

BREAKING THE NEWS.

'Do you think he'll take it very badly, Nora?' Nora Helmsley shrugged her shoulders.

'My dear Betty, you ought to know more about Mr Markham's powers of endurance than I.'

'But what do you think he'll do? What do you suppose—'

'Why waste our time in supposition? He'll be here most likely this afternoon, and you will be able to judge for yourself.'

Betty Oakhurst sprang to her feet. 'Ted is coming here this afternoon? Why on earth didn't you tell me before?' And she fidgeted nervously with her hat before the glass as she spoke.

'But you knew. Betty, where are you going?'

'Anything out of this,' cried the girl, laughing nervously as she stooped to kiss her friend.

Nora, however, caught her arm. 'No sense, Betty! You'd much better tell him straight out now and get it over. It will be ever so much more awkward for you if the news reaches him from outside.'

'I don't see that at all,' returned Betty quietly, as she drew away from her companion. 'I am sure that if— if you—'

She paused tentatively. 'You don't mean to say that you expect me to tell Ned Markham that you've jilted him?'

'I certainly don't expect you to put it in that way,' replied Miss Oakhurst, with a little laugh; 'but I am quite certain that you would explain it to the poor fellow much better than anyone else.'

'Explain!' exclaimed Nora, impatiently, 'I don't know that there's anything to explain, except that you've put yourself and me in a most ridiculous position.'

'Nora!' 'I wish I'd never had anything to do with it. I never felt so uncomfortable in my life as I have done since

you dragged me into this precious scheme of yours.'

'Ooo: old Nora!' murmured Betty sympathetically, while she cast furtive glances at the clock.

'You came here and shed any number of tears; declared that you adored Ted Markham; that your father wouldn't hear of an engagement, but that if you only had a little time before you you were sure everything would come right.'

'So it has,' remarked Betty, sotto voce. 'It's only a question of point of view.'

Nora flashed an indignant look at her.

'I think you might be serious now, and at least pretend you're ashamed of yourself. You begged me to help you to get my aunt to ask him here, to act as screen in fact, so that your people might imagine it was all over and that you had both changed your minds, and now—now—'

The sound of a bell broke in upon Miss Helmsley's eloquence, and Betty caught up her gloves.

'I'm awfully sorry, Nora. Abuse me as much as you like. Good-bye!'

And before Nora could stop her she had darted through the door and was on her way downstairs. She let her go. After all, it never was of any use to argue with Betty; she was one of those delightfully irresponsible creatures who always manage to shift the blame of their shortcomings on to other people's shoulders, and whom no one — no man, at any rate — never dreams of judging by ordinary standards. Nora wondered, as she stood there idly looking into the street, how she could ever have been foolish enough to take Betty's love troubles seriously.

Meantime, that same folly of hers was going to bear some very unpalatable fruit. In less than ten minutes young Markham would be there. He had arranged to call for Miss Helmsley and her aunt, Lady Hewitt, to escort them to an afternoon concert. The elder lady had declared at lun-

cheon that the weather was far too depressing for it not to be madness to risk the probability of a further fall in one's moral barometer by a couple of hours of orchestral music, and that Nora must give him some tea and her excuses.

Nora was conscious that this was a neat pretext for giving the young man the chance for a tete-a-tete with herself. Lady Hewitt was too indolent, naturally, not to be heartily weary of her duties as chaperon to her niece.

An attractive heiress was a responsibility little to her taste, and the girl felt that, ineligible as most mothers and responsible people would have termed Ted Markham, with his post in the foreign office and his meagre personal fortune, Lady Hewitt would open her arms to him gladly if he would but relieve her of her enormous duties of watch-dog, and would declare that Nora had money enough for them both.

Nora sighed as she stood at the window. It was a topsy-turvy world, and the wrong people were always being thrown together. If only—

'Am I disturbing you? I was told to come in here.'

Nora started, and the colour rushed to her face.

'Oh, I hadn't heard you come in! Do sit down. Aunt isn't well. I am so sorry you should have had the trouble of calling for nothing, but she hoped to be able to go until the last moment. Won't you let me give you some tea?' She spoke with nervous hurry, scarcely pausing for an answer.

Ted Markham took the chair she offered him and listened in silence while she rattled on. Suddenly she stopped, conscious of his fixed glance.

'Is anything the matter?' she asked, in a slightly alarmed voice. It was surely not possible that he could already have learned of Betty's treachery.

'Yes. We can't go on like this, Miss Helmsley!'

'No?' Nora felt the colour go out of her face.

'It isn't fair to you, and besides, I— things have changed—'

'You mean that Betty—'

'Miss Oakhurst is going to be married.' Nora gasped, but did not speak. 'She is engaged to Lord Bartholpe. I met Lady Oakhurst just now, and she was overflowing with loving kindness to the world in general.'

'Betty has behaved abominably!' put in Nora, indignantly.

Ted Markham smiled. 'I think, on the contrary, that she has shown remarkably good sense. I am going to leave London. I really came this afternoon to say good-bye.'

Nora bit her lips.

'I am very sorry,' she began, hesitatingly. 'I am afraid I was rather to blame, but I thought Betty really cared, and—'

She left the sentence unfinished. Ted Markham's demeanor puzzled her. He was quite white, and there was a look in his eyes which troubled her. What was there in her fluffy-haired, blue-eyed friend to move a man so? That her companion had taken some great resolution, and that a singularly difficult one, it was easy enough to perceive.

'Are you going to be away long?' she asked, awkwardly. 'I mean, are you going far?'

'I think of going to have a look at the antipodes. My father has some interest, and I hope to get sent off to Melbourne.'

'But haven't you made up your mind rather hurriedly?' she objected, timidly.

'Hurriedly? Why, I put things in train weeks ago!'

'Weeks ago!' she exclaimed. 'But Betty's engagement is quite fresh. Did you suspect—'

'I suspected nothing. I knew—'

'You knew!' she exclaimed, indignantly. 'Then why didn't you speak? Why didn't you tell me?'

'Tell you!' She stared at him, his tone was so vehement. 'Oh, about Betty, you mean?'

'Of course. What else could I mean?'

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