



THE QUARREL

Joe DeMent

“George,” called Mrs. Barkley from the front room, “did you find your white shirts?”

George Barkley slowly shook his head at his wife’s words. “Yes, Ann,” he said, and he looked back at the top drawer of his bureau. It contained eight rows of neatly folded socks. He looked at them uncertainly for a moment and then put the first three pairs into his alligator traveling bag.

“Did you hear me, George?” He turned and saw his wife standing in the doorway looking at the open bag. “Aren’t you wearing the blue shirt, dear?” She crossed the room to the bed and held up two pairs of dark brown socks. “You can’t wear these with blue.” Then she took them to the bureau and exchanged them for blue ones.

“The shirts are already packed,” George said.

“What did you say?” said Ann.

“The shirts—they’re in my bag.”

“Oh, the shirts, yes,” she said. “George, I just don’t understand why you have to pack before you go to the office if you’re taking the afternoon plane.”

George Barkley sat on the edge of the bed and put his hands on his knees. His face wore a grim little smile as it looked at Mrs. Barkley. Then he opened his mouth very slowly and spoke to her in the manner used by an annoyed adult lecturing a not-yet-housebroken puppy.

“Ann,” he said, “I’m not going to repeat this again. I am

packing my bag now so that I will not have to come home after it. I do not want to come home after it because I must spend every available hour before plane time giving instructions to Jordan about the Consolidated deal. Is that an adequate explanation?"

Mrs. Barkley sat down on the bed and looked at her husband, the traveling bag between them.

"George," she said, "Don't talk to me like that. I have a right to know why you are going early."

"I thought I just gave you the reason," said Mr. Barkley.

"There is no reason why Emma can't pack your bag," said Mrs. Barkley. "Why should we have a maid if she can't do things like that?"

"I believe that I have told you before that I *like* to pack my own bag," said Mr. Barkley. "Listen, we've been over all of this before. If you don't believe that I am going to Chicago strictly for business reasons, pack your bag and go with me. If you do believe me, then stop this third-degree and let me finish packing."

"You know I trust you, George," she said, "and you know I can't go because I promised to help Mrs. Anson with the Milk Drive. It's just that you're always so mysterious about these trips."

George stood up, looked at the ceiling, and shrugged his shoulders. The resentment which had long been caused by her childish suspicions made her its target. "My God, mysterious?" he said. He went to the closet, selected a tie, and started trying it.

"Mysterious," he said again to no one in particular. "By gosh I haven't been mysterious in fifteen years. Ann, it seems to me you think every time I leave this house I'm never coming back." He adjusted his tie and put on his coat.

"Well," said Mrs. Barkley, with a sudden burst of unaccustomed burst of frankness, "sometimes I do feel that way."

George Barkley looked at his wife as if she had just become a gibbering lunatic. Then he snapped shut the clasp on his traveling bag, found his hat, and walked quickly toward the

front door. Mrs. Barkley ran after him and caught him just as he was going out the door.

“George,” she said. “Oh George, don’t be mad.” She reached for his arm but he escaped her grasp by stepping out into the hall.

“You think that, do you?” he said. “Well, maybe I won’t be back!”

Walking down the stairs, he could hear his wife calling his name. He knew she wouldn’t follow him because she never left the apartment in her housecoat.

Won’t come home, he thought as he was driving toward the office, *so she thinks I won’t come home. Fifteen years of marriage and she still doesn’t trust me.* The more he thought about his wife’s statement, the angrier he got. Then he began to feel sorry for himself, telling himself that he was never alone anymore. If he wasn’t immersed in business, Ann was always dragging him to some charity event or other. Or else to the home of some stuffy bozo to eat a dinner that gave him indigestion and then to play bridge, a game which held only boredom for him.

Then he thought about the old days, when he and Ann had been overflowing with hope for the future. But there had been a lot of sacrifices. They had been in Chicago then—not Lake Shore Drive, but a cheap little apartment on the South Side. He remembered the Bohemian restaurant where he and Ann had eaten the first meal of their married life, Mr. Bernstein’s pawn shop, the pool hall, the old South End theatre. These memories evoked unexpected sentiment, feelings he had not known still existed.

In front of the office building, he stopped the car and sat thinking for a moment. Joe Gibson, the parking lot attendant, came up to the window, “Park your car, Mr. Barkley?”

George hesitated a moment, smiled, and said, “No, Joe, I’m only going to be here a minute. Would you just sit in the car and keep the motor running?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Barkley,” said Joe. He watched Barkley stride quickly into the office building and wondered how much money he was really worth.

A few minutes later, Barkley and his young business associate, Jordan, emerged from the building. Barkley tipped Joe and got behind the wheel of the car. On the way to the airport, he quickly briefed Jordan on the details of the Consolidated deal, and assured him that the preliminary negotiations were finished. Jordan offered to drive the car home, and the two men parted at the entrance to Terminal D. George had no trouble changing his afternoon reservation for one on a morning flight.

The weather was perfect for flying. George had never felt so relaxed on a plane. They made a perfect landing in Chicago, and he immediately caught a cab.

The old district had changed, but not too much. The pawn shop was still there and George was very pleased that Mr. Bernstein remembered him. He went into the Bohemian restaurant and ordered a glass of wine. The place looked the same as he had always remembered it, a trifle shabbier perhaps, but still rich with the atmosphere of George's memories. As he sat sipping the wine, his mind wandered over the years between that first dinner and this glass of wine. He thought of Ann's unselfishness, the help she had given him, and the countless hours she had spent by herself, waiting for him to finish his business obligations. He saw that he had spent too much time in providing material necessities. No wonder she didn't trust him! He resolved to complete his business as quickly as possible and return home. They would take a vacation. Why shouldn't they? The business had never been better and Jordan could take care of it just as well as he could. Yes, they would go someplace Ann wanted to go; do the things she wanted to do, the things that had always had to be put off in favor of business considerations.

He gave the waiter a large tip and caught a cab uptown.

His business was concluded in a much shorter time than he had anticipated, and he was happy when he realized that he could still catch the late flight back to New York.

The flight was uneventful. George spent the hours think-

ing about places he and Ann had never seen. The whole world was opening to them.

In the cab going home, the driver turned on the radio to get the late news. The news announcer was just saying, “. . . one of the worst air disasters in our nation’s history. The plane which was scheduled to leave LaGuardia airport for Chicago at 4:10 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, took off on time. It crashed eleven minutes later. The cause of the disaster has not yet been determined.” While the cabbie switched the station, all George could think was, “That was the plane I was to have taken; it could have been me; I’d be dead!” Then he started laughing.

When he finally got control of himself, they were at the front door of his apartment building. He gave the astonished cab driver a twenty-dollar tip and ran up the three flights of stairs as fast as he could.

When he finally got the door open and walked into the front room, he saw the maid standing by the sofa staring at him with a blank look on her face and a magazine in her hand.

“What are you doing here, Emma?” he said. “Where’s my wife?”

“Miz Barkley? Why, she caught the afternoon plane to Chicago!”