

DEATH CANNOT WITHER

Author's note: I should like to take this opportunity to thank A. J. Budrys for the work he did on this story. The revision and condensation he did on my own rambling earlier draft was so extensive that the story should properly carry a joint byline.

J. M.

EDNA COLBY awoke an hour after dawn, and after no more than three hours fitful sleep. In peignoir and mules she groped to the window, and looked out at her Dutchess County farm—hers and Jack's, she reminded herself dutifully—at orchard and field touched by a winter morning's first light. Just barely winter by the calendar, but winter . . . and Jack's bed beside her own, was still as smooth, as empty, as when she'd made it up the day before.

Separated by an authentic hand-tied rag rug and an Early American maple night-table, the two beds were gray in the light. She stared out the window at the apple trees, at the twisted barren-bare trunks, and whispered, "Like my own heart." She repeated the phrase, tasting each syllable, listening to the sound of a woman bereft. Then she went downstairs, a pink ribbon adding a wistful note to her handsomely cut hair.

She stood before the gleaming stove in the kitchen, making coffee, her eyes unseeing on the golden knotty-pine panelling of the walls. She was thinking over how to phrase her excuses to the farm help when they came to get Jack's instructions for the day. The coffee boiled over before she could decide on the proper wording. She pinched her lips and wiped the stove.

"He might at least have called," she whispered sharply. "The other times, he's at least tried to cover up." She realized suddenly that each of those only suspected other times had this morning become a certainty too long ignored. "I'm losing him," she thought with great intensity; then, in jealous anger: "I've lost him!" And then, finally, in purest rage, she cried out: "No!"

The kitchen door slammed loudly. "Coffee!" Jack's hearty voice cried out on a wave of cold sharp air. "Baby, that smells good!"

Before she could react, Jack had crossed the room, embraced her warmly from one side—avoiding the coffee pot in her other hand—and murmured fondly: "Happy anniversary, sweetheart!"

It was, indeed, eight years to the day since the cocktail party at which Edna Arkwright, Assistant Buyer in Ladies' Wear, had met Jack Colby, who was something-or-other on Madison Avenue. She at the age of thirty-five, chic if not specially pretty, trim-figured with the aid of a remarkable new bra, and he of roughly the same age (actually a trifle younger), amiable, friendly, personable in a downy sort of way, and pretty much at loose ends.

Pretty much at loose ends, and perfectly willing to have someone gather them up for him, if that someone showed the slightest tact in the gathering. He seemed to be completely unaware of what perfect raw material he was; content to drift, to meander pleasantly along—in short, to waste himself instead of assuming a settled, solid role in life of the sort for which his background obviously fitted him.

He had left his father's apple-country-squiredom at the usual time of youth to become an officer in either the Army or the Air Force—perhaps they had been one and the same thing at the time; Edna could not get it quite straight—and, after the war, had simply accepted a position in a distant relative's firm.

That was the thing—the thing about him that both attracted and angered Edna Arkwright, with her sense of greater things to be done with one's life, with her code of aspirations that had kept her firmly undistracted, steadfast in pursuit of her destiny. She conveyed to Jack, gradually but unflaggingly, that there was more in him than could ever be realized by a life of effortless progressions toward old age. What was he doing with his life, with himself? To this, of course, Jack had no ready answer.

It was plain to Edna that Jack Colby was not truly at home in the city; however much he might think he liked it, he was growing soft underneath and certainly drinking more than he should. In her complete sincerity of purpose, she saw in his eyes a hint of something that was, if not lost, then misplaced; she taught him to understand that she, of all people, could best remind him where he'd left it.

They were married five months and a few days after the cocktail party and, Jack's father having died and left him everything, went straight home to the ancestral manse in Dutchess County. There they lived comfortably and suitably, once Edna had wiped out the frowsty traces of Mr. Colby, Senior's, last years of bachelor living. There was, of course, a great deal of continuing work for Edna to do, a gradual transformation of both the house and the remainder of the property into a condition appropriate to genteel country living, as distinct from the functional but often starkly unpainted working farm she had found. For Jack, as a sort of gradually diminishing concession to his old habits, there were infrequent trips into the city to tend to the Colby investments and the business requirements of modern fructiculture. Except that, though all of Edna's other concerns prospered as if to prove the rightness of her planning, Jack's trips into town did not diminish as they ought to have. Despite her best efforts, some elusively stubborn streak in him would not relinquish its old ways, even after the passage of eight years.

And now, still circled by his mackinaw-sleeved arm, her neck prickled by the short brown beard he had at her behest grown since their marriage, she realized she had completely forgotten what day it was. Eight years—not long enough, it seemed, and yet perhaps already too long—and Jack had been out since dawn, it developed, doing something special for the occasion, He wanted her to come out with him after breakfast. Something to show her. A surprise ...

But he didn't immediately say where he'd been till dawn. As if he hadn't even seen the necessity to make up a good story beforehand, and needed time to extemporize one now.

Over breakfast, he told her at last about the late poker game in the city, and losing track of time . . . deciding not to phone and wake her up . . . the slow milk train ... getting home late, knowing he'd have to be up early . . . napping downstairs on the living room couch so as not to bother her . . . up early, and out ...

She listened to him with careful gravity, then touched her lips to his forehead and went upstairs to dress.

She dressed in a cold fury, putting on walking shoes and a bright red jacket—it was hunting season—and realized only then that she had forgotten even to order anything special for today's dinner. Well, the woods were full of rabbits. She knew a delightful recipe for rabbit, and it would add something if they shot a couple for themselves.

It was inexcusable to have forgotten, she thought in a sort of additional annoyance; she had always managed things so perfectly. The restoring and remodeling of the old house; the garden club and prize flower growing; urging Jack to write little pieces for the Farm Journal; arranging for Jack to become an advisor on farming and animal husbandry for the local 4-H club; having the house eventually selected for photographing by a national magazine—these gradual shapings of a hundred details toward an enduring whole of gracious living, firmly rooted in all the most admirable attitudes and ideals.

But: the bottle in the toolshed, though they'd agreed with utmost reason that alcohol, for some people, was a disease.

But: the late homecomings, and the excuses, the glib and at first believable phone calls from the city . . . and now not even a phone call.

She hadn't allowed for this continuing goatishness in him. Could it be that her careful management of things was going to be overcome by the very person who was intended to crown them all? Was the intended ideal husband suddenly going to destroy the intended perfection of her life's work as the ideal wife?

Edna Colby saw herself on the brink of disaster, all because Jack, for all his excellent potential, simply did not realize what a difficult thing she was trying to do—how few women had the singleness of purpose successfully to take a man and mold him into everything he should be, and to provide the proper mode of life to set him off, like a perfect work of art in a perfect frame.

There had been a lingering scent of alien perfume in Jack Colby's beard. Edna Colby clenched her fists. "Oh, no," she whispered. "Oh, no, you're not going to lose me now, Jack Colby." And then she turned and brightly went downstairs to look at Jack's surprise.

She found him waiting for her in the yard, gunning the motor of the jeep, a look of arch anticipation on his face. Obviously, he thought he'd gotten away with it again. Obviously, he expected that even if she

were somehow suspicious, a little extra devotion on his part would smooth everything over.

She smiled, the perfect picture of the country matron, and got in beside him, sweeping her hands under the backs of her thighs to straighten her skirt. She pushed his hand away impatiently, her irritation breaking through long enough to snap: "Act your age, Jack!"

The little-boy playfulness flickered in his eyes, and for a moment she saw something else there.

"Really, Jack, didn't you get enough of that in the Air Corps?"

"It was the Army Air Force," Jack said, and put the jeep in gear. After a moment, he forced a rueful smile. By the time they were out of the neatly tended yard, in the center of the trim, freshly-painted outbuildings, she was a country gentlewoman again, and Jack was to all intents and outward purposes her devoted husband.

A two-mile jeep ride through the woods, and another half-mile's walking brought them in sight of a stand of fine young hemlocks. For three years, Jack had been promising her a hedge to shut off the pig-pens from the new sundeck view. Now he wanted only her approval of the trees before he started digging them out to transplant.

A pitchfork and spade, a pile of burlap, and a small hand-truck to take the young trees out to the road were already on the spot. Jack had his lunch—and a hidden pocket flask—along. He figured it would take him till midafternoon. Young Harold, the grown son of the farm foreman, already had instructions to get the trenches dug at the new location and come after Jack with the jeep when he was done.

The trees were perfect. Edna said as much with delight even while she smelled again that musky trace of foreign scent in his beard. Later, when he bent over to pick up the rabbits he'd shot for the anniversary stew, she saw a smudge of lipstick on his neck. She had worn none herself that morning. The spot was covered by his jacket collar when she looked for it again. She smiled when he turned to wave goodbye. Her smile, she thought idly as she drove the jeep homeward to cook the special dinner, had been exactly right. He could never have guessed she was lost in contemplation of ways to make him behave from now on.

At four that afternoon, Edna took a spicy-smelling deep-dish pie out of the oven, checked the setting of the small table in front of the fireplace, and started upstairs to bathe and dress. That was when Young Harold came to tell her he'd been looking in the woods for an hour or more, and found no sign of Mr. Colby—nor any trace of work done on the trees. He had brought back with him the spade and pitchfork, the stack of burlap, and—though he did not tell her that at the time—Mr. Colby's red hunting cap.

"He must have walked down into town for some reason," Edna said as casually as she could, remembering the pocket flask. "I guess he'll phone if . . . maybe you'd better go down to the village and look around. He might have tried to phone . . ."

Harold went out, and Edna went upstairs. By the time she was bathed and dressed, and Harold had returned again alone, she was furious. Jack had never done anything quite this gauche before.

A half hour later, she was getting worried. By six o'clock she was sick with fear, and at six-fifteen, she phoned for the police. By seven o'clock, in spite of heavily falling snow, the woods were swarming with volunteer firemen, state troopers, and as many of the older teenage boys as could get loose to join the hunt. Edna answered the troopers' questions with as much presence of mind as she could summon. She told them what he had worn, and that she had brought the gun back herself. Young Harold, she said, had brought back the other equipment. She had gone out with Mr. Colby about half past eight. It might have taken half an hour to reach the site . . . probably less. They had selected the trees to move, had shot two rabbits, and walked up to a ridge with a favorite view before she left. She wasn't sure just what time she got back home; it was before noon. Mr. Colby had expected Young Harold to show up by midafternoon. And that was all she could think of that might help. Perhaps Young Harold could add something.

They had already talked with him. At midnight, they gave up searching until dawn. Next day, descriptions went out on police wires through the state, and across the country. By the end of the second day, the obvious assumption was already accepted, though the search continued: one more unfortunate

hunting accident, with the body, somehow hastily disposed of.

There was talk of dragging the old quarry pool, but the township selectmen frowned, pointing out the considerable distance between the hemlock stand and the quarry. They nodded their heads toward the over-night snow thick on the ground, and said: "Likely it'll turn up, somewheres, come Spring thaw."

For Edna, on the week before Christmas, there was shock, and grief shading into sincere loneliness. But it was on the day before Christmas that she broke down, alone in the old house where she had planned the old-fashioned Christmas Eve dinner . . . the roast goose, the pudding, the log in the fireplace.

She fled to New York, to spend Christmas at a hotel. Right after New Year's she returned just long enough to engage a caretaking couple, and to promote Big Harold,

Mr. Vandervardt, Sr., to Farm Manager. Then she packed the few things from the old house she had to have—she could hardly bear to take even necessities with her—and went back to the city. It seemed to her that her own life was as good as finished. How could she ever hope to start, all over again, toward that at best difficult goal of complete happiness?

Still, she had to do something to keep occupied.

Ladies' Wear had no charms for her. She could still remember, quite clearly now that she had to think of it, the tearful interview with Selden's supervisor of personnel when she had, for the second time, been passed over when there had been an opening for a full-fledged Buyer.

"Look, Honey," the no-nonsense, severely tailored executive had said, impregnable behind her desk. "You're not going to stay with us forever."

"Oh, but I am, I am!" Edna had insisted.

"No, you're not. You're not the type. You got all your ideas of what you want out of life in the wrong places, for us. You think Paradise is going to have its floor plan reproduced in Better Homes and Gardens any day now. One of these days you're going to run across some poor defenseless guy whose main attraction is he can give you that kind of life. When that happens, you'll be phfft, out of here so fast you'll break the door down. We've got to promote the people who're going to stay with us."

The memory of that interview was sharp enough so that Edna's first thought of going back was her last.

She settled, finally, on a specialty florist's shop. Somehow, it seemed a logical compromise between her status as a business-woman and the all-too-brief years of her recent past.

Like everything else to which she applied her diligent concern, Edna's shop flourished. She purchased the brownstone building in which it stood, and, allowing for business expansion to the second floor, began remodeling the upper stories as a town house. After the farm, she found a hotel apartment confining.

In the little spare time that remained, she betook herself dutifully, on the advice of friends and doctors, to parties and concerts and dinner engagements; she was introduced to a wide assortment of suitably eligible gentlemen, and was cynically pleased to discover that as a wealthy widow of forty-two she was patently more attractive to the male species than she had been as a bachelor girl of ten years' less. It all confirmed her suspicion that there were two main classes of men; those who were after her money, and those who were after Something Else.

Edna Arkwright had been seduced, once, under a lying promise of marriage, by a plausible gentleman with the wit to see that she could be seduced in no other way. The widowed Edna Colby remembered too well the anguish, the hideous, weeks-long fear afterwards that she might be That Way. She had no compensating memory of pleasure—the gentleman had been plausible, but he had done nothing to dispel the virgin impression that the girls who did It over-rated It in a spiteful effort to make their more strong-minded sisters feel jealous. And as for the rewards of motherhood, didn't she have her own mother's reiterated testimony, day after day through the years? Was the honor of living in the stink of diapers supposed to compensate for the horror of giving birth . . . for the hours on the agonizing rack, for the whole dirty, humiliating mess that was, in fact, a blind animal response to the indiscriminate need of the brute organism indiscriminately to reproduce itself?

"Jack," she had said firmly, and more than once, "that sort of thing may be all right for some people.

But you and I are presumably civilized."

There had been times, of course, when some of the bounds of civilization had had to give way. But Edna had always seen to it that even in those moments, it was clearly understood that a certain gentility must be preserved, as it was in everything else. Civilized people could hardly be blamed for the environment of their childhood—there was, indeed, a certain degree of merit in having risen from, for example, a two-room cold water flat on the Lower West Side to a charmingly restored farmhouse in Dutchess County—but it was certainly unthinkable to slip back into those discarded ways once they had been overcome.

So Edna spared very little time on gentlemen who did not remain impersonally friendly. She devoted herself to her shop and her new house with such energy that the one was a going concern and the other a completed work of the decorators' art in very short order. It was only then, with her social habits fixed and her workload diminishing, that Edna Colby had time on her hands.

She was not sure she liked that state of affairs. There were mysterious stirrings somewhere deep within her, and these speedily became a gnawing restlessness that no amount of late reading, exercise, or careful avoidance of afternoon coffee could keep from turning into a chronic insomnia.

There was something missing . . . something . . .

She turned and tossed on her bed at night until dawn came into the windows of her pink bedroom, and when it came it reminded her of Jack. Eventually, she found herself ridden with the notion that Jack was, somewhere, somehow, roisteringly alive.

It was a ridiculous obsession, she knew. But she could not allay it. She understood it to be a symptom of some private turmoil that was shut off from her conscious mind, and it frightened her.

Then spring came. The shop showed a disconcerting tendency to run itself. Daffodils and the first forsythia reminded her of tulip bulbs she wanted to get from the farm. She could have them sent down, of course. . . .

But she wondered if anyone had trimmed the lilac. And the next thought—of apple blossoms—convinced her that she did want some of the dining room pieces from the big house for the duplex. So it came about that on a warm weekend in the middle of May, Edna packed slacks and a nightgown in a hatbox, took the little-used car out of the garage, and drove up along the river to the old farm, unannounced.

She arrived to find the driveway rutted and ungravelled, the lawn ragged, flower borders untended, and the house itself smelling of dust and must. She did not stay overnight, but gave the caretakers two weeks' notice, and drove straight back to town to make arrangements for an indefinitely prolonged absence.

When she returned a week later, she was expected. She had written ahead asking a friend in the Garden Club to engage some help for the work inside the house. She arrived to find the Club ladies had already started work on her flower borders. The man and two women she'd asked for arrived at ten thirty on the dot. One of the women carried a basket ("Miz Barron said from the Garden Club ladies, welcome home") with fresh farm milk and butter, salad vegetables, a still-warm home-baked loaf of bread, and a foil-wrapped roast chicken.

All day, the four of them scrubbed and rubbed and scoured. By evening, the house was clean, and Edna was gloriously tired. She soaked in a hot tub, went to bed, and was asleep before she had time even to think about the sleeplessness of the past four months.

"What a fool I've been!"

She thought it again as she awakened in the morning, with the sun pouring in through the sheer ivory curtains. And then it came to her, unaccountably, that she had once again failed to remember a date. For tomorrow, she realized with a pang, was her wedding anniversary. Was that, she wondered in surprise, could that have been what had brought her back here?

That day she was busy with visits and errands and arrangements. She had dinner out, with the Barrons; when she drove home it was nearly eleven. She went through the big empty house, checking doors and windows, then found herself oddly reluctant to go to bed. It was almost as if she were afraid last night's exhausted peace might not come again.

She went back downstairs in her negligee, made some cocoa, tried to read, and couldn't concentrate. In the end she turned on the television and watched it without interest. At the stroke of midnight, she turned her head and saw Jack sitting in his own favorite chair.

"Jack . . ." Edna whispered. "Oh, Jack, no!"

He sat there, as ruddy and bearded as ever, wearing the clothes he had worn that day five months ago, except for the cap, and his smile was a curious mixture of the tender and the flippant, as though he felt some need to make his first words cheerful. "Happy anniversary, sweetheart," he said, the cheerfulness not quite successful.

"But, Jack—"

"Oh, I'm dead, Edna. We'd better make sure you understand that. Do you?"

She nodded, carefully. "How—have you been, Jack?"

He shrugged. "All right." He seemed listless. That was very little like him. Edna had learned to mistrust him when he acted out of character.

A host of thoughts went through Edna's mind. Suddenly, she was back to her mood of that earlier anniversary. Jack was here—in what way, made no immediate difference—he was here, and she could talk to him, see him, possibly even touch him. It was as if the intervening five months had never been. She wondered if that lipstick smudge might not be still faintly visible on his neck.

All this because of one unguarded tone of voice. But she knew him too well to let it escape her. Knew him too well not to understand what it meant.

"Jack—what happened to you?" The question popped out almost of its own will. She was teeming with things she urgently wanted to know, and she was still too numb to worry about the possibility of bad manners.

With the same forced lightness he had shown before, Jack confirmed her surmises of last December in a few halting sentences. A careless hunter had, indeed, shot the wrong game. Then, finding Jack dead with the bullet through his heart, the killer had chosen discretion before valor or honor. Wrapping the fresh corpse in some of the burlap, he had roped the whole bundle to the hand-truck, carted it cross-country for a quarter mile, and dumped the whole thing into the quarry pool, while the beginnings of the snowfall hid his tracks behind him. From there the hunter had vanished, presumably to his car and back to the city. Jack, in his typically careless way, seemed to bear him no particular ill will.

"The hand-truck!" Edna exclaimed. "My goodness, I forgot all about it and I suppose Young Harold didn't think to mention it, either. No wonder no one could see how your—that is, how he reached the quarry!" Another thought struck her. "But, that's terrible! Now your— That is," she corrected fumblingly, "They won't find you."

It was unthinkable—it was ghastly to know where Jack was, now, and to think that there had been no funeral and no proper interment. Jack . . . at the bottom of the quarry . . . roped to the hand-truck, in the black, frigid water.

"I'll have to tell them immediately. In the morning."

"Darling," Jack said in discomfort, "why should they believe you? How are you going to explain how you can be sure?"

"Why, I'll just . . ." Edna suddenly clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh, darling, I haven't been thinking!" She flew across the room into Jack's lap, to throw her arms around his neck and hug herself to his chest. Only later did she stop to think it was only luck that Jack did, indeed, have the substance to receive her. At the moment, she was too occupied with holding and kissing him, having at last, and so abruptly, fully realized what a remarkable and wonderful thing had happened. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you! You don't know how lonely I've been!"

It was only gradually that she realized Jack was returning her embrace with perfect politeness but with an unmistakable desire to bring it to an end as soon as possible. "I do know, darling," he said uncomfortably. "You see, you're the one who's keeping me here."

She leaned back. "I'm the one who's . . .?"

"It's—" Jack was plainly embarrassed. "Well, it's hard to explain about how things are. In some ways, it's a great deal like it was before I . . . well, you know. The countryside looks the same—but it's

wild ... there aren't any buildings, or roads, though it's certainly pleasant. There's something very odd about the horizon, too. Sometimes I'm almost sure it's flat; I think I can see a lot farther than I ought to be able to. But it's hard to tell."

"Are there any other people?" Edna asked artlessly. Even in her most distracted moments, she had found long ago, she was able to keep her head about certain things—and the suspicion lurking in the back of her mind had to be satisfied.

"People? Oh, yes, there're quite a few. I can see them, off in the distance." There was a wistful note in his voice. "I'd like to go and talk to them . . . see what they're doing."

"And you can't? Go over to these men ... and women?" She traced one fingernail through the beard at the base of his jaw, studying his face.

"No, no, I can't. It's because you ... well, it's because I can't leave the boundaries of the farm—except as far as the quarry, of course." He was fidgeting nervously, she saw; the fingernail was distracting him. Substantial or something a shade less, Jack had kept his old reflexes. She wondered who was keeping them sharp for him, if anyone was.

"And can't these people come to you?"

Jack shook his head. "I think it's part of the rules. Or maybe they just haven't noticed me, yet. Maybe I'm not really one of them—maybe they can't see me. I wonder if you might not be the only person anywhere who knows I exist."

"What about those rules, Jack? Hasn't . . . well, Anyone . . . explained them to you? Didn't Anyone meet you?" Edna settled into a more comfortable position on Jack's lap.

"Oh, no!" Jack said as if repeating the most obvious thing in the world. "The only people who can meet you are people who care for you. They sort of welcome you, I think. I don't know—I'm not sure I know—you seem to just feel the way things are supposed to be—but I think the amount of good that does you depends on how much you can trust your feelings." He shook his head, again, and Edna saw that there was much about his new life that troubled him. She considered that carefully.

"But, my dear, you have a number of relatives ... there . . . It seems to me your father, at least, or your mother . . ."

"Well, no, sweetheart," Jack said. "You see, they had no warning I was coming. It happened too fast. Unless they were right there on the spot—and, of course, they weren't ... And now I'm over there without anyone knowing about it, and I don't think they can find out about it, now. You see—" He patted her shoulder clumsily. "I don't think I'm really all the way over there. And that's because if no one knew I needed welcoming there, then it's necessary for someone over here, who loved me, to have said goodbye to me."

"Said goodbye!" Edna recoiled to arms' length, barely retaining her grip around Jack's neck. "I was so lonely I couldn't even stand to live here any longer!"

"Well, yes, sweetheart," Jack said tortuously, gathering her up in his own arms and holding her close. "Yes, of course you were. But couldn't you . . . well . . . let go of me? I am down in that quarry you know"

His choice of words was unfortunate Edna had a sudden graphic image of Jack, and the burlap wrapping, and the hand-truck, and the water, cold and black even this close to summer, and the weeds, and the fish—were there fish in the quarry? Someone might have put minnows in it, mightn't they? She prayed no one had.

She clung to the warm, substantial husband she had here, in the house with her, now.

"And let you wander away? To do I can imagine what?"

Jack winced. "But that's what it's for."

"What?"

"Not—not that—not what you're thinking," he said quickly. "I meant the wandering; the meeting people, talking to them, seeing what they do."

"Jack Colby, I've got you back and I'm not going to let you go."

Jack sighed. "Now, look, Edna," he said, "you can't keep me here against my will."

"You just said I could."

"Oh, you can keep me here around the farm. But you can't make me actually be here in the room with you, and talk to you, unless I help." And as if to prove his point, Jack suddenly seemed a shade less warm, a shade less substantial. His skin took on a curious transparency, and his chest did not seem to move with breath at all. His voice was distant, if rebellious. "If you feel that way about it, I can just make sure you never see me again, even while I'm looking over your shoulder."

"Jack!" Edna wailed. And at this point she was desperate. Her voice changed. "Jack?" Her negligee loosened a little at the shoulders.

"Edna, what in Heaven's name . . . ?" It was there, in Jack's suddenly wide and quite substantial eyes; the roguish gleam, that had twisted her heart bitterly only five short months ago but was her ally now. "Edna?"

"Don't leave me, Jack. Not tonight."

"Well, I'll be—"

Damned?

One night passed after another, and Jack never failed to come to her. Edna Colby blossomed again, and the house and farm had never seemed so prosperously trim, so efficiently run. The Garden Club ladies remarked on the amazing way she had taken hold of herself again. Edna had never been happier. She knew some of them considered it hardly proper for her to be so content so soon, if ever. But she was proper. Not even the most vicious gossips could find anything with which to reproach her. Some of them, she suspected, were keeping close watch on the doors at night, to see if perhaps somebody might not be ...

But nobody was. . . . Nobody who needed doors

Edna blossomed. She found, now that there was No Danger, that there was a certain element of . . .

Well, she said to herself occasionally with a certain kind of smile, Jack had never again made his ridiculous threat to leave her, had he? As a matter of fact, he seemed rather more . . . satisfied . . . than he had ever been, before.

There was, in fact only one problem. It was small at first, but it could not remain so. The future cannot be disregarded forever ...

Edna Colby sat in her living-room, and looked around her at the polished wood of the authentic Dutch Colonial furniture, the multi-paned casement windows opening to the rose garden in summer-time, the creamy-yellow walls and deep-napped carpet. She looked at the dying embers in the great stone fire-place.

Last of all she looked into the shining mirror opposite her on the wall.

Edna was now forty-three years old. Jack had been thirty-eight when he . . . died. He had of course not aged visibly in the short time between then and the time when he began appearing to her. From what he said, his body did age somewhat when he materialized—but at nothing like the metabolic rate of her own.

Jack was from long-lived country stock—the kind who looks young at fifty, and feels it still at sixty-five. Edna had once been trim and tiny; during her widowhood, she had begun to think of herself as skinny. The past months had put weight on her for the first time. She looked herself over carefully: beginning to show her age was one way to put it; dumpy was another.

And the end of summer brought another nagging worry. . . .

It was September before Edna became seriously concerned. Up 'til then she could still remind herself that she was after all, of a certain age.

It was ridiculous. Suddenly peevish, she stood alone before the big mirror and slowly turned from side to side, examining a figure that showed signs of a specialized sort of dumpiness.

It was absolutely ridiculous. Who would have thought of taking Certain Precautions in these circumstances?

She stirred as if waking from a dream and moved slowly toward the sunlit library, where she took the

big medical encyclopedia from the shelf, opened it to Sterility, psychosomatic, and began reading carefully. When she had finished, she went back and examined her newly-rounded figure in the mirror again.

"Receptive, relaxed attitude." If Jack had seen fit to speak to her about such matters, instead of simply busying himself with what she now saw was desperate enthusiasm, he might have used those words to her. "Banishment of fear-tensions . . ." If she had found the words to tell him how she felt—not now, of course, not now that this awful thing had happened—but last week, last month, yesterday . . . those would have been the words.

For one brief moment, Edna had the feeling of something lost; something that might have been, with just a little more time.

Now her mouth was a hard, narrow line, and the crows' feet stood sharply outlined at the corners of her clenched eyes.

When Jack appeared from behind the turn in the upstairs hall that night, he found Edna waiting in the middle of the bedroom, a carefully packed bag at her feet.

"You brute!" she cried out in a high-pitched voice. "You nasty animal! Get out of my sight!"

Jack stared at her. Then, gradually, the surprise was erased by an expression of dawning relief.

Edna finished: "You just wait 'til I get back!"

The relief disappeared from Jack Colby's face.

Edna had already informed Big Harold that she had been called to the city suddenly for a few days. She left in the car and drove not to New York, but to Boston, where she knew no one and no one knew her. She checked into a hotel and, first thing in the morning, phoned for an appointment with a nationally famous obstetrician.

Doctor Martin's receptionist was quite firm, at first, about there being no time available for the next two weeks. But in this sort of jousting, Edna was in her element. She emerged triumphant from the Battle of the Telephone with an appointment for that afternoon. She spent an edifying morning inspecting the Common, and a few of the more prominent historic landmarks. She made mental notes about other places to see later in the day; she would be interested in attending a talk on Winter Protection, at the Boston Botanical Gardens . . .

She never did get there. The doctor, a cheerful, chubby type, told her exactly what she had been trying to pretend he would not.

His examination was both thorough and expert despite its speed. Smilingly, he assured her that her symptoms were indeed those of an increased, rather than a diminishing, fertility.

About four months, he thought . . . hard to tell without a definite date . . . and now, if "Mrs. Hartley" was planning to remain in Boston, he could recommend several excellent physicians. Unfortunately, his own time was full right now. . . .

In a dutiful daze, Edna copied down names and addresses. She accepted the little booklet of information he gave her, and murmured what she hoped were appropriate responses at proper intervals. She was halfway out of the consulting room before she thought to ask, "Isn't there some sort of a test, Doctor?"

"Rabbit test." He smiled, if possible even more heartily than before. "Yes, but hardly necessary at this stage."

"Oh?"

"Of course you can have it if you want it," he said patiently. "Any doctor you decide on will be able to do it for you. . . ."

At Dr. Elliott's, "Mrs. Grahame," having taken thought, insisted on a test. She filled a small sterilized bottle for the nurse, and departed. When she phoned the following day—she had not been able to leave a telephone number, since she was registered at the hotel under her own name—the results were, as she had expected, negative. In the intervening time, instead of visiting Boston's historical or horticultural wonders, she had procured several books of a specialized nature in a small shop on Huntington Avenue, and had perused them thoroughly. By the time she checked out of the hotel that afternoon, Edna Colby,

who had looked up psychosomatic sterility in the encyclopedia at home, was now also something of an expert on psychosomatic pregnancy. Enough of an expert, and possessed of enough additional personal knowledge, to wonder a little about how much psychosomasis there might be to some of the case histories detailed in the books.

For four hours she drove carefully and attentively southbound through moderate traffic; it was not until she found herself approaching the end of the Wilbur Cross Parkway and the beginning of the Merritt, that she realized she had taken the turnoff for New York, rather than staying on Route Six for Dutchess County. That wouldn't help. She was no more prepared for chance meetings with friends and acquaintances than for any immediate steps with Jack.

Accordingly, she left the highway, and headed due south for the Connecticut shore. At some small town whose name she never knew, she found a motel with clean white, painted cabins, and a chintz-curtained dining-room. After a quiet dinner, she walked down to the shore, and sat for a long while in the shelter of a rocky ledge, ignoring the cold and the damp, doing her planning to the rhythm of the white-foam sea.

If she could not hold Jack, without paying this price, then she knew what her choice must be. As the daylight waned, she began to think in cold, carefully thought-out steps without reference to or remembrance of the very longing that had brought her to this situation.

Edna stood up and walked to the edge of the pounding surf, seeing in her mind's eye, instead, the still surface of the old quarry pool. The way was clear to her now: the one and only way.

She shivered abruptly on the cold empty beach.

In the morning, she continued toward New York. She would have liked to go home and close the house properly, collect her belongings, and provide suitable explanations for the neighbors; but she could not risk letting Jack learn her plans. True, he could not leave the farm till she released him—but still, he might think of some way to upset her program. So she wrote letters instead, and arranged things by phone, telling everyone that urgent business required her to leave immediately. Three days later she embarked on a prolonged tour of South

America, where she thought she would be reasonably safe from chance encounter with anyone she knew.

When she returned to Dutchess County, it was four months, almost to the day, from the time she had left. She did not go to the farm, but took a room at an exceedingly middle-class resort hotel where she knew there was no possibility of meeting someone who knew her as the mistress of Colby Farm. In all probability, anyhow, none of her former friends would have recognized the fat-and-fortyish woman in the ill-fitting clothes, with the brooding face and the too-bright eyes.

She had tried to time her arrival so as not to have too much waiting, but she had not dared stay away too long. As it turned out, she spent almost two weeks in the dingy hotel room, waiting.

When the pains came at last, late one frozen afternoon, Edna bundled up, left the hotel without a word to anyone, and walked the full four miles to her destination, rather than hire a driver who would almost surely remember taking her out to the quarry. She walked haltingly, stopping to rest against trees and rocks for brief moments, then pressing on.

Fear and iron determination drove her. She was in a panic at the coming ordeal; the possibility of death, of some terrible crippling that would leave her alive, but helpless, freezing—with each fresh pain, her heart leaped so that she could hardly breathe.

But she would not give up. Jack had done this. He had returned all her devotion, all her dedication, in this monstrous way, and he would suffer for it.

Sobbing with effort and hysteria, she dragged the burden of her body up through the woods to the quarry's edge. And there, at last, she could stop, fighting for breath between waves of pain.

She swayed on the windrowed stone-chips near the quarry's rim, looking down at the ice below.

Jack was in there, she thought with wooden concentration. Down there, under the ice, wrapped in a rotting shroud.

"Jack," she croaked hoarsely. "Jack, I've got something for you."

As she said the words, the picture of the sodden bundle under the ice returned compellingly to her

mind. For a moment, her resolution wavered. For a moment, it seemed easier to give in, to admit that it was her fault much more than Jack's. But she had come this far with immense determination and the courage of a martyr—if she gave in now, she would have wasted it all.

With a moan, she sank to the ground, struggling to arrange her clothes, flayed by the bitter cold. The contractions were nearly continual now. She raised her wristwatch to time them, in automatic accordance with the manuals she had pored over, but her eyes were misted with tears.

The pains were like nothing she had imagined—like nothing her mother had ever succeeded in describing. They were directional; great automatic spasms of her lower body that knotted her shoulders and thighs in sympathy, that surged like the sea turned to molten oil, that seemed to be trying to take control of her body away from her brain and relocate it somewhere in the depths of her spinal column.

She reached out frantically for comfort—she clutched the folds of her soft coat; she dug at the unyielding ground. She no longer thought of the danger in childbirth to even a hospitalized woman of her age.

"Jack," she moaned. "Jack."

From somewhere, strong hands were closed on her. "Bear down, sweetheart," the urging voice said; "push, Baby, push. Don't let it break you up. Push."

The knowledge of someone near—she barely recognized the voice as Jack's; the words were only sounds—was enough. One fraction of her panic ebbed away, and her body did the rest of its own accord. She was possessed by a sudden understanding of herself as a function, as a force; as an elemental, marvelously instinctive engine triumphantly meeting a resistance that was all the massive closure of extinction. Meeting it and, with a series of quick surges, suddenly relaxing so that her burden almost seemed to go forth and overcome it of its own volition.

"Take him—take him, Jack, quickly," she moaned. "Take him where he'll be warm, and safe."

She fumbled at her coat to cover herself. She was terribly cold. There was nothing on the ground—nothing that she could see; there was no sound, no cry.

"Jack? Jack—can you still hear me?" She had planned it all so well. Planned it on the basis that she would hate what came out of her torture. Planned it on the basis that it would be torture, planned on the assumption that it would be the best revenge of all to saddle Jack with the brat forever. "Jack—is it a boy? Please . . ."

She raised her arms. Silhouetted against the trees, she dimly made out a patch of russet color from Jack's beard, and the faint vertical tinge of his trousers. Sole shoes scraped very faintly on the stones beside her. And then she heard it—the faraway whimper of life—and she looked at the level of Jack's chest. There was something there . . . something . . . As the cry grew momentarily louder, swelled to a full-throated wail, she saw the boy, wrapped in his father's arms.

"Take good care of him, Jack," she whispered. She pitched herself up to her knees, somehow got to her feet. "I have to go. I'll freeze if I don't." She looked down into the quarry. "Goodbye, Jack. Goodbye—I'll miss you."

"Goodbye, honey," Jack said softly. "I'm sorry about the other girls," he added hurriedly, already gone from sight.

"It was my fault," Edna whispered. There were tears in her eyes as she thought of Jack and the boy, free to roam their world over, now, free to see what lay beyond the wide horizons. She turned sharply on the loose stones.

For one moment, she tried to balance herself. One thought passed through her mind, in a familiar female voice, a voice out of her childhood: "By God, if that little snip puts on any more airs about being too good for me, she's going to hear a thing or two about what it took to bring her here." But it was only a fragment of something—perhaps her first conscious memory, rounding out her days into an ellipse of beginning and of end.

There was a shock.

Edna Colby never knew if her body broke all the way through the ice to sink into company with that other abandoned shell. . . . She and Jack and the boy had gone to where the world was warm and green.

