And I invented this thing!" Marc said wretchedly. "I'm as guilty as if I were bombing the city myself. I wish I were dead!"

"You will be," Toffee said, "if something doesn't happen. I heard them talking last night. They've decided not to give you any food today. After they've fired the bomb, they're going to let you float off into space with everything else." She closed her eyes against the thought. "We've got to get out of here and stop this thing." She looked at Marc imploringly. "Can't you go to sleep?"

"They've been giving me all those powders."

"If only that supernatural serpent would just show himself," Toffee said. "I'm sure we could talk George into something if we just had the chance and enough time."

After that they fell silent, lost in a mood of black desolation. Outside the sky failed to produce the full promise of day; the grey dawn lingered and became a dark storm color. Gerald left his work long enough to throw the levers that closed the metal coverings over the turrets. A moment later rain could be heard splattering against them. The tangled shadows of the fantastic equipment grew darker and more formidable under the glare of the overhead worklights. Toffee looked at Marc, and for the first time the dullness of true despair was in her green eyes.

"We've got to get out of here, Marc," she said, "We've got to!"

"But how?"

"We could try to get our chains loose. Our fingers are free, at least. If we moved close enough together . . . We've got to try."

Marc glanced without hope at the tangles of chain that imprisoned them. "I suppose so," he murmured. Slowly, careful lest he upset himself, he began working his chair toward Toffee. Slowly he inched forward.

IT WAS nearly a half hour before they were close enough. Marc strained his hand forward and began fumbling with the chains at Toffee's wrists. It was difficult work, but he kept at it. At the end of several minutes, however, his hands were stiff with pain, and he had to rest.

"I can't even see what I'm doing," he said.

"Let me try loosening yours while you rest," Toffee said with determination. "We'll take turns."

The hours wore on without result. There was no interruption from the Blemishes, however. The brothers were far too absorbed in their preparations for destruction to pay any attention to their captives. They did not bring food.

"I'm beginning to feel hungry," Marc said.

"This is no time to think of your stomach," Toffee said.

"It's not my stomach," Marc said. "I just hope I don't start floating away from you. It could happen, you know." He glanced at her chains. "Do you feel any slack around your wrists at all?"

"Not yet," Toffee said. "Keep trying."

The rain outside continued with a steady monotony and grew louder. It was impossible to judge the passage of time. Hours dragged by, enough, it seemed, to round out several days. Toffee and Marc continued their efforts with the chains, but with a growing sense of futility.

"It's no use," Marc said. "My fingers are raw."

"We've got to keep trying," Toffee said.

Then suddenly they both were quiet as the sound of nearby yawning interrupted the stillness. It had the thoughtless, indolent tone of George about it. They turned expectant eyes toward the scaffolding.

Slowly, George came into view, materializing himself with slow luxury. He yawned a second time and stretched his arms above his head. Then he glanced in their direction and waved with airy insolence.

"That's a clubby picture you two make," he commented. "Spending your last hours in romantic rapture."

"Louse!" Toffee said. "I'd like to see you spend yours in intolerable agony."

"How can you bear me such ill will?" George asked innocently. "Didn't I let you loose last night?"

"Stop lolling around," Toffee said, "and come down here."

"Sure," George said, and drifted blithely down to the floor.

"Something on your mind?"

"Yes," Toffee said. "Murder!"

"George!" Marc said. "You've got to help us. Regardless of your personal feelings . . . or lack of them . . . you can't . . ."

George shrugged with great indifference. "What difference does it make to me if they blow up the city?" he asked. "The High Council will be recalling me at any moment now. Let the city go or stay, I won't be around to see it."

"How do you kill a ghost?" Toffee murmured.

MARC GLANCED in the direction of the Blemishes. It was evident that their labors were nearly at an end. The rain was beating in a steady roar, high on the roof above them. There couldn't be too much time left. He turned decisively toward George.

"George!" he said. "I'll make you a proposition. What you want, is to get rid of me forever, isn't it? So you can stay on earth?"

"That's the idea," George admitted.

"Then listen to me," Marc said, his voice level. "You have no special liking for Cecil and Gerald, so it shouldn't matter to you if they get hurt." He cleared his throat. "If you'll just turn me loose and give me a chance to stop them, I'll let you send me off in the catapult."

"Marc!" Toffee cried. She turned to George. "Don't listen to . . ."

"Whether I win or lose, George," Marc said.

"You can't!" Toffee cried. "That's suicide!"

"Not exactly," Marc said. "If he doesn't finish me off, they will." He turned back to George. "You'll be sure of getting rid of me. And the city will be saved."

"Well," George hesitated. "I don't know . . ."

"Hurry," Marc said. "You've got to do it. They're loading the bomb right now. This is your chance to do something decent for once."

George closed his eyes thoughtfully and rocked back on his heels. There was a moment of tense silence as he swayed forward. "Okay!" he said. "It's a deal. Not that I have any particular feeling one way or another about this city of yours. Actually, I'm only doing it as a personal favor to you. After all, I can understand why you don't want to move on to the next world to make room for someone else. It takes time to get adjusted to the

idea that . . .”

“Stop orating,” Toffee put in harshly. “If you’re going to let us loose, you ghoul, then do it.”

“Hurry, George!” Marc said.

Happily George went about the business of releasing first Marc, and then Toffee.

“Now don’t try any funny stuff,” he said to Marc. “Remember you made a bargain.”

“I won’t,” Marc promised gravely.

“Good!” George said. “I’ve been dying to use that catapult anyway.” He chuckled softly. “You’ll die when I do. Isn’t that funny?”

“Screaming,” Toffee said, and followed Marc as he moved swiftly into the shadows.

They crept quietly forward to a position behind an enormous dynamo. Marc stopped and peered around. A few yards away, the Blemishes toiled with the enormous bomb, adjusting it to the catapult, getting it ready to be fired. They paused briefly in their activities.

“Is it time yet?” Gerald asked excitedly.

Cecil consulted his watch. “A quarter after eight,” he said. “Just fifteen minutes to go.”

“I can’t wait,” Gerald said.

Toffee moved closer to Marc and put her hand on his arm.

“You aren’t really going through with that deal, are you?” she asked. “With George, I mean?”

“I don’t see how I can avoid it,” Marc said. He nodded over his shoulder toward George, who was watching them from a close distance. “He isn’t letting me out of his sight for a second. I’m so weak now from lack of sleep and food, I may not be able to handle those two out there. Then too, if it weren’t for George, we’d still be helpless.”

“There must be some way out of all this,” Toffee said miserably.

MARC TURNED to her for a moment, his eyes clinging worriedly to hers. “I only hate doing this to you,” he said. “I know you’ll go when I do, and I can’t really believe you aren’t completely real any more. Sometimes, I feel that I’ve known you for years and years.”

“You have,” Toffee said softly. “You have.” Then, boosting herself to the tips of her toes, she reached up and kissed him

lightly on the cheek. "It's all right. Do what you have to. I'll help if I can."

"I'm sorry," Marc said.

They waited a bit longer. Marc glanced around for a weapon and found the length of pipe Toffee had given him the night before. He picked it up and moved cautiously to the edge of the dynamo. The rain sounded ragingly against the metal covering over the turrets. He watched the demented brothers until their backs were turned toward him, then sprang forward.

The moments that followed were covered with noisy confusion. At Marc's first movement, the brothers left their work with a cry of dismay. Cecil whirled about, a heavy wrench in his hand. He raised it menacingly and Marc ran toward him. Toffee ran toward Gerald, but her value as a combatant was negligible. Gerald quickly shoved her aside and, as she fell to the floor, ran to the aid of his brother. It was just as Marc raised the pipe over Cecil's head that Gerald, in a headlong dash, butted him squarely and brutally in the pit of the stomach and sent him doubling forward in a convulsion of agony. Cecil was quick to seize the opportunity to use his wrench. He swung it upward and brought it down with savage strength. But the blow was inaccurate. It missed Marc's head and crashed dully into his shoulder. With a cry of pain, Marc twisted to one side and fell to the floor. He lay inert as though the blow had paralyzed him.

Toffee, from her position, had a jumbled impression of Gerald running in another direction, toward a table upon which lay two guns. He was going to kill Marc! She jumped quickly to her feet and ran unknowingly to the switch panel on the wall. Something had to be done! She began pulling switches with frenzied swiftness. It was as her hand pressed frantically on the fourth one, that everything was suddenly plunged into blackness. For a moment she leaned against the panel, weak with relief.

There was stark silence in the old house for a brief moment, and then the darkness was filled with sound; curses, a dull dragging, the clang of equipment being tumbled over. Toffee waited breathlessly, then moved forward to the place where Marc had fallen. She felt in the darkness for him, but he wasn't there.

"Marc!" she called.

But her voice was drowned out by the sudden loud rumblings of machinery. Then a great blast of cold air swept through the

building, and Toffee felt a dampness on her face. She turned and looked upward. The turret at the top of the large catapult had been opened! Even as she looked, a flash of lightning squirmed through the sky and illuminated the entire building. Toffee caught a glimpse of George, lifting Marc into the cartridge on the catapult.

"Marc!" she screamed, and ran forward.

THERE WAS also a cry from the Blemishes. But she didn't stop to listen. In the darkness she felt her way rapidly through the machinery to the base of the catapult. As another streak of lightning writhed across the sky, she saw George climbing down from the scaffolding and moving toward the switch. She reached out and grabbed wildly at his sleeve.

"Stop!" she cried. "It isn't fair!"

But George moved doggedly forward. In the darkness, Toffee knew that he was reaching toward the switch. Then, as the enormous room once again flashed with light, she looked upward toward Marc, and almost laughed with relief. Even in that small interval, she had seen his lank figure rise buoyantly above the cartridge and start inching into space.

"He's floating!" she cried triumphantly. "He's getting away!"

George suddenly brushed past her in the darkness and leaped to the scaffolding. In the next flash of light Toffee saw him climb to the top of the cartridge and grab vainly at Marc's rising coat tails. Suddenly, she knew what she had to do. She whirled about and reached for the switch, found it, and pulled with all her might.

Instantly there was a terrible sucking sound and a great flash of light. As George fell back into the cartridge, it streaked up the track of the catapult and out into the night so fast, that it seemed, a moment later, never to have been there at all. There was a beat of silence, and then frighteningly, all the heavens seemed to tremble with an angry light. A moment later a roar of thunder rolled back across the earth and crashed deafeningly against the walls of the old house. It was as though the whole universe shook with a destructive rage.

Toffee gazed weakly toward the now darkened heavens. "Bon Voyage, George!" she murmured. Then she turned back to the darkness. "Marc!"

There was no answer, but as she waited, the beam of a

flash-light knifed the darkness in the direction of the small catapult. The Blemishes, murmuring together, were back at work. Toffee crept forward until she was close enough to hear what they were saying.

"I don't care what they're up to," Cecil said. "I don't care if they all went to eternity, it's eight thirty and we're going to launch the bomb. After that, they can live or die or sit around in their stocking feet. It won't make any difference to us."

Gerald directed the beam of the flashlight up the track of the small catapult, then to the face of the turret.

"There he is!" he cried.

MARC, SPREAD eagled across the face of the metal covering, was clinging frantically to the cable that lifted the contrivance. As the light caught him, he glanced around, but made no effort to avoid discovery. He seemed curiously agitated.

"Fine!" Cecil said. "That's a good place for him. "We'll get him with the bomb. Put the light back here so I can see what I'm doing."

"That dame *would* have to blow out the lights," Gerald said sullenly.

"Never mind. We can manage. The bomb is all set now. You take the lever that raises the turret shelter. I'll pull the switch on the catapult. I'll give the signal and we'll pull together."

"Okay," Gerald agreed. The beam of the flash moved off at a distance, then darted upward again to illuminate Marc's activities in the turret. "I'm ready!"

"Marc!" Toffee screamed. "Get away! They're firing the bomb!"

Marc glanced back at her, but didn't move. He seemed to be pulling frantically at the cable, almost as though he had somehow gotten caught on it.

"Ready!" Cecil yelled. "Aim . . . !"

"Marc!" Toffee screamed. "Marc!" "Marc!"

"*Fire!*"

In the dreadful flash that followed, Toffee couldn't be certain of what she saw. It seemed that Marc had darted away from the face of the turret, but she couldn't be sure. In the same moment there was a cry of terror from Gerald.

"It didn't open!" he screamed. "He jammed the cable!"

The tracks of the catapult gleamed red with friction, and the room was lighted with a dull glow. And then Toffee saw

that the metal covering had remained secure, blocking the passage of the bomb. She had only a glimpse before the crash came.

There was an awful rending as the old house groaned and screamed under the impact of the blow. The turret tore loose from its moorings on the roof, but the bomb had been deflected. The great metal cylinder looped away from the track, tore through a section of the ceiling and streaked upward into the night, traveling in a straight line. There was a breathless silence as Toffee and the brothers watched the terrible thing move into the sky directly above the house. It hovered for what seemed to be minutes, then started down again in a definite course.

"My God!" Cecil screamed. "It's coming down on top of us!" He began to run.

And then the bomb struck. The whole world glared with screaming light, and then exploded.

In that last moment, Toffee had only a brief, horrified glimpse of the lank figure, some distance above the house, soaring away into the darkness, and the rain.

The world gasped and crumbled around her



Chapter Fourteen

A SMALL hum stirred at the back of the darkness, a glimmer of sound, like a faint ray of silver white light in an area of great stillness. Somehow sound and light had gotten themselves mixed up together, so that one was difficult to distinguish from the other. But this was sound and it had started with a humming smallness and grown shrill. It screamed in Marc's head so that he had to open his eyes to let it out.

A great brightness rushed forward, stabbing at his eyes, thrusting deep into the nerve centers at the back of his head. He blinked painfully and looked away, but the light came at him again, nervous light that moved toward him, then away, but always in the same direction, jittering along with small irregular spurts.

Marc was aware that he was lying on his back, and there was a sharp pain in his shoulder. It didn't make sense. The last he could remember was the night drawing him upward, squeezing the breath and the life out of him. He lay back and gave himself over to the effort of breathing. And then a voice spoke close by, irritably.

"Of all the perfectly insane places to wind up, this snags the

prize!"

There was no question that the voice was Toffee's. Marc glanced around, then up. The redhead was standing over him, an evil glint in her eyes.

"Toffee!" he said.

"Of course," Toffee said. "Who'd you think? Who else would be silly enough to sit up here in this ridiculous place with you?"

"What place?" Marc asked. "Where are we?"

"What place?" Toffee said. "We're back in the city. In fact we're right smack in the center of the city." She waved a hand at the jittering lights that were still skittering along behind her. "That," she announced amusedly, "is the news sign on the face of the Dispatch building. You know, the one that has the lights that spell out words and keeps moving all the time? We're on the ledge right in front of it. And a fine spectacle we make, too, I imagine."

"My gosh!" Marc exclaimed. He sat up. Now that Toffee had told him he could see that the jittering lights did spell out letters as they moved along.

"In fact," Toffee said, "talking about being in the news, the story of the explosion is coming through right now. She turned to the sign and paused to read:

MYSTERY EXPLOSION LAYS WASTE SEVERAL
MILES OF PASTURE NEAR CITY . . . WRECKAGE . .
VEGETATION . . EVERYTHING CHANGED TO BE BUOY-
ANT . . . PILLSWORTH FORMULA BELIEVED TO HAVE
PROVIDED BASIC EXPLOSION

Then suddenly a meaningless jumble of lights burst forth upon the atmosphere. It appeared that the sign had been surprised into a fit of exclamatory stuttering. Then the words began to come again.

PILLSWORTH AND UNIDENTIFIED GIRL SIGHTED
HERE ON NORTH WEST LEDGE OF BUILDING . . . PO-
LICE AND FIRE EQUIPMENT PREPARING RESCUE.

"Thank heavens," Toffee said. "We're not going to grow old together up here after all." She moved away from Marc and to the brink of the ledge. As Marc followed her progress he noticed for the first time that it was still night, but as his gaze moved toward the horizon he saw a growing margin of dawn.

"Golly!" Toffee said happily. "You should see all the people down there! And there are some men with a big ladder on a

truck. We'll be down from here in no time at all." She patted her drooping butterflies into place. "They've got a search light on the man who's climbing up. He's terribly big. Why don't you stand up and let me lie down for a while? I'd look more helpless."

"Any time you look helpless," Marc said, "I want to see it."

"That may be," Toffee said, "but don't be surprised if I faint gracefully at the proper moment."

Marc moved closer to the ledge. "I wonder if Julie's down there?" he murmured. But even as he said it, he knew she wouldn't be.

AT THE BOTTOM of the ladder Marc and Toffee were promptly greeted by the two government men, ushered without delay to a limousine, whisked across the city to a large grey building, and taken to an office with large comfortable furniture and sound-proofed walls. While a male secretary wrote it all down, Marc and Toffee tiredly narrated their experiences at the hands of the Blemishes.

"It was dreadful," Toffee said, eyeing the secretary. "I feel faint."

The more talkative of the two government men told them the rest of the story from where they left off.

"There wasn't anything left by the time we got there," he said. "Even the grass was uprooting itself out of the ground and drifting up into space. There was no sign of the Blemish brothers, of course. Definitely criminally insane!"

Marc gazed out the window at the city stretching up around them, and was taken with a tremor of horror.

"There's just one thing puzzling me, Mr. Pillsworth," the government man said. "How is it that you returned to earth? Will all the debris finally return to earth in a few days?"

Marc gazed at them blankly. He had been wondering the same thing himself. He passed a trembling hand over his eyes and shook his head.

"I know," Toffee said mildly. All eyes turned curiously in her direction. She smiled blandly. "You see," she said, charmed with the idea of having so much male attention all at once, "you see, being rather a creature of nature . . . but I don't suppose you gentlemen would understand that . . . just let it go that I have a special understanding of natural causes and effects that

do not occur in the ordinary human being." She nodded toward Marc. "It was the double dosage that brought him back. The original treatment made him give off the impulses which caused him to be buoyant, but the second one, instead of increasing his buoyancy, merely counteracted it. It was a matter of a war between impulses of equal strength and pull. The ones moving outward were met by the ones forcing their way inward. It was what might be called a condition of impasse. Eventually, the two exhausted each other, and so he returned to earth." She smiled beguilingly. "Is that all perfectly clear?"

The government man whistled shrilly and glanced at the ceiling. "If you say so," he muttered.

"Of course," Toffee went on, "the thing that really saved his life was the fact that, in being buoyant, he drifted far enough away from the explosion so that the impulses that reached him were in exact proportion to those he was giving off. It wouldn't happen again in a million years."

THE GOVERNMENT man gazed at her from the corner of his eyes "No," he said. "I'm sure it wouldn't." He turned to the secretary. "I hope you got all that on paper."

The young man shook his head. "I was too fascinated," he said. Even as he spoke, his eyes did not leave Toffee's well crossed leg.

The government man cleared his throat.

"Well, anyway, everything is all right now," he said.

He turned to Marc, who was showing increasing evidence of complete collapse. "I hate to do this," he said, "but I'm afraid we'll have to ask you for another favor. This incident, along with the one of the monument and all the attention in the newspapers, has caused a national panic. The people are threatening to do all sorts of things. There have already been several suicides. Anyway, we have to reassure the public at large that your formula is in our hands and safe. The best way to do this, we've decided, is in a public presentation; if the people can see you handing your formula over to us with their own eyes, then they'll have to believe it. It's not the orthodox procedure in such matters, of course; but this is an extreme situation and calls for extreme measures.

"Anyway, we'd like you to go with us to the stadium this afternoon and publicly present your formula to the chief. Every precaution will be taken and you'll have the very best of pro-

tection. Will you do it?"

Marc, too far gone for words, merely nodded. He could hold off sleep no longer.

"Fine!" the government man said, and got up. The others followed. "Then we'll leave you here to rest and will call for you at four o'clock. And, you, young lady . . . ?"

The man stopped, stared, turned to his companions. "Where did she go?" he asked in a whisper. "What happened to her?"

"Gosh, I don't know," the secretary said. "But I wish she'd taken me along!"

In hushed bewilderment the men went to the door and quietly left the room. After they had gone, there was only the sound of Marc's exhausted breathing which bore the promise of a good healthy snore.

FOR A LONG time Marc lay immersed in the unbroken blackness of complete sleep. And then the darkness lifted, gradually, and a soft light began to glow around him. He gazed up at a sky of unbroken blue, and somehow his spirit lightened. He sat up and looked around. He knew instantly, by the gentle misted slopes and the strange trees, that he had returned to the valley of his mind. He looked around expectantly.

It happened just as he had known it would, on the nearest rise. The mists swirled aside and a shapely leg appeared, leading quickly after it another of its kind and a perfectly formed body. Toffee smiled as she ran toward him.

"I knew you'd turn up sooner or later, you old wretch!" she cried happily. She dropped to the grass beside him. Marc noticed that she once more was wearing the negligible green tunic that she'd had on the first time he'd dreamed of her.

"I wonder how I got back here," Marc said.

"Who cares?" Toffee said happily. "Let's take advantage of it. What's more private than your own thoughts?"

"Now, just a second . . ."

"Still the same old prude," Toffee said. Then she giggled. "We certainly took the four bit tour through the mill, didn't we?"

"I don't like to think about it," Marc said grimly. "I wish it hadn't happened."

"Nonsense," Toffee said. "You needed trouble and a good adventure. That's what was wrong with you and your life. That's why you dreamed me up. A good upheaval does anybody a lot of good. Even a bottle of medicine has to have a good shaking to be

worth anything. That's why it all happened."

"I wonder about Julie," Marc said darkly. "I wonder if she's . . . ?"

"Wait and see," Toffee said. "Don't rush things." A reminiscent look came into her eyes as she gazed off into the distance across the valley. Suddenly she was taken with a fit of laughter.

"What is it?" Marc asked.

"George," Toffee said. "I wonder where he is now." She began to laugh again. "I had a glimpse of his face just before he took off. He was the most surprised ghost that ever moaned at midnight."

"Poor George," Marc said. "I suppose he didn't have a very good time of it. But then neither did any of the rest of us."

"Oh, well," Toffee said. "All that's over with now." She shifted closer to Marc. "Let's get down to the important stuff."

"Hey! Wait a min . . . ?" Marc cried.

But too late. Toffee had already twined her arms about his neck and was kissing him. Finally, she let him go.

"You never change, do you? Marc said shortly.

"Never," Toffee said. "Isn't it delightful? I know a game that's fun. We take turns. . ."

"No!" Marc said. "No games!"

"Well, all right," Toffee sighed. "Then I guess we'll just have to go on necking." She made a second dive at him.

"Help!" Marc yelled. "Help!"

Then suddenly both of them froze where they were. The valley had begun to tremble and the darkness was descending rapidly.

"You'll have to go now," Toffee said.

"I know," Marc said. For a moment he just looked at her, hesitant. Then quickly, he leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks for everything."

Toffee smiled gently. "Oh, hell," she said grandly, "that's all right. Just call on me any time."

"Goodbye," Marc said, almost wistfully. "Goodbye, Toffee!"

"So long," Toffee whispered. "Happy landings."

And the little valley fell into darkness.

MARC OPENED his eyes, fighting the pressure of sleep that still weighted his consciousness. The government man's face, like an affidavit of official duty, appeared over him. Marc

struggled to a sitting position and tried to shake the sleep out of his mind with a toss of his head.

"When we were driving over, you asked me to find out about your wife," the man said.

Marc nodded hopefully.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pillsworth. We haven't been able to reach her. Either here or in Reno. They're still trying, however, and they'll locate her before long, I'm certain." He glanced at his watch. "It's three forty-five; we'd better be going to the stadium.

Wearily Marc got to his feet. He dreaded the affair at the stadium; there was nothing he wanted to do more than start out looking for Julie. Even as tired as he was. It didn't matter where or how, just so long as he was looking for her doing something to find her . . .

"We'd better go," the man said uneasily.

Marc sighed and followed him to the door.

* * *

Entering into the center of the stadium, Marc glanced cursorily at the wave upon wave of faces that rippled down the sides of the bleachers. He walked in the center of a group of silent, armed men, the government man at his side. Planes droned overhead, providing a protective barricade, even in the sky. They walked to a platform in the center of the field and mounted it. The government man led him to a seat and then took his place beside him. Marc glanced around.

The platform was fairly bulging with important persons, politically speaking. Every faction and party had apparently done its utmost to get into the act. Most of the men sat in solemn silence, as though in attendance at a funeral. Marc guessed that this was to impress the gathering public with the immense gravity of the occasion. When a band played the anthem, Marc could barely get to his feet, but he managed it with a great effort.

"This won't take too long," the man from the government whispered as they sat down again. "The President was delayed in arriving, so the Chief will say a few words of explanation, and then you step forward and hand him the formula. You can leave after that if you like."

Marc nodded. It did take too long; the Chief turned out to be a large thick-necked man with a ruddy face and unlimited

lung power. He explained about the formula and its power, and assured everyone that it was not in foreign hands and that the two persons who had seen it, besides the inventor, of course, had destroyed themselves in its use. The rest was largely political. Everyone yawned quietly, with the possible exception of the Chief's wife.

Marc turned his thoughts toward the sky and a cloud that drifted lazily overhead. It was natural enough that his thoughts turned briefly to George, and the fate of that erstwhile haunt. He gazed far into the heavens, though it was difficult to think of George in the upper regions, even though he had been headed in that direction when last seen. Marc could not imagine to what kind of place in the universe George had returned.

FAR BEYOND the cloud that Marc watched, George sat rigidly upright on a hard piece of atmosphere and shifted uneasily. He glanced at the entity next to him and grinned wryly.

"I'm glad I don't have to go in first," he said glumly.

"What are you up for?" the other entity asked. "When you get to the supreme Council it must be bad."

"Disorderly conduct," George said, "and attempt at falsifying the fate of a mortal down on Earth."

"That's bad," the other said.

"Yeah," George said, "but what gets me down is how they recalled me. They planned it all without letting me know. I tell you it was a nasty jolt to my nervous system when I found out that damned catapult had been aimed right smack at the chambers of the High Council. They probably will banish me to hard labor on one of the planets. You know, digging out those craters for the mortals to stare at through their silly spy glasses. It was a terrible shock."

"How was it on earth?" The other shifted eagerly.

"Well . . ." George answered, and a reminiscent look came into his eyes, "there was this little redhead, see . . ." He smiled secretly, and gazed off into the distance. "I guess," he continued, as though to himself, "on the whole, I'd say it was worth it . . ."

"Mr. Pillsworth!"

Marc awoke from his reverie and turned around. The government man had taken hold of his sleeve.

"Now you give him your formula."

Marc glanced quickly toward the podium where the Chief was staring back at him expectantly. Stiffly, he rose from his chair and moved forward.

The Chief turned back to the audience.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" he announced dramatically. "The Pillsworth Formula!"

Suddenly the heavens echoed with a cry from several thousand throats that was almost terrifying in its magnitude. Marc reached into his inside coat pocket, felt for the little black book and found it. Quickly he slipped the pen clasp free and withdrew the book. Then, strangely, he hesitated. Suddenly he wondered if this was the right thing to do. At any rate, it was much too late now. The sooner he handed over the formula, the sooner he could leave and start looking for Julie. He drew his hand from inside his coat and held the book out to the Chief.

IT WAS THEN that the whole affair took on a new and more sensational aspect than even the politicians on the platform had dared hope for. The Chief in reaching out for the book, neglected to extend his hand far enough, and Marc, thinking that he had taken hold of it, let go of it. Suddenly the book began to fall. But only for an instant. Describing a small loop in mid air, it only started down, before it shot upward. Before anyone realized, or even believed, for that matter, what was happening, the little book had risen high beyond the Chief's grasp and gone soaring rapidly toward the heavens. The cry in the thousands of throats became a gasp of horror.

Marc stood dumbly staring at the black dot in the sky, as it grew smaller and smaller, even in the space of a heart beat. He felt awful in the first moment, and then, all at once, he was assailed with a feeling of great relief. Suddenly he realized that exactly the right thing had happened to the book and the terrible formula. Smilingly, he turned and looked at the disgruntled expressions about him. The Chief was swiftly turning a lovely green color.

At once Marc realized that he had no further business with these people, or they with him. The world had suddenly become a much brighter and simpler place to live in. Without a word, he turned, walked down the steps of the platform and started across the field toward the exit.

It was just as he neared the exit that the first cheer went

up in the stands, and before he got to it, the stadium was screaming from end to end. There was no question that the disposal of the formula had been a great relief to everyone. Marc turned, smiled his agreement to the crowd, and disappeared beneath the stands. Just as he started into the shadows, he saw the figure waiting at the outer door-way.

"Julie!" he cried.

She ran toward him, and there were tears in her eyes. Even before she reached him she had begun to talk.

"I was on my way to Reno," she sobbed. "I felt so awful I didn't look at the papers or listen to the radio . . . and then I saw a newspaper in the dining car . . . with your picture on it . . . I thought I'd go out of my mind . . . I left the train . . . but there weren't any planes because of the weather . . . and . . . I just got back . . ."

Marc just stood staring at her, too happy, too warm inside to speak.

"Please forgive me," Julie said. "I'll give up the clubs . . . and . . . and everything . . . You won't have to spend your time in the basement . . . I'll even forget about the redhead, if you'll just take me back . . . I thought you were dead! . . . You will take me back, won't you? Please Marc!"

Marc nodded dumbly.

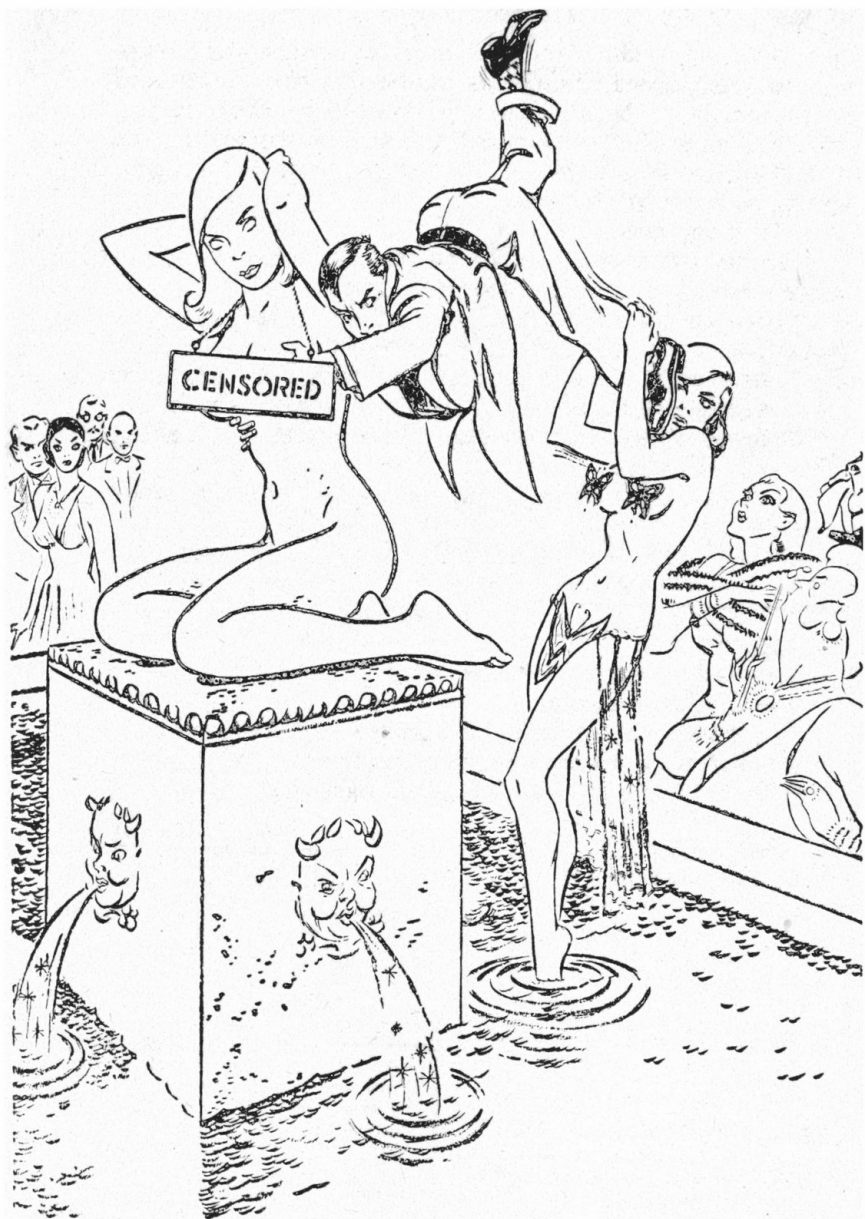
"Oh, thank you, darling!" Julie smiled. "Thank you!"

Marc took her in his arms and drew her close to him.

"Oh, hell," he grinned, "that's all right. Just call on me any . . ."

Then suddenly he stopped. He wondered vaguely if he hadn't heard someone else say that before . . .

THE END



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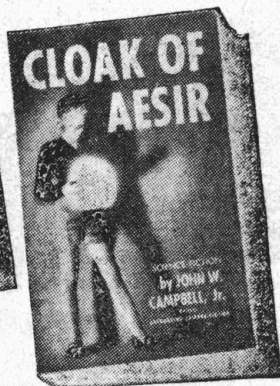
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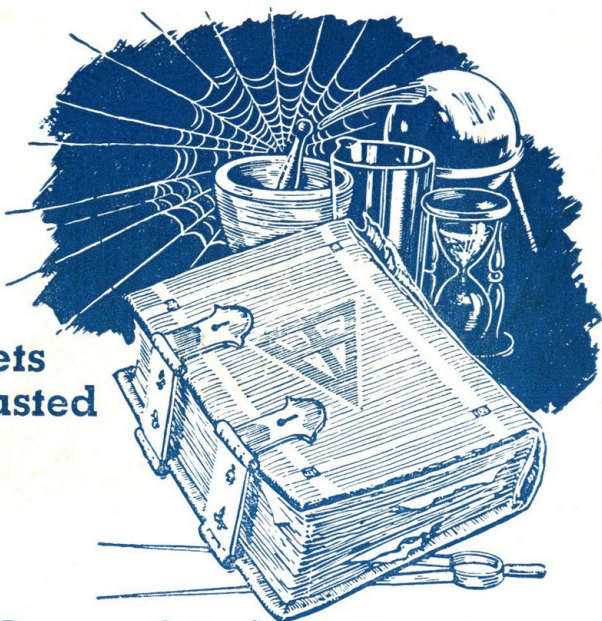
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