

When a courtship needs the velvety touch, there's nothing like a magical sofa. But watch out for . . .

The Upholstered Chaperone

By JEANNE WILLIAMS

Illustrated by KOSSIN

"YOU just don't look right to me," said the sofa, a blue velour Louis Quatorze.

"Uh—what?" gasped Arnold.

The sofa kept smug silence. The

salesman, after a birdlike twitch, smiled tolerantly. "How clever of you, Mr. Arnold. I'd no idea you were a ventriloquist."

Neither had Arnold, but argu-



ing about it could get sticky. He intended to have the sofa, whether it liked him or not. It was to be his ultimate weapon in his long siege of Eileen Kilmer.

"Any rats in it?" Arnold asked, gingerly poking under it.

"Sir! Get your grimy paws off my midriff!"

Arnold leaped back at the sofa's outraged squeak. "Hah!" said the salesman with a pained grin. "Hah-hah! You and this sofa were made for each other, Mr. Arnold. Your friends will scream."

"I'll bet," Arnold said darkly. "Well, how much is it?"

The salesman named a figure that meant Arnold would be out selling insurance from dawning till dusk for a couple of months. Arnold gulped.

"Cheapskate!" sniffed the sofa. "When the Comte de Nuit had me made especially for his mistress, Madame Sinmart, he paid a pretty franc, let me tell you. No haggling. Ah, *noblesse!*"

Fighting back an urge to kick this upholstered budgetary disaster, Arnold paid.

THE freak was going to look silly in his leather-and-monks-cloth apartment, but it might entice Eileen through the doorsill, something which carefully plotted ballyhoo about quiet evenings over broiled porterhouse and choice l.p.r. selections had thus far been

unable to do, unfortunately.

Only the night before, while they were walking past the antique shop, Eileen had squeezed Arnold's arm in such rapture that Arnold, thinking his seductive persuasions had produced a delayed reaction, had quickly encircled her waist.

He had been preparing to plant a triumphant kiss on her lovely cheek when her breathless words left him high and dry as a stranded sea slug. "Look, Arnold! That *darling* sofa! *Oh*—what *wouldn't* I give to have it!"

"Yeah?"

Jarred that she could work up more enthusiasm over a sickly azure wreck than his own reasonably sound physique, Arnold stared down at her. She was small but delectable, with a triangular, high-cheekboned face, gray eyes and black hair swept briefly back from an impish widow's peak, just the right tang of strangeness to spice the slim, soft body below.

Whenever he looked at her for very long, he invariably got vague ideas which warred with his opinion that the wedding service should be concluded with, *And may God have mercy on your soul*. He glanced back at the sofa.

It might be just the way to break through defenses that he had gloomily decided could be broken only by bell, book and candle. Bemused, he had taken Eileen home, kissed her chastely

in token of larger joys to come and betaken himself to see if his earnings could bear the brunt of an upholstered piece of junk.

Now in the cruel light of day, Arnold shuddered away from his purchase. "Here's the address," he told the salesman hoarsely. "Have it delivered right away, please."

FIVE cups of hot coffee later, Arnold unhocked his long legs from the stool at the lunchroom counter. He told himself, for the dozenth time, that the salesman had thrown his voice in a clever effort to sell the sofa, had then pretended to believe Arnold had done it in an effort to make it more convincing.

Sofas can't do anything but creak. Arnold repeated this silently till it had the ring of truth, then went over to the phone booth. He dialed the doctor's office where Eileen worked as a receptionist and, when her voice smiled back at him, told her about the sofa. As much as he thought was discreet . . .

He didn't even suggest that she come over—just gave his news and waited.

"Arnold!" Eileen was thrilled. "I—oh, I didn't realize you appreciated it! You know, you just sort of glared at it last night. You've actually *bought* it?"

"Positively," Arnold sighed, think of his depleted funds.

"Well, that's lovely! I mean, the sofa is. When are you going to let me see it?"

Easy, boy, don't let your fangs show.

Arnold spoke through the sudden thickness in his throat. "Why not tonight? I'm going out of town for a few days tomorrow morning." His palms sweated, but he kept his tone light. "Maybe you could tell me how to take care of it—furniture polish and so on. It'd be a shame to ruin it with my ignorance."

"It certainly *would!*" Eileen took the hint right out of his mouth. "Don't you dare touch it, Arnold! I'll be up *right* after work—a little after five."

"Fine," crooned Arnold. "I'll make us some sandwiches."

Blithely, he went out to his car. He didn't even hold a grudge against the salesman for the voice-throwing trick. The sofa was doing its work.

Arnold got home in time to unlock the apartment for the delivery men. As he glanced from the Louis Quatorze nightmare to his shiny, comfortable brown leather couch, he flinched, and barely suppressed a sudden, sharp urge to tell the men it was all a mistake, that they had come to the wrong apartment. But his good money was already paid and, anyhow, what would Eileen think if she came and found no sofa?

Madame Sinmart's loquacious property was installed. Sadly Arnold watched his old, lumpy lounging wreck carried out. He seemed to hear, as he closed the door after the men, a callous giggle. He kept his back turned. The sound came again.

"Okay!" he yelled, whirling and striding over to the sofa. "Do you have a sound-box or something built in your moth-eaten, scroungy guts?"

"My entrails," observed the sofa, "have outlived yours."

It relapsed into complacent silence.

Arnold was too disgusted to be afraid. The thing couldn't move, apparently, but he kept a wary eye on its legs as he bent over and peered underneath. He wasn't surprised to find a perfectly normal, ordinary sofa-bottom. After all, a radio or records couldn't possibly enable the thing to talk sense. Besides, it spoke at long and unpredictable intervals.

HE was stuck with a talking sofa, that was all.

Clairvoyant, as well, maybe? For just then it said, almost kindly, "Actually, it's simple—during my long life, I've been intimately associated with many people. I've heard them talk till I learned to imitate the sounds by compressing air in and out of my springs. Most of my owners have been beautiful

women." The sofa sighed. "I have therefore acquired a feminine point of view and may I say, sympathies. Ah, the tears that have been wept on me!"

Good Lord, had he brought home a moralist? What if it persisted in yapping after Eileen came?

Getting down on one knee, Arnold leered. "I bet you could tell some good stories, Quatorze. How about that Madame Sinmart?"

"Damned!" intoned Quatorze. "She cut her throat. The Comte had married a convent-bred chit and even quit visiting my poor Madame, who was unfortunately too old to find a lover right off hand. She sat right here—" to Arnold's shocked gaze, the right end of the sofa humped itself—"and slit her throat. I had to be completely recovered." It added dolorously, "Of course, one never does recover from such a thing. I mean I just got new material."

"Uh—yes. Terrible."

Spent from this effort at gay fellowship, Arnold heaved himself up and fled to the kitchen. He had to think of something—but what?—to keep Quatorze from blathering Eileen right out of his apartment.

Shakily, Arnold opened a cabinet. A drink might help, he thought.

Thus braced, Arnold went back to the living room. He pulled up

a hassock. It didn't seem quite safe to sit on the sofa.

"Now look, Quatorze," Arnold said companionably, "I'm expecting my girl friend up this evening."

"Goody!" bubbled Quatorze. "I want a family. When's the wedding?" Arnold sprang up from the footstool.

"Now wait a minute! Eileen . . ."

"Oh. She's that kind of girl." Quatorze snorted. "*Well . . .*"

"Shut up! Eileen's a damn sight nicer than—than your acquaintances!" He lowered his voice. "I want it understood that you're to keep quiet while she's here. None of your creakings. Is that clear?"

Quatorze muttered a while. Then it said defiantly, "*No!* I'm not going to sit idly by while you cause more tragedy. At least Madame Sinmart was lofty in her affairs—not a low, scheming bourgeois."

Arnold clenched his fists. He ought to kick it to kindling—but no, he couldn't. Without Quatorze, he couldn't interest Eileen in a cozy evening at his apartment.

Then inspiration struck. If the sofa was such a reformed character, it wouldn't want Eileen beyond its surveillance.

Arnold shrugged, said, "I guess I'll have to entertain her in the bedroom if you won't behave."

Quatorze swallowed the bluff. It seemed to tilt back. "No—don't do that! I'll be quiet."

"You promise?" demanded Arnold. "Not a word, not a moan?"

"*Heartless!*" wailed the sofa. Arnold swung away. "Yes, yes!" cried Quatorze. "I promise."

Arnold nodded. "Fine. You'll like her. She's going to tell me how to take care of you." *You beat-up, blue holocaust.*

Walking out of the room, Arnold reflected it might be just as well to humor the sofa for a while. He liked Eileen too much to rush her and possibly ruin his chances. If Quatorze would keep quiet, the evening ought to be the first of many.

EILEEN rushed in on the crack of five o'clock, bearing a brown paper sack and a look of ecstasy. She brushed right past Arnold and fell to her beautifully rounded knees by Quatorze.

"I went to the library on my lunch hour and read up on the care of fine furniture. Then I stopped by an antique shop and the man told me what kind of polish to get. I bought some cheesecloth, too, just in case you didn't have any."

She was already uncapping a bottle of repulsively hued liquid, which she poured into a thick wad of the cheesecloth. This was not what Arnold had had in mind.

"Won't you have some sandwiches?" he asked. "Coffee, gin,

tea, whiskey, milk—anything? You must be starved.”

Glancing up long enough to cast him a faraway smile, Eileen shook her head till a strand of black hair tumbled below her widow's peak. “Later, Arnold. Right now, *this* is more important.” She gestured impatiently. “Move out of my light, will you, please?”

“I'll help,” Arnold decided. If you can't whip 'em, join 'em. But as he knelt to pick up a cloth, Eileen said, “*Please, Arnold!* Just watch this time, and see how I do it.”

A snort came from the sofa. Eileen glared at Arnold. “Why don't you go make coffee? You plainly don't appreciate the treasure you've got, snorting at me!”

There was danger in telling her Quatorze had done the snorting. Arnold, an outcast in his own home, straggled back to the kitchen.

He had a tray of sandwiches all made, and a flotilla of little dishes of nuts, gherkins and olives. He plugged in the coffee-maker and reflected that at least it couldn't take much longer to polish that sofa. Then he and Eileen could talk—though conversation might get pretty cramped with Quatorze within speaking distance. He waited . . . and waited . . .

Finally, Arnold had had enough. He marched into the living room. Eileen was curled up in a corner

of Quatorze, stroking the velour and sort of purring.

“Isn't it *lovely?*” she crooned. Arnold looked at her slim ankles. He got a funny, breathless feeling.

“You're more so . . .” A fizzling rumble came from Quatorze. Eileen jumped up, looking startled.

“Are you feeling all right, Arnold? You've been making odd sounds all evening.”

Arnold tried to laugh. “I'm hungry,” he managed weakly.

“Of *course*, you poor dear! I'm sorry you had to wait, but—well, I never saw such a *fascinating* piece of furniture.”

Me, either, thought Arnold. He stood back from the door with a little bow. “You can admire the sofa later. Come in and smile at my sandwiches now.”

SHE ate daintily but hurriedly. Once she looked around and said chidingly, “You really have a nice place, Arnold, but the curtains are impossible. If I had it, I'd . . .”

The opening attack of female assertiveness, the vibration of lurking wedding bells. “Have a cup of coffee,” Arnold said hastily—and burned himself on the side of the percolator.

Eileen did the dishes while Arnold stacked some records, mostly soothing, lush instrumentals that would not interfere with any tender remarks he might think of. He

turned to Eileen as she shined the last cup.

"Would you like to dance?" he murmured, holding out his arms. Eileen's eyes sparkled. She seemed to read his mind, but with gentle derision, not terrified scorn. Whirling past him, she sank in a flutter of can-can petticoated skirts, settling in a corner of the sofa.

"It's much too crowded for dancing. Besides, this may be my one and only chance to sit on this sofa." She patted the blue velour in a way that made Arnold bristle with jealousy.

He strode over and planted his hands on his belt. "Eileen, I've always thought you were a—a clear-headed girl. I've respected your intellect. I . . ."

"Have you?" smiled Eileen. She stretched her arms gracefully above her head and yawned languorously. "Arnold, dear, a woman *has* to be extravagant about *something*. If it can't be human, it might as well be furniture."

"My mother was extravagant," said Arnold. "She griped at my old man till he got a divorce. Then she married two other poor devils, bang-bang—like that. Too bad she didn't have your passion for Louis Quatorze."

There was a bad taste in his mouth. Damn it, he was crazy about Eileen, but why couldn't she quit making those sarcastic cracks? A hand closed on his arm. Eileen

was physically minute, but she fairly swung him around, dropped his arm and stood there with her eyes blazing green fire.

"Arnold! I'm *sorry!* I'm sorry that I love you! Are you going to go around all your life saying, 'My mama was a bad, bad woman and she broke my little baby heart.' Or are you going to face it and say, 'Okay, that's how it was and I can't help remembering—and—and hurting. But what happens from here on in is what *I* do?'" She spun away as her voice broke. "Good-by, Arnold. I—I hope you'll have lots of fun with your sofa!"

He grabbed her as she was groping for the doorknob. He had had plenty for one evening. Who was she to call him a baby and a psycho case when he was simply a bedeviled man with a sofa that talked and a girl who cried?

"Listen!" He had her shoulders under his hands and she was warm and trembling. Her mouth was parted and she faced him in a sort of shocked consent. Arnold forgot whatever he had been going to say.

THE kiss shook him up. Thoroughly. Eileen clung to him and he had a confused feeling of desire and protectiveness that made it seem impossible ever to let her leave. He kissed her again. When he drew back, she stayed in his arms.

"Eileen . . ."

She stiffened suddenly. He stared down at the hurt on her face—she was gazing past him toward the sofa. Arnold turned.

Dread shot through him, even before he recognized the gaudy tube as a lipstick case. It lay cozily on the sofa. Arnold tightened his hands.

"Damn you, Quatorze!"

Eileen said coldly, "Is that the lady's name?"

"Oh, *Lord!*" groaned Arnold.

"Honey, I can explain. That sofa—it talks and—and . . ."

With a glance of incredulous scorn, Eileen opened the door. "For old time's sake, Arnold, I advise you to see a doctor or stop drinking. And even if your sofa did talk—objects speak louder than words."

She stalked out and banged the door behind her.

For a long time, Arnold surveyed the monster under his roof. Finally he crossed over, sat down on the rug and said in what he hoped was an objective, conversational tone, "Why? I just want to know *why?*"

The lipstick glittered evilly. Arnold grabbed it as if it might turn into a snake, rolled it in his hands, then hurled it into the wastebasket.

"*Why?*" he said again.

"Don't deny what you were thinking," Quatorze retorted huffily. "From long experience, I know the outcome of lovers' quarrels.

You had the poor child feeling sorry for you. Also, you're good-looking in a tousled sort of way. I had to do *something.*"

"Gee, thanks," said Arnold bitterly.

"It was nothing," Quatorze said airily. "I have all kinds of interesting mementos in my springs and upholstery. That little number you threw away belonged to an exponent of a fine old New Orleans profession. She had to hock me."

"A pity she didn't burn you, you obnoxious flea-bitten—"

"*I,*" broke in Quatorze, "am a duenna."

"A duenna?" Arnold's jaw dropped. Then he rallied enough to add, "Sure you don't mean chaperone? I thought you were French."

He got up, ready to abandon the stupid argument, but Quatorze said pleasantly, "Oh, I belonged to a Spanish lady once and, naturally, I learned the language. Duenna has more of an air than chaperone, don't you think? That's what my senora called me."

"She, no doubt, drank poison," growled Arnold.

"No, she was the only one of my owners to marry. A sea captain, he was. He was home nine times in nine years and they had nine children. Charming family."

"I think your Madame Sinmart was wiser," said Arnold. "Also, if I had any children, I'm damned if

I'd expose them to your influence.
Good night!"

ARNOLD was out of town the next three days on business. While he was extolling the advantages of insurance to family men, he caught himself thinking of Eileen. He was not cheered at the grim vision of her marrying a substantial bread-and-butter citizen, which was probably what she was preparing to do.

As for himself—Arnold shivered—he would spend his existence going home at night to Quatorze. He had too much dough sewed up in the wretched sofa to throw it out. On the fourth day, reluctantly, he parked his car in front of his place, went up to his apartment and unlocked the door, closed his eyes till he was inside and then looked toward the sofa.

Quatorze sat there, blatantly elegant amid the reproachful remnants of the pre-antique days. "Welcome!" it said. "I'm glad to see you didn't bring any baggage with you."

Something snapped in Arnold's brain. A red mist in front of him turned Quatorze a virulent purple.

"I'll teach you!" Arnold yelled. "Just wait!"

He stormed down to the astonished maid's quarters and came back with a vacuum sweeper and all the attachments. In plain view of Quatorze, he selected the wick-

edest-looking fixture, screwed it into the nozzle and plugged in the sweeper.

"Now," he gloated.

"Please!" Quatorze gurgled. "Stay! Hold thy hand! Don't!"

Arnold jeered. "A cleaning ought to benefit your filthy mind." He pushed the control and sent the vacuum gobbling along the blue velour.

Quatorze seemed to cringe. Then a rending hideous racket wailed from the depths of it. It howled louder and louder, pitching its shrieks higher than the buzz of the cleaner. Arnold kept on doggedly. He was going to put this meddling piece of furniture in its place. The ringing phone interrupted him.

Switching off the cleaner as Quatorze gasped into silence, Arnold felt momentary hope. Could it be Eileen? Not possibly, he told himself, but his heart was thumping as he picked up the phone.

"What are you doing up there, Mr. Arnold?" It was the apartment manager's voice. "Three women have called me in a panic. They say someone's yelling her head off in your place."

"I'm vacuuming my sofa," Arnold snapped. "Tell the old busybodies I pay my rent the same as they do."

He hung up and returned to the attack. The phone rang again and

he ignored it. Quatorze shrieked, sobbed and squealed, but Arnold didn't stop till the sofa's cries had subsided to weak whimperings.

"You are to be *seen*, not heard," Arnold commanded, folding his arms. "I'll rip your springs out if you give me any more trouble. Understand?"

QUATORZE moaned submission. Just then, before Arnold could exult, a loud hammering resounded from the door, along with sounds of nervous whisperings and shifting feet. Wondering what was going on, Arnold flung open the door.

A couple of women yipped and jumped back behind two sturdy policemen. The apartment manager held his ground, though he kept twining his hands together and his eyes darted around like a scared rat's.

"Where is she, Mr. Arnold? Have you killed her?"

"W-w-what?" gulped Arnold. "Are you crazy?"

The policemen stepped in and got on either side of him. "Keep cool, son," one advised. "Play ball and you'll get off easier. Where's the woman?"

"There *isn't* any woman!" Arnold sputtered. "I was just vacuuming my sofa."

"*Hah!*" scoffed a hatchet-faced woman. "The most sickening wailings you ever heard! Bet he's chop-

ped her up. Look in the chests and drawers."

She led the apartment manager, the other neighbors and one cop to the bedroom. Arnold turned to his guard. "The sofa talks," he said desperately. "It was yelling." The cop stared. Then he rubbed his big chin pityingly.

"Son, I guess either way we're going to have to lock you up. Seen any mermaids too, lately?"

"I tell you—" began Arnold, when the phone pealed.

"Talk to *that*," boomed the policeman. "You won't have one in your cell."

Arnold picked it up. He didn't recognize the voice at first till it gave the name of the antique shop where Arnold had bought Quatorze. "... chance to make a nice profit if you care to sell, Mr. Arnold. The customer's right here. Shall I bring him up? He'll meet your price."

Swiveling around, Arnold stared at Quatorze. The monster had got him in trouble up to his ears, had broken up his romance with Eileen—and this was his chance to get rid of it. And profitably.

But as he glared at the sofa, suddenly, crazily, he recalled how Eileen had cuddled there, how she had polished the wood and stroked the velour. She would never have anything to do with him, but he still couldn't sell the object she had loved.

"No, thanks," he told the salesman. "I'm used to it now."

He cradled the phone. The searchers were straggling back into the room, prying suspiciously. "He may have tossed her out a window," growled the cop. "We'll look careful later. Right now—come along, buddy."

Arnold didn't say anything. He started to move along with his captors when the door burst open and Eileen ran in. She halted, glanced in horrified shock from the police to Arnold, then came over and stood in front of him.

"What are you doing?" she asked the cops. They didn't say anything. She clenched her hands. "Arnold didn't do it, whatever you think! He—he's wonderful and sweet and—and I'm going to marry him!"

NO double-crossing wench would talk like that. Things fell into place in Arnold's whirling mind and he put his arms around her. "Eileen, honey—do you *mean* that? Would you marry me?"

"Lady," cut in one of the police, "you can't marry this guy! If he isn't a criminal, he's crazy, on account of he's saying this sofa can talk and scream and—"

"And why not?" Quatorze inquired.

They all jumped and whirled. The sofa emitted a horrible scream. It laughed, it sobbed, it ran the

gamut of sounds a female could make from birth till death. When it got through, Eileen was clinging to Arnold and his unasked visitors were sidling toward the door. "If you're still not convinced," said Quatorze, "come back any time."

Arnold understood. When he asked Eileen to marry him—that was when Quatorze had quit playing possum and sounded off. A very proper duenna. He felt a glow of positive affection for it. But a good deal more for the girl in his arms.

"Eileen, what made you come back? I thought . . ."

She smiled and he realized for the first time that she had been crying. "I was worried about you, Arnold. You said the sofa talked and I—I thought you were losing your mind. So I had to come back."

"Lucky for me," said Arnold. "Well, you won't get lonesome while I'm at work. Quatorze can always talk to you." He gathered her up and for the first time sat down on the sofa. It felt comfortably welcoming.

"As I was saying," murmured Quatorze, "my first owner, Madame Sinmart—"

"Duenna," said Arnold, "don't you ever know when to shut up?"

Jeanne Williams