

*A Previous
Engagement*

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A PREVIOUS ENGAGEMENT

A Story

By HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH.

Betty began to think that she had misjudged Cornelia. Ever since the invitation had come for Billy Randolph's yachting party on the 11th Cornelia had been so full of kindly suggestions, so magnanimously indifferent to the fact that she herself was not invited, that Betty's tender conscience was pricked by many a compunction.

"I always thought that she took her revenge on me when I was invited and she wasn't," reflected Betty. "It shows how easy it is to get suspicious and misjudge people. But, oh, dear. I never was suspicious till I came to live at Uncle Chester's."

After continued self-reproach and many excellent resolves, it certainly was distressing to overhear snatches of a conversation suggesting that Cornelia's kindness was not altogether disinterested.

With cheeks aflame Betty marched into the next room, and Cornelia stopped in the middle of a sentence, while Aunt Emily looked coldly annoyed.

"Who is it that is coming to dinner Wednesday?" demanded Betty, who believed in short cuts and direct methods.

Cornelia did not reply. Aunt Emily indulged in an impressive pause before she answered, "It is a friend of Alan's."

"I thought I heard you say Mr. Burnham, and I wondered if it could be the Walter Burnham who was such a friend of Ernest's in college. I'd give anything to meet him."

Aunt Emily and Cornelia exchanged glances. "Unfortunately, you have an engagement," the other woman reminded her.

"Oh, I'll break it. Walter Burnham was my brother's dearest friend, and I'd give up a dozen yachting parties before I'd miss the chance of seeing him."

Cornelia's mamma turned majestically to Betty.

"In this world, my dear Betty, we are not expected to do exactly as we please. I have brought Cornelia up to believe that an engagement is a promise,

and therefore sacred.”

“But I could explain to Billy Randolph, and he’s so good-natured”——

“We will not discuss the matter further, Betty. It is not a question of Mr. Randolph’s good nature, but of your own good breeding. I shall expect you to keep your engagements, as Cornelia would do in your place.”

Betty looked across at the mirror on the other side of the room and surprised a malicious smile on the face of Cornelia. It had all been planned beforehand. That was what the smile acknowledged.

Betty walked out of the room, afraid to trust herself to speak. Her old suspicion that her cousin feared the comparison of her more mature charms with those of pink-and-white 18 had become a certainty.

Under other circumstances Betty would have laughed over the discovery with a half-pitying, half-amused wonder. But this was Walter Burnham, her far-away brother’s college friend, about whom she had woven romantic fancies when her skirts came just below her knees.

And now he was to take dinner at her home, and she would be on Billy Randolph’s yacht, listening to Billy’s tiresome stories. Open rebellion against Aunt Emily was out of the question. But the extremity of defiance may be the opportunity of diplomacy.

The corner druggist had a call from Betty that afternoon. “I want something for a cold,” she murmured sweetly as she leaned toward him with a pretty air of appealing confidence.

The druggist was beginning to expatiate on the virtues of a well-known remedy when she checked him. “You don’t understand. I don’t want to cure a cold—I want to get one.”

The man stared, began to laugh and ended by looking interested as he caught the faintest glint of a twinkle in the blue eyes turned appealingly upon him.

“Ah, I see,” he said with mock gravity. “You want to sneeze and have your eyes run and all that sort of thing, and be yourself again after a few hours. Well, I’ve got some snuff here that will fix you up in great shape.” He took the bottle from the shelf. “It’s an unusual order,” he added.

Betty blushed. “It’s an unusual occasion,” she confessed.

When Betty made her appearance in the dining room on the morning of the 11th a handkerchief of heroic proportions temporarily obscured her face. As

she dropped into her chair she sneezed, and the attention of the family was at once focussed upon her. Her pretty blue eyes were bloodshot and swollen, her small nose a most unbecoming shade of pink. Apologetically, she bowed her head and sneezed again, and yet again.

“Really, Betty,” said Aunt Emily, with more annoyance than sympathy, “you must have been extremely careless to take such a cold.”

“And moreover, my dear,” said Uncle Chester, “you’ll find it necessary to be very careful. I shall insist on your remaining indoors today.”

Cornelia made a false move. “Betty has an engagement, papa. She is to go on Billy Randolph’s yachting party.”

Betty sneezed twice.

“A yachting party!” cried Uncle Chester. “Preposterous. I will telephone young Randolph myself and explain that Betty is not fit to leave the house.”

“Ker-choo!” said Betty, with a grateful glance at her uncle, while Aunt Emily put in quickly: “Instead of yachting, the poor child should go to bed at once.”

“Ker-choo!” said Betty again, and, with coffee and rolls dispatched amid much sneezing and constant use of her handkerchief, she straightway sneezed her way upstairs to her room and softly bolted the door.

Betty did not make her appearance at luncheon. Susan took up a tray to her room, and when Cornelia knocked later in the afternoon there was no answer. Cornelia strode away on tip-toe. A good sleep was the best thing in the world for a heavy cold. If Betty did not wake till morning, all the better.

It lacked only five minutes of the dinner hour when Betty, an audacious vision in pink chiffon, floated into the drawing room. Her blue eyes were as clear as a June sky, and only her cheeks were flushed, while in her hand she carried a lace cobweb handkerchief. Cornelia and her mother looked blankly at each other. But the young man whom Alan had just introduced stared at Betty.

“I’m sure we’ve met before,” he said. “Your face is so familiar.” He went across the room and stood by Betty’s chair. The girl smiled up at him, and dropped her eyes.

“The last time you saw me I was in a silver frame, wasn’t I?” she said, “with long curls hanging down my back.”

Walter Burnham’s heart leaped.

“You’re little Betty Carroll!” he cried joyously. “Ernest Carroll’s sister

Betty. Why, I've known you by reputation since you wore pinafores. By Jove, this is worth coming for!"

At dinner Betty, of course, was seated at the other end of the table from Burnham, but he sought her side the moment they returned to the drawing room, and remained there till he had missed two trains. When he said good-by he held her hand a little longer than was necessary.

"I shall see you very soon, you know," he said. "I'm only 50 miles off, so I can run down almost any time. You didn't know Ernest gave me the picture in the little silver frame, did you? I've got it in my room now."

When Billy Randolph, a day or two later, asked Betty to take dinner with him at the country club the following Saturday, he was disappointed when she shook her head.

"Thank you. Billy," she answered, blushing, "but I have a previous engagement."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story was originally published as a newspaper or magazine short story.

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *A Previous Engagement* by Harriet Lummis Smith]