

THE BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF MYSTERY, THRILLS AND SURPRISE

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. . . before she was through, the strange woman had clipped blonde hair, instead of her former long tresses. . . —Page 16

Blueberry Pie

[Complete Mystery Novelle]

By Thyra Samtér Winslow

I

THE Laurence Martins were at breakfast. It was a most charming domestic scene. The dining-room, though small, was one-fourth of the Martin's North Side Chicago apartment.

The table of black enamel was set daintily with a blue and white runner and with blue and white Canton china. In the center was a vase holding four jonquils. The blue and gold cretonne curtains made the thin March sunshine seem almost as gold as Irma Martin's smooth bobbed hair. The Martins had been married just four months.

Irma Martin turned the toast in the electric toaster at her elbow. She poured coffee. Then, her hand trembling a little, she picked up the morning paper and started to read. Martin was already scanning the headlines of his own newspaper which he would read more thoroughly on his way to the office. He glanced at his wife.

"Irma," he said, and then, as she didn't answer, "Irma."

"Speak to me?" she looked over at him.

"What's the matter, dear?" he asked. "You look pale. I don't believe you slept well. I heard you tossing."

"You're a darling to worry," she smiled at him. "It's really nothing. I was—a—a little restless. Not sleeping makes me pale, I suppose."

He looked at her hand, holding the paper.

"Why, child, you're trembling."

She got up, then, went over, put an arm around his shoulder, her cheek against his hair.

"You are nice," she said. "I think it's just nerves. But I'm lots better than I was. You said so, too. You watch—I'll improve. I'm the nervous sort—all my folks were, too."

"What have you got to be nervous about? A beautiful Spring day. . . . I honestly believe, Irma, if you didn't read the papers so much—got your mind on other things—reading things like this, now . . ." he pointed to a glaring headline.

"I know. I shouldn't have read it. I suppose that was it. I'll forget it in fifteen minutes. It does seem—awful, though. I'm going downtown with Lois Britton. We're going to look at bedroom curtains and slippers."

Martin looked at his paper again.

"That'll be fine," he said. "I can't blame you—reading a thing like this. An awful thing. That was a terrible murder. Glad the papers will be through with it, now. How that beast ever went on proclaiming his innocence to the end—I see he did—is more than I can figure out. I don't believe in capital punishment, as a rule, but in a case like that—when a man deliberately murders an innocent little woman—electrocuting is none too good for him. He deserved all he got."

"I—I suppose he did," agreed Irma.

"Of course. You're the softest-hearted little thing in the world, or you wouldn't be trembling, now. I

ought to have kept the paper away from you. Though I can't blame you, if a thing like this gets on your nerves. You were in New York when it all happened?"

"No, it was just a few weeks after I got there. I remember reading it in the papers. Just coming from New York and the woman having light bobbed hair and all, I felt terribly interested."

"I suppose you did. That's right, you came here in July, didn't you? I bet you never thought, when you left New York, that you'd meet the man you were going to marry within a month, did you?"

"You bet I didn't. Nor that I'd marry him six months after I did meet him. Marry in haste, you know. . . . You sorry, yet?"

"I should say not. Marrying you is the one best thing I ever did, Irma. You know that. Now sit down and finish your toast. I'm late again."

Irma went back to her seat across the table. They talked about little things, about Irma's coming to Chicago, when the aunt with whom she had lived in New York had died, how she just happened to pick out Chicago because she had never been West, how she had met Martin's cousin at the Y. W. C. A., where she had taken a room, and how the cousin and she had found a place to live together and had gone job hunting, and how Irma had met Martin a few weeks later, with "love at first sight." ". . . and here we are, with a little apartment and married and everything. . . ."

Martin looked at his watch. He grabbed his paper, his hat and his coat and said, cheerfully:

"Now put that awful murder case out of your mind, won't you?"

"You bet I will." Irma kissed him and the door slammed.

But little Mrs. Martin did not put the murder case out of her mind. She sat there, with the paper before her and read over that awful headline:

**DENNISON PAYS
PENALTY FOR CRIME
Electrocuted at Sing Sing Yesterday
For Murder of Irene Graham**

Then, under an Ossining date line, followed the full details of the electrocution, the crime and the trial.

Irma shuddered as she read the story to the end, the last day of the condemned man, the résumé of the brutal deed. It was enough to make anyone shudder.

II

THE details of the Dennison case are well-known to the average American. For the average American is a newspaper reader, and no reader of newspapers could neglect the fruity details of that tragedy. It contained all of the elements that make newspaper readers.

A fairly well-to-do young man of around thirty, just before an announcement of his engagement to a young woman in his own social set was to have been made, murders the young woman—hardly more than a girl—with whom he had shared an apartment for two years previous. The details, the murder itself, the plan to make the murder look as if a burglar had committed it, the little things which the murderer could not foresee, but which proved his guilt; the trial, and now the electrocution, were all spectacular, fascinating, in a morbid, gruesome way.

The first the public knew was on a morning in July. The people in the apartment building in the West Hun-

dreds were told by their sense of smell that something was wrong. Horribly unpleasant, right from the start. The janitor and then a plumber visited several apartments, found nothing. The plumber decided the unpleasant odors came from an apartment on the third floor. This was occupied by a Mr. and Mrs. Stuart Dennison. At least, they were supposed to be Mr. and Mrs. Dennison, though the acquaintances of Mrs. Dennison, who was a friendly little soul, knew that no marriage existed, that the girl was really named Irene Graham. Realizing that the irregular relations were but one of the incidents of city living, the neighbors thought none the less of Miss Graham. On the contrary, their own regular lives bored them, and they rather welcomed her. She was a pleasant, frank little thing, always telling them little confidences, asking advice. Until just a few months before, she had been awfully happy, full of gay little stories. Since then, she had been wistful, sad, because Dennison was no longer kind to her.

When the plumber wanted admission into the Dennison apartment, the janitor, a fellow by the name of Schmidt, told him that there was no one at home, there. He, himself, had been told by Mrs. Dennison that she and Dennison were going away for a vacation of several weeks. Mrs. Dennison had been quite excited over going. In fact, Schmidt had brought up from the basement two trunks and several suitcases. One of the trunks had left in the morning, a whole week ago. He had seen it leave. The other one had gone away later in the day, and then Mrs. Dennison had had it sent back from the station. She had met him in the hall, he remembered, and told him that the second trunk had contained bedding which

they weren't going to need, after all. Mrs. Dennison had gone on up into her apartment—had said that Dennison would come for her and they were going to leave together, later. No, he hadn't seen them leave, but there hadn't been lights there since, nor the noise of anyone walking around. So they had evidently left that night, as they had planned, and not returned. He knew that. When the plumber insisted, Schmidt handed over his master's key.

Half an hour later, excited tenants were rushing to and fro, the most daring of them even venturing into the apartment. Someone telephoned for the police. Three policemen arrived within half an hour, asking questions and ordering folks to be silent, simultaneously. In the closet of the bedroom of the apartment the body of Irene Graham had been found. She had been strangled with a towel. She had been dead just about one week. There was no sign of any other occupant of the apartment.

One trunk was in the apartment, half full of bedding. An empty suitcase stood nearby. The window of the bedroom was partly open. The window led to a fire-escape. The drawers of the chiffonier and the dressing-table were pulled out, their contents scattered, chairs were overturned. Evidently a struggle had taken place.

At first glance, the police said that a burglar had committed the crime. But only at first glance.

Little things began to creep out. After one day there was enough evidence to hold Dennison. In three months more he had been convicted. Now his electrocution had followed. To the end, as is frequently the case, Dennison had pleaded innocence, but there was not one single person in

the city of New York, perhaps, who believed him innocent of the crime for which he paid with his life.

Those who looked into the affair admitted that Dennison had planned carefully enough to make it seem as if a burglar had committed the crime. There was the woman, bound, gagged, dead. There was the window, on the fire-escape, by which the thief could have entered and escaped. There were the rifled drawers. Miss Graham's jewelry—all but one piece, that is, and even a burglar might have overlooked a small wrist-watch—was gone. What more natural than that a burglar should enter an apartment, start rifling its contents, see a young woman, struggle with her, finally strangle her with a towel and make his escape?

Dennison had evidently left the apartment for good the day the murder was committed. He said he had gone out a day or two before the murder and had never returned, that, when he left, he had planned not to return. Several things pointed to the fact that the murder was committed on a Thursday evening. Miss Graham had planned to go away that evening. She was never seen alive again. A letter was found in the letter-box. It had been delivered the next morning. It was from Dennison, and in it he told her he hoped she would be as sensible as she had seemed, when they parted. He enclosed a check. It was a generous check, his lawyers pointed out. It could well afford to be, the district attorney answered, when Dennison knew his victim could never cash it.

Just at first, the thing did look as if a burglar had done it. Then, little things—

Neighbors gave proof that helped convict Dennison. Little Mrs. Peterson, who lived across the hall, had

been glad to tell her bit. It was the first time Mrs. Peterson had ever got into the lime-light, and she rather gloried in it. She was a slender woman with a thin nose and rather beady eyes.

Mrs. Peterson had been a friend of Mrs. Dennison—Miss Graham, that is. She had always liked her—had known her for two years. The Dennisons—well, the two of them, had been awfully happy for a long time, happier than most married couples. Then, a few months before, things had changed. She had found Miss Graham crying. Finally, Miss Graham admitted that Dennison was no longer kind to her. He was cruel—awfully cruel. He threatened to leave her. He said he was in love with another woman. Miss Graham had done all she could, cooked the things he liked best. She was a good cook, a nice little woman, quiet, well-bred, pretty, too, with short light bobbed hair. Mrs. Peterson would never forget how she looked—when she saw her there, dead—her blonde, bobbed hair—her poor stained fingers, her little stained apron. . . .

Yes, the quarreling had gone on—got worse all the time. Then a couple of days before—before the end, Miss Graham had cried all the time. But that morning, things had changed. Miss Graham had come to her, awfully happy, to say that Dennison and she had made up, that they were going away on a two week's vacation up in Westchester. They'd have a lot of fun. The janitor brought up the trunks—she didn't know just when—Dennison's trunk and Miss Graham's—of course, the very one in the apartment. Miss Graham and she had gone down at the same time to answer the post-man's ring and later, Miss Graham had called her in as she packed and

she had stood and watched her. Miss Graham had packed blankets for use in the cottage—Miss Graham had told about using a cottage belonging to a member of Dennison's firm. The other trunk was packed, then. It left early Thursday morning. Miss Graham had gone out into the hall with the boy, and coming back had said she had told him to come later for the other trunk.

Later, Mrs. Peterson remembered, the square trunk had gone, though she had seen it come back, too. Miss Graham had opened the door for it and she had spoken to her, again.

"Just think," she had said, "we won't need this trunk, after all. There are plenty of blankets at the lodge and as we have got a long automobile trip at the other end, there's no use taking it. All that bother for nothing."

Mrs. Peterson had stepped into the Dennison apartment for a moment. Miss Graham had been—yes—she had been baking blueberry pie. The pie was just finished. Miss Graham had said that blueberry pies were Dennison's favorite dish—Miss Graham didn't care much for it, herself. Dennison wouldn't have a homemade one for a couple of weeks and blueberries might be gone by the time they got back, so Miss Graham was making one for his dinner. She didn't want to cut it, now, but she'd bring Mrs. Peterson over a piece, later. Miss Graham had worn that little gingham housedress, with the blue apron over it—the clothes she had been found dead in—and her fingers, even then, had been stained with the berries from the blueberry pie.

Mrs. Peterson never saw Miss Graham again. Never, that is, while she was alive. She had looked at the body to identify it—if identification were needed. She had seen the

bobbed blonde hair, the little, berry-stained apron—the terrible berry-stained fingers—after a whole week. She had seen the pie again, too, there on the kitchen table, with its one piece missing.

Mrs. Peterson's evidence was important. But there were other things. The watch, for one. Another neighbor, a Mrs. Grant, had told, eagerly, about the watch. She, too, had seen Miss Graham that very Thursday—that afternoon. She, too, had heard about the promised vacation. Miss Graham was coming in and in the lower hall, they had stopped and talked. Miss Graham's arms were full of bundles.

"I'm going to bake a pie," she had said.

Miss Graham had asked the time—and mentioned that Mr. Dennison was having her watch repaired—would bring it home that night—she was lost without it. Miss Graham usually wore a small wrist watch—yes, Mrs. Grant had seen it frequently. Yes—the one they found on the dressing table. Miss Graham had glanced at her bare wrist, instinctively, Mrs. Grant remembered. She had said how she would have hated to be away two weeks without a watch. Mrs. Grant hadn't seen Miss Graham again. But she had seen the watch again—there on the dressing table—and later in the court-room. Yes—she had glanced at the body with its tumbled light short hair, its familiar little apron—a terrible thing—you can't tell what your neighbors will do, these days—Dennison had seemed like such a nice fellow. . . .

Another neighbor testified—a fellow named Felix, who lived on the floor above. The evening that the police decided the murder had been committed—Thursday—he had been

coming upstairs to dinner about half-past five—he had left the office early—when he had heard furniture falling, heard a woman scream. Her screams did not sound as if they were those of a woman being attacked by a stranger. On the contrary, he had heard, distinctly, "Oh, God, what are you doing, Stuart!" and then "Oh, Stuart—oh God!" He had told his wife that, when he got upstairs. They had decided it was a family quarrel, not serious enough for a stranger to interfere. They had talked about the Dennisons, what a nice little thing she was, how she had been crying, lately. Yes, he had seen the body—mere curiosity, of course—a gruesome sight. Of course he had recognized it. He'd have known that bobbed hair any place. Of course—the state the body was in—he hadn't looked long—but that was the least—identifying the body—poor little girl—it just shows—the wages of sin—

The evidence hedged Dennison in, closer and closer. If it hadn't been for Margaret Harrington, though, he might have pulled out, somehow.

Margaret Harrington had been engaged to be married to Stuart Dennison. She was ready to announce the engagement. She had expected him to call on her that Thursday evening. He was to come about six and they were going out to dinner. Dennison arrived a little late and she had noticed immediately something odd about his actions. One thing, especially—his mouth and teeth were stained blue—as if from blueberries. She had teased him about it. He had seemed nervous, and, instead of laughing it off, hadn't even admitted eating pie, but had changed the subject, quickly, instead. The evening had passed as they had planned.

She had seen Dennison several

times during the week that followed. He had seemed about as usual, but nervous, too. Then, a week later—when Dennison was arrested—when she had read that on the kitchen table of his apartment had been found a blueberry pie with a piece cut out of it and the slice missing, she had felt that to her had been given the last link in the chain of evidence. So she had gone to the district attorney with her knowledge.

She had given up Dennison, of course, as soon as she heard of the murder. It was not only on account of the murder that she had given him up; it was on account of the whole, ugly affair. He had never told her about Miss Graham—about another woman. She might have forgiven him in the beginning, if he had confessed. But to have kept on with the other woman while he was calling on her—making her think he cared only for her. That seemed quite as bad as the tragedy, itself. So she had felt that she must not shield her former sweetheart. Her own conscience demanded that she tell what she knew about the pie.

III

No one was surprised at the jury's decision, at the judge's sentence, when the trial took place. Smug citizens shook their heads with satisfaction, young girls, about to err, shuddered and chose less easy paths. It worked out quite well, morally—there was a crime—a motive—apprehension of the criminal—punishment.

What did it matter that Stuart Dennison repeated over and over again the same story. He told it to the district attorney. He told it to his own lawyers. He told it to reporters. He seemed dazed, almost, at the lack of response his story

received. All he could do was to go over and over his version of the affair.

Stuart Dennison's story was, to say the least, amazing. That he couldn't prove anything seemed the least amazing part of it. For Dennison maintained that he hadn't been near the apartment the day of the murder. He couldn't offer an alibi for every moment of his time. He had been in and out of his office and his club. But he was always going in and out. He had occupied his room at his club. But then, he had always kept a room there and used it more or less. Most of the club members had been away. Those who had been at the club could not testify when they had seen him. His story was simple; too simple even for those who wanted to sympathize with him. He hadn't been near the apartment, that was all. The watch? Yes, he had given it to Miss Graham on a previous Christmas. To his knowledge it had never been broken nor mended. How could he prove that? He couldn't. He maintained that he had left the apartment the evening before—that Miss Graham definitely knew that he was not going to return. He had packed his trunk before he had gone—had sent for it. It had been taken to his club as he said. Vacation trip? He knew of no vacation trip; had planned none. He couldn't understand Miss Graham saying anything about that. The second trunk—the same thing. . . . The little woman with the blonde bobbed hair, the one person who could have proved him wrong—or right—was buried long before the trial began.

Dennison did explain about the blueberry pie in a way—a peculiarly ineffective way, everyone thought. On the way to Miss Harrington's he

had passed, he said, a small pastry shop. In the window he had seen some blueberry pie. It was near dinnertime. He knew that. But he was fond of blueberry pie. He had gone into the pastry shop, eaten a small piece of pie. Later, when Miss Harrington had asked him, he had been embarrassed, had denied eating the pie. He hadn't remembered, he explained, that his teeth and lips would look blue. At the pastry shop no one remembered him nor the pie. One waitress had gone—no one knew her name—no one else knew anything about it—so many people came in to eat pie. . . . The pie in the apartment? He had never seen that, of course. . . . A burglar must have come in—

The cold-blooded fact—that just before or after he had killed the woman who had been everything to him for two years—he had eaten a piece of pie that she had baked as a surprise for him, turned people against Dennison more than any other one fact of the tragedy. That much is certain.

It was a clear case, as the district attorney sketched it. The two, Dennison and Miss Graham had lived together. He had fallen in love with someone else, had threatened to leave her. There had been scenes. Then, he had promised her that things would be better—had planned the vacation trip to prove it. He had packed his trunk, had gone away. Miss Graham, all eager for his return, had packed the big trunk, sent it away, had probably telephoned to him, found out the trunk was not needed, got a wagon to call for it and bring it back, then had returned and had baked the blueberry pie. Coming in about five, on Thursday, Dennison had found her waiting. They had quarreled. He had murdered

her, perhaps without meaning to do so.

The deed done, he had tried to get out of it, had disarranged things, tumbled the dressing-table drawers on the floor and bed, opened the window, taken the simple jewelry. Sometime, during the hours he spent there, he had taken the watch out of his pocket, then had forgotten to "steal" it. Before or after the murder, he had eaten the pie. He had thrust the body into the closet, washed his hands, straightened his hair—had left the apartment to call on his fiancée, Miss Harrington. A terrible, brutal deed. No wonder he was electrocuted for the crime. No wonder people shuddered as they read, avidly, details of the affair. It was brutal. It was a remarkable case, too. Perhaps it was most remarkable, though, because it happened not to be true in any particular.

IV

It was over. When Irene woke up, she realized that. When Dennison packed his trunk, the day before, and told her that he was not going to return, she knew that he would keep his word. She hadn't been able to hold him. That was the truth of it. Now he was going to marry a society girl. Margaret Harrington! Irene had seen Margaret Harrington's picture, even—a beautiful girl, really beautiful. There was absolutely nothing Irene could do. Dennison was gone.

"Buck up . . . be a good sport," Dennison had said, and, "you have known for a long time this couldn't go on." Things like that.

She had been a good sport. That is, she had tried to laugh, tried to pretend that it didn't matter. It did

matter. It meant more than anything else in the world.

Not that the thing was unexpected. From the first—from two years ago when she had started—and come to Dennison's apartment—she had known that the arrangement couldn't last. But she had hoped—prayed—that it would. She had even thought, lots of times, that maybe Dennison would marry her, that they could settle down without this everlasting subterfuge and this constant explanation, have a home, really. Now Dennison was gone—was going to marry someone else.

She really loved Dennison—had loved him, that is. Why, she had loved him from the first time she had ever seen him there in McNally's. She wondered how he had ever happened to notice her. He had never been in a department store since, as far as she knew. He had come in, that day, to match a bit of silk for the head-dress of a Persian costume for a charity play, and she had waited on him. She had liked him, had gladly broken a rule when he asked her and had given him her address, the address of that lonely little room in that cheap rooming house on Lexington Avenue.

He had come to see her, then. The six months that followed had been the happiest she had ever known. She had been in New York for over a year, ever since her aunt died in Ferrisville, and nothing had happened to her, nothing that is, but long hours of work or longer and wearier hours of searching for work. The men she had met had been stupid, impossible creatures, mostly friends or brothers of the girls who worked next to her. Then she had met Dennison and he had altered everything.

She remembered, now, those first six months she had known him. He

used to call for her in his neat little car, after work. The last half hour in the store she would spend surreptitiously arranging her hair, powdering her face, applying her lip stick, though she didn't make up a great deal, those days. At twenty-one one doesn't need artifices. Then they'd go to funny little restaurants Dennison knew about, Italian places where you'd get awfully good things, little French places, a Swiss restaurant uptown. Sometimes, Dennison would take her home, then, if you can call a rooming house home. Sometimes, they'd go to the theatre. Then, Dennison had an accident with the car and sold it. After a few weeks there would creep into his talk the desire to be with her when no one was around, his want to "have her to himself."

"How can I talk to you," he'd say, "in a movie theatre or in restaurants or parks. Am I never to have a minute of you to myself?"

It seemed not. Then he suggested his apartment. Until then, it seemed, Dennison had shared an apartment with another chap. Now the other man had left New York.

"You'd feel more at home up there," Dennison had told her. He'd beg her to come up, fix him a cup of tea, be comfortable, where he could hold her hand if he felt like it.

She had hesitated—she had been a simple little thing, then. She had gone, of course. They would get dinner, together, after that, bringing in a hot roasted chicken and crisp fried potatoes from a rotisserie and preparing a salad, themselves. Dennison could make a couple of salad dressings. They would buy French pastry and make coffee. Evenings were happy, though always over them hung the fact that Irene had to hurry away, had to be up early the next

morning, was afraid of kisses that frightened her.

"Why do you want to go?" Dennison would ask. "You know I love you. Can't you let me take care of you? I hate to think that my girl has got to go to a horrid little room, when she could stay here with me, instead. I don't want my girl to work all day.

That was it—his girl. She had cared for him. She knew that. With his arms around her, the soft lamps, the pot of hot coffee, the occasional cocktail, it hadn't been easy to go.

One night it began to rain. She could have got a taxi, of course. She had gone home in taxis, other nights. But Dennison's arms were around her, his lips pressed to hers. She was comfortably drowsy and awfully happy and young.

The next day she went back to her room, packed the square trunk, told her landlady she was going to share an apartment with another girl. She gave up her position at McNally's. Two years ago. . . .

Dennison had been all she had dreamed he would be, that first year, tender, affectionate, thoughtful. Then little things began to creep in . . . he would object to things she'd say, to the way she laughed. He corrected errors of speech rather impatiently. But even then, he was good.

It wasn't until this last year that he didn't come home, every evening. He took a room at his club. It was lonely, then. If she had been another girl—another sort—Irene felt she might have gone with other men. She didn't. She stayed in the apartment, waited. Dennison was no longer thoughtful nor affectionate. He found fault, didn't like the way she did things. She tried hard to arrange the table daintily, pored over

cook-books, spent hours preparing foods he was especially fond of.

Then he told her about Margaret Harrington. He was going to marry Miss Harrington—a suitable match in every way. Irene should have known this wouldn't last—he had been fond of her, of course—he would do what he could.

Then, Irene knew she hated him. She knew that all the love she had had for him had disappeared—had turned into one huge hatred. She wanted to get even. She wanted to leap at him, pound him with her fists . . . why . . . kill him, even. That was it—kill him! She remembered something she had read—in the Bible she thought it was—"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." She thought that was it. Well, he had scorned her. She wanted to get even.

V

Now, Dennison was gone. Lying in bed, now, Irene thought of him. How could she get even. Of course—she could kill him. But she'd be found out—sent to the electric chair. She might get off, of course—most women did—but she mightn't be lucky. The chair! She shuddered. Someone had told her, once, that a few hours before a person was electrocuted, he was doped so that when the time came he was scarcely conscious of what was happening. That was the reason cowards appeared brave at their death, her informant had said. Maybe that was true. She didn't know. Even so, she didn't want to be electrocuted. She'd be found out, of course, if she killed Dennison—or if she killed Miss Harrington. Anyhow, it wasn't Miss Harrington she wanted to get rid of, after all. Miss Harrington was just a part of a game, as she was part of a

game. No, definitely, it was Dennison. She must get even. Kill him? She knew she couldn't actually kill him, though, at that.

How could she, a poor, friendless little thing, get even with anyone. She didn't have any influence of any sort. She had lived so entirely for Dennison, these two years, that she hadn't kept up with her acquaintances from the store, even. The only people she ever talked to were the neighbors. They couldn't do anything to help her. She felt helpless, trapped. She must do something.

She thought of killing herself. She couldn't quite do that, wasn't brave enough. Why should she die, anyhow? She was too young to die, not twenty-three, yet. No, she wanted to live—she wanted to live and get even—to kill Dennison.

Dennison was gone—never to come back. The rent for the apartment would have to be paid in a few days. She couldn't even keep on living there. She had a little money, though—. What could she do?

She got up, went to the door, found the newspaper there, brought it in, sat on the edge of the bed reading it.

She glanced at the usual headlines; politics, world affairs. They didn't interest her. She turned to the inside pages, listlessly. What did anything matter to her?

Little scandals, divorces, deaths. She read them all, all seeing. What was this? She read a small item:

Woman Takes Gas

Miss Grace Trummer, about twenty-five years old, a pretty little blonde seamstress, committed suicide at a rooming house in — Street, last night, by inhaling gas. Miss Trummer left no reason for the deed, and, as far as is known, she had no relatives—

Irene dropped the paper on the bed. There, that was a way out—gas. She could do that—could end things that

way. What if she did? That wouldn't hurt Dennison. He'd be glad she was out of the way, really. If she could be found dead! If Dennison could be blamed! That would be something. He would be electrocuted for her murder! Of course! That would be clever!

In her mind, now, she went over the whole thing—how she could kill herself—and leave little evidences about, so that it would look as if *Dennison had killed her*. She'd have to be careful, of course. Why, of course. She would have to make it look as if *Dennison had planned to make it look like suicide or burglary!* Burglary would be best. Dennison would die! She laughed almost wildly over that. She dressed and laughed all the while. She felt sort of funny. Was she mad? She didn't think she was. Of course not. Yes, that's the way she'd do things.

But—then she would be dead. She didn't want to be dead. She wouldn't know about Dennison. She had to know. No, that wouldn't do either. She wanted to live. She was too young to die. She must get even with Dennison!

That woman who had died—a blonde woman, too, nearly her age. She wondered about her.

Then *the thought* came to Irene. It came to her, suddenly. It enveloped her, left her weak, dizzy. Could she get that body? If that body could be found—here—instead of hers!

The woman had no relatives—surely that would be easy enough. She would try. That was it. She could do her best. It was the only way—a way to get even. . . .

Her heart started to sing in a wild way, a way it hadn't sung for a year—more than that. If she could—if she could fix things so that it would look as if Dennison. . . .

She thought it over. If things went right! If not . . . well, she'd have to take some chances, anyhow.

A ring at the door-bell. She trembled. The mail man. She went downstairs, a plan already formulated in her mind. She met Mrs. Peterson in the hall, started right in on the plan—talked with her . . . the vacation . . . a holiday with Dennison.

She telephoned to Schmidt to bring her trunk up. He brought it and the bags up almost immediately. She talked with him eagerly, nervously.

Another ring at the bell. It was the man for Dennison's trunk. She trembled as the man took it out. Mrs. Peterson, again. Dennison's trunk gone.

She finished dressing, went out, the clipping about the woman suicide in her purse.

Mrs. Peterson's door was still open. That prying little woman. She'd keep on talking—prepare her—in case things went all right.

VI

SHE hurried out of the apartment building, took a subway train, went to the address mentioned in the news story. It was a cheap rooming house. She hurried up the stone stairs, remembering to sniffle a bit.

A weary looking woman with red eyes answered the door.

Irene's voice trembled. She really was nervous.

"I—I read in the paper just now—" she began.

"Yes?" the woman looked at her, suspiciously.

"My sister—her name—she disappeared from home. I just happened to be here, visiting in New York—she could sew—she was blonde—like me. . . ."

The woman's expression changed.

"Your sister?" she asked sadly, but with a certain eager curiosity.

"Yes—I—I think so," said Irene. "Is—she—the body—here?"

"No," said the woman. "They came last night—took her right down to the morgue. You can see her down there."

Irene hesitated. Her mind leaped on.

"I—I—we want to take the body home—if it is my sister," said Irene. Then,

"Do you know what I could do—how to get it?" She started to cry.

"It's too bad," said the woman. "I'm Mrs. Figg. She's rented a room of me for over six months, now. Never talked much of herself. And yesterday morning—come in, dearie. . . ."

Irene went in, saw the cheap little room of the other woman, listened to stories of her. No one cared for her. It seemed the woman was herself, in a way. That didn't matter. She wanted—the body.

"I'll go, now—to the morgue," she said.

"I'll go with you, if you like, dearie," Mrs. Figg volunteered. Irene shivered a little more at that. Then she nodded. After all, she didn't know how to get a body at the morgue. With this woman, who believed her story. . . .

She sat, quiet, while the woman dressed. They took a cross-town car. The morgue. . . .

It was a big, gloomy building, smelling of disinfectants, clean, solemn.

They went into a bare room, with wooden chairs about. A man asked questions. Irene sobbed. Mrs. Figg answered. The woman had died—no post-mortem had been necessary. Irene suddenly remembered those. What if there had been. How would she have got out of this?

Yes, they could see the body. If Irene could identify it there would be no objection to her taking it away. She must get an undertaker, of course—she could sign, authorizing him—he could take it to his shop, embalm the body—have it shipped to her home out of town. . . .

Irene didn't want an undertaker or embalming. All she wanted was that body, untouched, in her apartment, without a coffin, without anything—that body. She must get it. What could she do? She must get it. Her mind raced on.

Well, she'd do her best. A new cunning seemed to come to her. If things would only go on. . . .

The man led the way down a row of narrow stairs into a big room, with walls of white tile, clean, like a kitchen. There were huge drawers in the walls—drawers that pulled out. . . .

"Here," said the man, and pulled out a drawer, a long drawer with a woman on it—a dead woman. Was that the woman? She looked, covered her eyes. A dead woman—a woman she had never seen before—a blonde woman with a sad, thin face—not like hers—and yet—in a way—if there was enough time before the body was found. . . .

She glanced at Mrs. Figg through her fingers. She had to be sure that this was the woman—that they were not testing her.

Mrs. Figg nodded.

"The poor, poor thing," she said.

"Yes," said Irene, "that—that's my sister—two years older than I am—and she'd dead—all alone. . . ." she sobbed. They were real tears, now. She was thoroughly frightened.

The man turned away. He was accustomed to scenes.

They went up the narrow stairs. Another man filled out a blank slip,

gave it to Irene, told her the details about getting an undertaker.

She and Mrs. Figg walked out of the morgue. Another step was finished. She couldn't fail, now! What should she do?

Irene was sobbing again.

"I wonder," she said, "if—if I dare ask you another favor. Could I bring her—the body—to you? Could she be embalmed there? I could go out and buy her a new dress—so—that, when we got her home . . . I'll get something right away. I can't bear to think of her in an undertaking shop. She wouldn't be in your house very long. I'll have my trunk sent there, too, with some things in it. I live in the country—I've been here a week—I'll go right home with—her. To think that Grace. . . ."

"That's all right, dearie, don't carry on," said Mrs. Figg. "Of course, if it would make you feel any better—have it sent right out. . . ."

They stopped at an undertakers, near the morgue. The undertaker, it seemed, preferred embalming the body right there—get it ready for shipment. But, of course, if the lady—

Irene bought a coffin, paid in advance for that and the embalming—asked the undertaker to send the body at once and come later in the afternoon for the embalming, when she'd have the clothes there. He promised. Yes, that would be all right—the body had been on ice in the morgue.

Irene left Mrs. Figg. She wanted to get the dress and to have her trunk sent, she said. She thanked that good lady again and again—in a little while she'd be back.

VII

ANOTHER subway ride. In her own apartment, Irene threw a couple of

blankets into the big trunk, moved it into the hall, so that the expressman could get it if she were not there, spoke to Mrs. Peterson again. That woman! Still, if she were careful, it might work out all right.

Irene went to a corner express office and gave an order for the trunk to be called for at once and delivered to Mrs. Figg's.

The subway again. A block from Mrs. Figg's, she passed another undertaker's establishment, and this gave her a new inspiration. She went in. She told the man a story that he accepted, though she was quite afraid he wouldn't. She had bought a coffin for her sister, she said. The body was to arrive there—just a block away—quite soon. Now, her brother had bought a better coffin. Would the undertaker buy the one—give her something for it. She told him what she had paid. He offered five dollars. She agreed, told him to call later—she would step in and let him know. It was taking a big chance. She had to get rid of the coffin if she could—had to keep Mrs. Figg from getting suspicious. Well, she was trusting to luck, anyhow—one thing more or less.

At Mrs. Figg's, again. Neither the body nor the trunk had come. Irene sat there in that poor room, her handkerchief over her eyes. The trunk came first. It was put into the room. She paid the express man, didn't open the trunk. The body came a little later, in the poor, cheap coffin. The man opened the coffin. She asked him to. She was afraid she wouldn't know how. She said she wanted another look at her sister.

Mrs. Figg came into the room, went out again. Irene closed the door, locked it—she wanted to be alone with—with the dead.

She opened the trunk, worked hur-

riedly. Nervously, tears streaming down her face, her teeth clenched, she managed, somehow, to get the stiff body out of the coffin and into the trunk. She locked the trunk again, closed the coffin. That was done. She sunk exhausted, ill, on a chair. She couldn't stop, now. What next?

She left the house. She hailed a passing express wagon. She had a trunk to go away. Could the driver take it at once? He thought he could.

Mrs. Figg was not in sight. That saved some explaining. She watched the man as he moved the trunk out of the house onto the wagon. She gave him the address of her apartment, stood looking at him until he drove off.

Irene stopped at the undertaker's again, the one on the corner. She told him to get the coffin now, at once. Yes, she would come back for the money, later. She couldn't, of course—but that. . . .

She went into a drug-store, opposite, called up Mrs. Figg. She had got the telephone number from the telephone in the hall.

"I'm—I'm sending for—for the body, after all," she explained. "The man is on the way. I—I couldn't stand to have things done there, after all. I'll write a note. Thank you. . . ."

She hung up the receiver dizzily. That was done. If the undertaker could only get the empty coffin out without Mrs. Figg suspecting—connecting things. . . . Mrs. Figg might wonder. Even so—she'd never do anything, if the coffin was taken away. Well, there was nothing she could do about it.

She took a taxicab, this time. She was too weak for the subway. She sat there, on the edge of the seat, her fingers clenched.

She stopped the taxi on the corner,

got out. She had left her watch at home. She wondered about the time. The wagon would be slow—he had two other trunks to deliver, she knew. She must do something to kill time—until the trunk came—until dark, even.

What could she do? Why, she'd bake a pie. Of course. She stopped in at the grocer's. She saw some blueberries, bought some of them. A blueberry pie—Dennison's favorite pie. Why not? It would look so domestic.

With the bundles in her arm, she came into the apartment building. She met Mrs. Grant and talked with her. She thought of the watch—put that in. That was a good bit!

She put on her housedress and an apron. She got to work with the pie. It was comforting, working in the dough. The pie was finished—in the oven—when the trunk—the body—came. When it was safely in the apartment she sat down, trembling.

It had worked out! She had the body! Here—now! If only things kept on. . . .

Mrs. Peterson in the hall! She showed her the pie—promised her a piece, later. What a fool!

Schmidt, the janitor, passed. She talked to him, too.

She was alone in the apartment—with the trunk. Irene was afraid of corpses. She had never touched one except a few minutes ago. She opened the trunk. She had to stop, start again. She was quite ill. But, before she was through, the strange woman had clipped blonde hair, instead of her former long tresses, and was dressed in Irene's own clothes. That was done!

She shivered. Was she going to be caught? She prayed to her God, a God she had rather neglected during the past years. Her prayers

were sincere enough. Why couldn't she get away with it? Dennison—Dennison would get what was coming to him—if things went right.

That was over. She could get ready, now. Irene started to change her clothes. She looked at her fingers and her apron, stained with blueberries. Yes—it had to be done. She dressed the corpse in her own house-dress, her own berry-stained apron. Then, her fingers wet with berry juice, she stained the fingers of the dead woman. Now, she covered the face, knotted a towel around the throat, thrust the body into the closet of her bedroom. She heard a noise in the hall. She sat in a chair, shuddered, for half an hour before she dared move or wash her hands. She washed them thoroughly, then. She was afraid you caught things from dead people.

Irene cooled herself under a shower, made rather a careful toilet. It was after five o'clock. There was something else to do, now.

She heard someone in the hall. She hoped it was someone she knew—but not too well. It was a man's step—a man coming home.

She threw a chair against a wall, pushed a table, kicked another chair, said, "Oh, God, Stuart," threw another chair.

That was done.

She adjusted the window, packed her bag—not forgetting a little bundle of things she would destroy, later. She took her jewelry. She put her wrist watch on the dressing-table, to one side, so it wouldn't be too noticeable. She hated to lose it. Still, with her other things. She had been economical. She could sell her jewelry later. She could get a job, maybe meet some young man, marry, even. Why not? Women did worse things than she did and got married.

Worse? Well, she hadn't been so bad—so really bad—if things would work out. . . .

She turned the dressing-table drawers out, disarranged the other things.

She sat at the window behind the white curtain, watched the traffic. She couldn't be seen, she knew. She couldn't light a light. She was hungry. She couldn't go out for fear of meeting someone, until dark. She hated the apartment—memories—the closet. . . .

She tiptoed around. Yes—everything was right. She repacked her bag to make sure. She could take only a few things so it would look as if all of her things were there. No one knew just what she had. The bit of paper in the corner of it—the woman's hair—her clothes—she touched it gingerly. She could get rid of that easily enough.

Yes—the signs of disorder—the window. The police wouldn't think it was a burglar—they were just clever enough for that—yet, she hoped, not too clever. . . .

She felt around, felt the familiar things. She could see a little from the street lamp, outside—. It was nearly time to go. Dennison—would things come out the way she had planned? The apartment! The closet! Did she dare? Dare? She had to, now. There was nothing else to do. She started in to sob, kneeling at the side of her bed.

"Oh, Stuart," she sobbed, "come back to me, come back to me. Oh God. . . ."

She could leave, now. She could get a ticket, go on to Chicago. That would be best. She didn't know anyone in Chicago. It was surprising how few people she knew any place. In Chicago, she'd go to the Y. W. C. A., take a new name, find

a position, even let her hair grow, maybe.

A new name? Any name. She'd think one up. Only she mustn't change her initials. That would be bad luck, unless she got married. Any name but Irene Graham. . . .

She pinned on her hat. She could go, now. She was hungry. She went into the kitchen. Where, in the dim light, she saw the pie she had made. Why not take a piece? She didn't care much for blueberry pie. She wondered, now, why she had bothered—how she had had the nerve to make it. Why not eat a piece, as long as it was there. They might blame a neighbor—the police, anyone. She cut a piece of pie, ate it. It was good pie. Too good for what it was made for. To think of all the pies she had made during the two years, for Dennison. Stuart—she had loved him—really had. Well, he'd get what was coming to him. She'd

forget it all—these two years—Stuart Dennison—the apartment—the—inside the closet. . . .

She opened the front door, carefully. There was no one in sight. She closed the door after her, quietly, and, suitcase in hand, went out to catch her train.

VIII

THE newspaper dropped from Irma Martin's fingers. So—it was over. Really over. Dennison was dead. He had "paid for his crime with his life," as the newspapers had said.

Mrs. Martin shuddered. She must get over being so nervous. She knew that. She stood up, began to gather together the blue and white breakfast dishes. Funny! She laughed, a bit mirthlessly, to herself. Funny, that she had happened to eat that piece of blueberry pie.

