

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

INSPIRED BY THE CBS RADIO AND TELEVISION PROGRAM SERIES **SUSPENSE**

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In each issue, the magazine *Suspense* features one of the distinguished short plays which have made broadcasting history as part of the CBS radio-television program series *Suspense*. *Maiden Beware*, published below, was originally performed over the CBS network in July, 1944, under the title *The Black Shawl*, starring Dame May Whitty and Maureen O'Sullivan.

Numbering its audience in the millions, the CBS *Suspense* series has brought to perfection a new type of high-tension presentation, in harmony with modern tastes, and featuring advanced concepts of entertainment. It ranks today as one of the finest dramatic programs on the air.

Maiden Beware

RICHARD LEWIS

THE scene is a county fair in North England, toward evening. Gay, noisy crowds throng the exhibits, jostling each other good-naturedly. Susan, young and bright-eyed, stands back to the flower booth, whistling *Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes*. A group of acquaintances strolls by.

GIRL: Susan! Not waiting for Rob again, are you?

SUSAN: When have you seen me that I haven't been?

GIRL: And him the solicitor for the watch factory. They ought to teach him to tell time. (*All laugh*)

MAN: How about a dance, Sue?

SUSAN: Thanks, George, but I'd rather wait. He'll be along. (*They move off, laughing. Susan resumes whistling. An old woman in black,*

who has been covertly watching the girl suddenly speaks.)

MRS. M: Hello, there.

SUSAN: (*Stops whistling abruptly*) Oh, hello. Do I know you?

MRS. M: No. But I've been watching you, and I wondered whom you were waiting for.

SUSAN: Just a friend.

MRS. M: I see. I don't wish to seem inquisitive, please don't misunderstand. It's only that your face struck me as being unusually bright and alive—as well as uncommonly pretty. You see, I have an eye for faces. My son was a sculptor. He worked almost entirely with heads, and my job was choosing them. It's all very foolish, I'll admit, more so since he . . . departed some time ago.

SUSAN: (*Sympathetically*) Oh, I'm sorry.

MRS. M: But that isn't precisely why I was watching you. You see, it wasn't as a model I was thinking of you. (*Quickly*) I know nothing about you, no more than you do of me, but . . . by the way, what is your name?

SUSAN: Susan Appleby.

MRS. M: Mine is Elizabeth Masters. I live just the other side of town. Let me come to the point, Susan. I admire your looks, and I like the way you act and speak. I'm not a young woman, and I'm lonely. (*Sad*) I have been ever since I lost my son. I need a companion, someone who can stay with me and help me, too. And you resemble closely my very first companion, my best remembered one.

SUSAN: But . . .

MRS. M: I'll pay you well, thirty pounds a month. (*Laughs*) Your chief occupation will be to brew me some tea and talk to me. Are you interested?

SUSAN: That's funny! I've been seeking just that sort of position. But . . .

MRS. M: Splendid! You need look no longer.

SUSAN: But you know nothing about me!

MRS. M: I know that I like you, and I want you to accept my offer. I will return here at this same time tomorrow. If you want the position, please be here . . . and believe me, I hope you are here. Good night, Susan.

SUSAN: (*Still startled*) Good night.

(*Whistles Drink to Me Only. . .*)

ROB: (*Coming up behind her, he joins in whistling. They both stop*) What does she mean, please be here? I thought you were expecting me? What do you think you're doing, making dates with strange women? And—she really looks strange!

SUSAN: Mrs. Masters? Oh, no. She's nice. And Rob, she offered me a position—as a companion, just what I wanted . . . and at thirty pounds a month, darling.

ROB: No small sum, that.

SUSAN: I'm thinking seriously of it, Rob. I'm going to take it.

ROB: What do you know about the old hen?

SUSAN: Why, nothing yet.

ROB: Did you look at the way she dressed, Sue? Black from shoes to shawl . . . why, you'd hardly know she had a face under that black shawl.

SUSAN: She seemed charming.

ROB: And well she might be. But I'm not so bad myself. And I want you for a companion, too. Let's push the wedding date ahead, darling. Make it any time you will.

SUSAN: We've gone through that so many times, and you know it can't be done. But, the way you're coming along, and thirty pounds a month additional. . . why, we'll have all we need in no time.

ROB: You're an awfully stubborn fellow, darling.

SUSAN: You know I'm right.

ROB: How many evenings off will she allow you?

SUSAN: We didn't get that far.

ROB: Where's her place, then?

SUSAN: Why . . . that's strange, isn't it? She left so quickly I never had a chance to ask. (*Pause*)

ROB: Call it off, Sue.

SUSAN: Why, Rob?

ROB: I don't like it. You nothing about her. Not even where she lives.

SUSAN: I told you, I hardly spoke to her. Tomorrow I'll know everything.

ROB: (*Reluctantly*) All right, my darling, you win . . . but let me hear from you as soon as you're set. (*He kisses her*)

SUSAN: Of course. Everything will be fine, dear.

The following night, Susan waits as instructed. Mrs. Masters picks the girl up in her car. The trip is short, not over two miles from town, but with so many twistings and turnings that Susan is completely confused. Finally the car stops before an old, dark house surrounded by dank hedge. Susan, nervous, is reassured when she sees her cheerful, comfortable room. She freshens up and goes downstairs.

MRS. M: I'm in the parlor, over here, Miss Appleby. Won't you join me in a cup of tea?

SUSAN: Thank you, Mrs. Masters. I love my room.

MRS. M: Good. Sit down over there, opposite me, won't you?

SUSAN: I certainly will. The fire's as inviting as the tea.

MRS. M: Keep one burning whenever I'm home. I get cold so easily—that's why I always wear this shawl about me. (*Pouring tea*) Now, Susan, tell me about yourself . . . everything, all you've done, all you

see in the future for yourself.

SUSAN: There's little to tell. I've always lived here in town, and expect I always shall.

MRS. M: After you're married, you mean. I presume you've a young man.

SUSAN: Oh, yes.

MRS. M: (*Reminiscent*) It is the only thing that matters, isn't it, having someone to care for? I know. Before my son left me, I desired nothing. The scope of his talent was the world we lived in—and very beautiful. I suppose love is like talent in that respect. It, too, creates a smaller world within the large one we inhabit.

SUSAN: (*Interested*) Talent? What kind?

MRS. M: Everyone saw in his work the promise of a truly great sculptor. The promise never bore fruit . . . because he hadn't enough time. I lost him far too early. . . .

SUSAN: How old was he?

MRS. M: (*With great emotion*) I lost him before his thirtieth birthday.

SUSAN: That's so terrible . . . such a waste. . . .

MRS. M: That's it! You realize it, too, the waste. Genius cast away . . . killed before it reached full expression. That no one can forget . . .

(*Almost sobbing*)

SUSAN: Please, Mrs. Masters, we have no control over such matters. They're God's will.

MRS. M: Of course. Thank you. You're very sweet. I wish you more success in the world of your love. Remember my son . . . life can be

so short. Enjoy it while you may!

Susan goes to her room, sleeps well, rises later than she intended. She dresses quickly and runs downstairs. She finds a note on the kitchen table telling her that Mrs. Masters has gone shopping. Susan makes herself breakfast, then looks around for a telephone in order to call Rob. She can find none. She decides to go out for a bit of fresh air. She tries the front door. It is locked—from the outside. Surprised, she returns to the kitchen, notices for the first time that all the windows are barred. She rushes to the back door, puts her hand on the knob . . . But at that moment the heavy lock turns and the door opens inward.

SUSAN: Oh!

MRS. M: (*Calm, cold*) Susan . . . Good morning. Did you have a good night's rest?

SUSAN: (*Upset*) Well, yes, thank you.

MRS. M: Fine . . . But you're trembling! Is there a chill in the house? You really should stay away from the doors.

SUSAN: Why? I wanted a breath of air. The front door is locked. . .

MRS. M: Is it? I must have done it automatically. I've lived alone so long. . . It's only natural for a lone person to lock all doors when they go out.

SUSAN: (*Still upset*) Why are the windows barred?

MRS. M: Oh, that! It goes back to the time my son did his work here. We had so much of it lying carelessly around the house—so much of value. Anyone might have easily

climbed through the windows.

SUSAN: Of course! How silly of me. For a moment, though, I felt like a prisoner behind bars. (*Laughs*)

MRS. M: (*Laughs also, coldly*) Now you're smiling again. That's fine. My son always liked to see a smile on a woman's face. Without one, he always said, they reminded him of death. (*Pause*) Yes. (*Pause*)

In her room later, Susan writes a letter to Rob.

SUSAN: (*Reading aloud*) Please come to see me, right now, Rob, if you can. Everything's all right, don't worry about me, but come to me. It's unbelievable, but I must tell you I still don't know the address here and I can't tell you how to find the place. But someone must know Mrs. Masters and can tell you where she lives. I want to send this off to you now, so I'll close. I can't tell you, darling, how great is my need to see you, and my love for you. . .

She seals letter, descends stairs and finds Mrs. Masters in the kitchen.

MRS. M: (*Surprised*) Why, yes, Susan, what is it?

SUSAN: Where do you send outgoing mail?

MRS. M: Oh, just let me have whatever you want mailed and I'll drop it in the box when I go shopping tomorrow.

SUSAN: Well, I don't want to bother you. I'll take it down myself.

MRS. M: No bother at all. There's no place around here to mail a letter, but I pass the box nearly every day.

SUSAN: But, I'd rather. . .

MRS. M: It's settled. . . let me have

it. It will be sent early tomorrow.

SUSAN: Of course, here you are.

MRS. M: Good. And, Susan, I dropped my shawl—would you mind?

SUSAN: Not at all.

MRS. M: Exquisite, isn't it? Will you join me in a cup of tea?

SUSAN: No, thank you. (*Embarrassed*) Mrs. Masters, this morning I said I was silly for feeling like a prisoner here. But the feeling persists.

MRS. M: Why, what have I done, child, to create that impression?

SUSAN: I'm not trying to answer that question—it's something I just feel. The question I'd really like answered is, what do you want with me? (*Sound of crash is heard coming from upstairs*)

MRS. M: (*Jumping up so hastily that she overturns tea things*) Wait here. I'll be back shortly. Wait right here, understand? (*Goes off*)

SUSAN: (*Running after her*) No I won't stay here. I'm frightened. If you're going upstairs, I'm going with you. (*Mrs. Masters is already out of sight. Susan climbs to the top of stairs, stops, hears the old lady's voice*)

MRS. M: (*Behind closed door*) No, don't worry about the bust, dear. It hasn't been broken. (*Sound of man whimpering*) There, there, don't cry, dear. . .

SUSAN: (*Screams. Flings open door*) Who. . .that man!

MRS. M: (*Furious*) Susan! I told you to stay downstairs. (*Suddenly calm*) Oh, what's the difference? You had to know sooner or later.

Miss Appleby, this is John Masters, my son.

JOHN: (*Gibbers and grunts*)

That evening, there are three at dinner. Susan cannot bear to look at John's twisted face, his dull, glazed eyes. He whimpers, grunts, is unable to speak a single intelligible word. And watching Mrs. Masters, with her black shawl draped around her, Susan begins to feel that the old woman is as mad as her son. By now she is keenly aware of her danger.

Later the same night, in her own room, she silently packs her bag. She waits till shortly after midnight, then opens her door and looks out. All is dark. She starts down the stairs, tiptoes toward the front door.

MRS. M: Susan? (*Switches on light*)

SUSAN: (*Suppresses scream*) Oh!

MRS. M: (*Evenly*) Susan, where do you think you're going? You couldn't possibly find your way about, once outside the house. You'd get hopelessly lost. (*To John, who has just appeared beside her*) Wouldn't she, son? (*He grunts*)

SUSAN: (*Crying*) Stop it!

MRS. M: All right. John, leave us now. John, did you hear me? (*He grunts, shuffles off*)

SUSAN: (*Frightened*) Mrs. Masters, you've no right to keep me here if I don't wish to stay. When I accepted the position, I was of the opinion that you lived alone. Since the conditions are different, I wish now to leave.

MRS. M: (*Pleading*) I don't blame you. Please, Susan . . . believe me, I don't blame you a bit. But think of

me, just for a single moment. Why do you think I asked you here? Do you believe it's so easy for me, chained to this lost thing, unable to converse with anyone day or night? I needed someone . . . I need someone now. . . .

SUSAN: You told me he was dead.

MRS. M: I never told you that—only that he'd left me—and he has.

SUSAN: (*Cries out*) No, I won't stay! I'd go mad too if I did.

MRS. M: (*Resigned*) All right, my dear, don't upset yourself. We won't argue. But stay at least until tomorrow. You could never find your way tonight, and besides, if you stay over it will give me a chance to find someone else in town—

SUSAN: I'd rather go now, if you don't mind.

MRS. M: (*Pleading again*) Tomorrow night. Just until then. You may leave after dinner tomorrow. I'll pay you two weeks' wages if you stay until then . . . please . . . you can't refuse me . . .

SUSAN: Well—

MRS. M: Oh, thank you, thank you, dear Susan.

Almost instantly, Susan regrets having agreed to stay. She sleeps badly that night. She is convinced that she hears odd sounds coming from the next room: low chuckles, whispered, voiceless mutterings. But the next day passes uneventfully. When Mrs. Masters returns from the town she tells Susan that a successor has been hired and will arrive the morning after. She spends the late afternoon preparing dinner, informing Susan that she will be free to leave right

after it. The old woman takes great pains with the meal, as if preparing a holiday feast. She is an exceedingly gracious hostess all through dinner.

MRS. M: Dear Susan . . . we drink to you . . . my dear, dear Susan . . . to your future . . . to your man . . . (*Laughs*) to your future with your man.

SUSAN: (*Laughs also*) Thank you.

MRS. M: And may you remember this evening all the rest of your days. All the rest—(*Meaningly*)—of your days.

SUSAN: You're very kind.

MRS. M: Not at all, my dear. Let me pour you some more wine. And some for you, John.

SUSAN: Thank you. I'm sorry that I must hurt you by leaving this way. Anything unpleasant I've said I apologize for now. Always, when I think of you, I'll remember this pleasant evening.

MRS. M: (*Colder*) I'm certain of it. And, so that you may remember the better, my dear, let me imprint the occasion still more clearly on your mind. Do you know what it is we celebrate?

SUSAN: (*Puzzled*) I expected it was my leaving.

MRS. M: And so it is. But did it seem likely that you alone would cause so much excitement in my home?

SUSAN: It has been somewhat surprising, I must admit.

MRS. M: No doubt. (*Tensely*) Miss Appleby, this is the third anniversary of the most important event in the history of Masters Hall. We honor you by having you participate.

SUSAN: I'm truly flattered.

MRS. M: I just ask you to listen (*In low, hoarse voice*) Three years ago my son was a genius. Today . . . (*Pause*) he is merely my son. Do you know why? Three years ago the door was slammed on us, locking us apart from the world . . . three years ago tonight. It was slammed by my first companion, a sweet girl like yourself. You see, my son loved her! (*Voice high-pitched, now*) I warned him. I told him. I swore that no woman would put up with his temperament, his moods. He wouldn't listen. He loved her madly. . . (*Laughs hoarsely*) madly. . . the perfect word for it. And for that she slammed the door on him. Slammed it in his face. That very night he lost the power of his mind.

SUSAN: (*Frightened*) I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. But—

MRS. M: Don't think we've forgotten the occasion, eh, John? (*Grunts of assent*) We've honored it ever since. Two years ago, this evening, on the first anniversary, Sally Thwaite left us. We told her the story . . . she was overwhelmed . . . she couldn't bear to stay. Last year it was another sweet, young companion of mine . . . Katherine . . . Kitty, we called her. She wanted to leave too . . . how could we refuse? And now tonight, Susan Appleby. Tonight you too are leaving us.

SUSAN: (*Fearfully*) Please . . . will you excuse me?

MRS. M: Where are you going, Susan?

SUSAN: To the kitchen . . .

Susan hurries into the kitchen, tries the door. Locked. She believes she is about to be assaulted, murdered, but she cannot know for sure. She thinks of the way the two laugh, especially the old woman fingering her worn, black, ugly shawl. As Susan tries desperately to hit on some plan of escape, Mrs. Masters comes into the kitchen.

MRS. M: Susan, there's one thing more . . . this shawl. So beautiful, so exquisitely wrought; have you noticed it? This shawl belonged to her, that first girl. A gift from my son. (*John appears behind Mrs. Masters*) When she left, it slipped from her shoulders, and I've worn it all the time ever since . . . It's all that remains of that lovely creature. (*Close to Susan*) I should like you to wear it, if only for a moment. (*Grunts of assent from John*) You're so much like her, my dear . . . and the memory of her is John's greatest comfort . . .

SUSAN: (*Screaming*) Don't touch me!

MRS. M: Just around the shoulders? John will like you better that way. He'll give you one little kiss, thinking of *her*. Then he'll play with your hair, as he did with hers. He'll take you upstairs—what's that? Did you hear that? (*Tinkle of front door bell*) Our door! Who would be coming here now? (*Fiercely*) Watch her, John. I'll only be a moment. If she shouts, just choke her . . .

Mrs. Masters, in her shawl, rushes out to the front door, opens it.

MRS. M: Yes. What do you want?

ROB: Pardon me, ma'am. I'm look-

ing for a Miss Susan Appleby.

MRS. M: You won't find her here. I'm sorry.

ROB: Are you certain of that? It seems to me I recognize that shawl. It was worn by the woman Miss Appleby described to me as having hired her.

MRS. M: This isn't the only black shawl in the world, nor am I the only woman who wears one.

ROB: I've been inquiring in town and all the shopkeepers recall you as the woman who *always* does. So I followed you here this morning. Then I returned to town—and now I'm back here again.

MRS. M: Well, isn't that nice! You can turn right around and go back, young man. If you must know, Miss Susan *was* here, but proved so unsatisfactory I sent her packing. You'll probably find her at home right now.

Susan, in the kitchen, has been overhearing all this. Afraid to cry out or move because of John, she starts to whistle, shakily at first, then more clearly. Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes.

ROB: (*Talking over the whistle*) Well—all right, if she's gone home I'll see her there. Sorry for your trouble (*Leaves*)

John, puzzled by the whistling, has done nothing to stop it. Mrs. Masters slams the front door, runs to the kitchen.

MRS. M: What was that whistling? I thought I told you to be still.

SUSAN: I was nervous. It's a habit of mine.

MRS. M: A bad habit, if you ask me. (*Moves closer*)

SUSAN: Stay away!

MRS. M: Here, now . . . the shawl's around you, see? Draw it tighter, John . . . Tighter!

SUSAN: No! No! (*Tries to scream, but shawl strangles her*)

Suddenly the back door is smashed in.

ROB: You heard her. Arrest her. Watch it—get him, Adams!

MRS. M: Draw, John. Quickly! (*Shot is fired, but by Adams, not John.*) You've killed him. (*Sobbing*) You've killed him . . .

SUSAN: Oh, Rob. You heard me, then?

ROB: Of course . . . You see, this morning I paid a call on our local constabulary and persuaded Adams here to join me.

ADAMS: I was interested, ma'am, because there'd been two disappearances in as many years . . . just about this time . . . and this sounded like a third.

ROB: Darling, I've missed you. I—after her, Adams. Don't let her get out!

They pursue Mrs. Masters, but the old woman escapes the kitchen and locks herself in the parlor. They break down the massive door.

SUSAN: (*Gasps*) Oh, Rob!

ROB: The chandelier . . . Let's cut her down!

ADAMS: Too late. Her neck's gone.

SUSAN: (*Sobs*) Rob . . . Rob . . . she's hanging by the shawl. The old shawl.