

Mr. Binkley Dies

Rebecca Blackley

Mr. Binkley was disgruntled. The world was all wrong. As he sat in his garden on that beautiful May afternoon, everything was colored by his distaste of things as they were. Even the larkspur seemed less blue to him. He couldn't understand about those larkspur; they had really failed him shamefully. He'd worked with them more hours than he cared to remember—hours stolen from his work, and look at them! Why they couldn't compare with Fred Baxter's—Baxter, who sold plumbing supplies, and knew nothing about the finer points of larkspur. "Just shows what this world is coming to," he grumbled.

He turned back with a scowl to the current book he was reviewing. He grunted disgustedly and tossed it aside. Trash, rank trash! There weren't any good books any more; even the best writers were becoming infected with the germ of decadency. Life was decidedly not worth the living. And bother! There was Edith calling him.

"Arthur! Arthur! Why don't you answer me, Arthur?"

Would she never stop annoying him with that querulous voice of hers? Edith, yes, even Edith, was all wrong. "She knows I'm working," he thought savagely, if inconsistently. "I wish I'd never have to hear her calling me again! I almost . . . yes, I wish I were dead!"

And it was as simple as that. Incomprehensibly and easily the fact was established. Mr. Arthur Binkley, book reviewer for the Post, lay dead in his armchair. For a moment, he was thunderstruck. He had carried it too far this time. He might at least have looked a little more pleasant about it; he really looked

quite terrifying. "Perhaps I'd better call the whole thing off," he thought. "I'd better do it right now. Here comes Edith!"

He started hurriedly to slip back into his mortal frame. Suddenly a thought seized him. What would Edith say? How would she act? What did she really think of him? And besides, it was a joke, a huge joke. What a tale it would make to tell his intimates. He could see himself now at Tony's, saying, "Well, that time when I died for a while—" And besides, it was too late now. Edith was approaching, inevitably and surely.

She walked across the lawn with that peculiarly awkward motion which had never failed to irritate him in the past. Now, it seemed immaterial. He was merely possessed with a great impatience for her to reach his chair. What a great laugh they would have about this later—or so he reasoned in his incomprehensible male manner.

"Arthur," she said peevishly, "why don't you answer me, Arthur? I know you couldn't have—Arthur! Arthur! What's wrong, Arthur?" She touched him on the shoulder, then recoiled. "Oh my God! He's dead!" With a horrified expression, she fled back into the house.

Mr. Binkley began to feel quite uneasy. After all, fun was fun, but this was carrying the jest too far. That was the devil of marrying a woman with no sense of humor. Why she might even, horrifying thought, have him buried! There were no limits to what an unimaginative woman could do!

"I wish I were alive again, right now!" he muttered desperately, and waited for the deed to be accom-

plished. No accomplishment. There he lay, and here he stood. This was a devil of a mess! What was he to do now?

But just at that moment, Edith came running across the line, and Dr. Maine was with her. Mr. Binkley breathed a sigh of relief. Everything would be all right now. John was a man of discernment. He would tell Edith it was just a joke, and then they could all have a good laugh over it. He waited expectantly while the doctor bent over his body. He straightened, a sad expression on his face.

"Mrs. Binkley," he said heavily, "you must be brave. It is my unpleasant and sad duty to tell you that your husband is dead. Heart failure, I believe, although I can't say positively as yet."

Mr. Binkley stared unbelievably at him. It was fantastic. It couldn't happen to him. Was the whole world mad?

"You idiot!" he screamed. "You call yourself a doctor, and you say I'm dead?" But they paid him no heed. He might as well have been thin air. Well, wasn't he?

Edith had collapsed in a chair, and was becoming hysterical. Even in this moment of dire distress, Mr. Binkley could feel that familiar irritation creeping over him. Edith was behaving very badly. But then, what could one expect of a woman?

But the situation was beginning to worry him. This was extremely inconvenient. For one thing, he was supposed to play golf at three, and it was almost two-thirty now. But then if he were really dead—and if these two were any indication, he indisputably was—he wouldn't be playing golf this afternoon or any other afternoon. He was deeply depressed.

"Why did I have to get in this mess anyhow?" he moaned. "And

what the devil am I going to do with myself. I'm dead to the world, but I don't in the least feel like a spirit. What now?" He stood helplessly as he saw himself being carried carefully into the house. Well, at least he could see that he was properly taken care of.

He followed them at a distance, superfluous caution. Edith was still crying. She was behaving in the best tradition of the bereaved wife at least, but it did annoy him. Her tears had always reduced him to a state of helpless fury, and he could still feel that very human emotion, disembodied as he was.

Now she was phoning to her sister.

"Sarah? . . . Sarah, this is Edith. Can you come over, right away? It's Arthur! He's dead! . . . Yes, dead! . . . No, it was very sudden." She sobbed. "Yes, I went out to ask him about that plumber's bill, and there he was, dead. . . . No, I hadn't thought about the funeral arrangements yet. I thought perhaps you—Oh, will you? . . . Yes, do come right over." She hung up the receiver. Her face puckered, and she began to cry again.

Mr. Binkley was beginning to feel most uncomfortable. This was rushing things with a vengeance. Couldn't they let him be decently dead a while before they started thinking about the undertaker? It was upsetting him dreadfully. He still felt very much alive, although no one seemed to appreciate the fact, and this was most disconcerting.

He wandered aimlessly for some time. There didn't seem to be any place where he could be alone and think things out. The house seemed suddenly full of people, and very queer people at that. Sarah was here, bustling about officiously. He had always detested that about Sarah, and she was having all sorts of conversations with a most offensive young man, he supposed he was the

undertaker's assistant. Really the atmosphere was decidedly too brisk for a house of death; for at last he was beginning to face the fact that he was irretrievably dead. And things were moving entirely too rapidly to suit him. Indeed, a most uncomfortable day and night had passed all too quickly, and here it was the day of the funeral.

And here he was, wandering about, feeling entirely superfluous, he, the guest of honor, as it were. Well, at least, he would have the distinction of being present at his own funeral, for present he intended to be. He was going to get something out of this mess, of that he was certain.

But when he arrived at the church a little late, for he had stayed behind the others to surreptitiously read some of the telegrams of condolence, he found the chapel doors locked. A feeling of righteous wrath pervaded his already overburdened spirit. Lock him out of his own funeral services, would they! Well, he'd show them! And he could do it, too! He was just about as mad as he had been at that fatal moment two days ago when he'd started the whole thing.

He stalked around to the side of the church. Luckily a window was open. It was a warm day. He clambered up and sat on the sill. He looked about. Everyone was there, even his editor. The minister was speaking, and the mourners listened with rapt attention. For the moment, he listened too. Dr. Pinder was doing nobly. This was a great soul who had departed. For a moment he forgot who was being eulogized so eloquently. He came to himself with a start.

"Hey!" he yelled pugnaciously. "What do you mean by locking me out of my own funeral services? Don't you know it isn't polite? Just for that I refuse to be dead another minute!" For a moment, he savored

the aghast and wholly foolish expression on Edith's face. Well, it served her right! Bury him without his permission, would she? But then things began happening too rapidly for more thought.

There he was again, back in his chair, exactly as he had been before the whole affair began. There was the rejected book at his feet. There were the delinquent larkspurs blooming blue. And there was Edith, bless her, coming across the lawn with that peculiarly awkward gait of hers.

"Arthur," she said peevishly.... "About that pl—"

With a bound, Mr. Binkley was out of his chair. "Yes, I know," he shouted joyfully. "That plumber's bill. Leave it on my desk, I'll attend to it later. I'm late for my golf game as it is. Don't wait dinner for me. I'll eat at the club." And he sprinted across the lawn and into the house.

Edith stood and watched his retreating back with a puzzled expression. "Now I wonder," she thought, "how he knew I wanted to ask him about that plumber's bill?"

Failure

Betty Davenport

He looked up and saw he was nearly there. The hand that was down in his pocket kept fingering the three pennies. David tried to make them clink like the money in grandpa's pocket—grandpa always rattled when he walked—and especially when he walked fast as David was doing now. It was fun to make the coins jingle every time he passed a crack in the sidewalk. Usually David found something fascinating in almost every crack—and then he'd have to stop and investigate. But today, when he was on such an important errand,