

SURNAMES

SHORT SHORT STORY NO.38

Backstage at the Ziegfeld Follies, Nora Bayes and Jack Norworth are having an argument about names. They're due to get married a week on Thursday and Nora refuses to take Jack's surname as her own.

'But darling,' protests Jack. 'What kind of wife refuses to take her husband's name?'

'A modern wife,' she replies, turning her head a little in the bulb-surrounded mirror and teasing her hair a little at the sides. 'My God, Jack, anyone would think we were still living in the middle of the 19th century! It's 1909 after all. Things have changed.'

'Damn change,' says Jack, pacing up and down like an expectant father. 'You're too full of ideas, do you know that?'

'And another thing,' she adds, ignoring that last comment. 'You needn't expect me to start playing all homely and dutiful after we're married either. My contract here runs for another three seasons and I intend to honour it.'

'Well that's alright,' says Jack. 'I can live with that. But please, Nora, reconsider the name situation, won't you?'

Nora spins around in the seat and stares at her fiance, her face a mixture of irritation and amusement. 'Well perhaps if you had a different name, then it would be alright,' she tells him. 'But if you think I'm going to be Nora Norworth, then I'm sorry to tell you that have another think coming. The idea's preposterous.'

'And how will other chaps know you're a married woman? They'll flirt shamelessly. They do already.'

'And I hope they always will,' says Nora with a smile. 'But if it means that much to you, you could always change your name instead. You could become Jack Bayes.'

'Now you're just being silly.'

Nora shrugs and turns back to the mirror. The idea of names stays in her mind for a few moments. She thinks of Leonora Goldberg, a talented singer from Joliet who came to Chicago to make her fortune. She remembers her being one of eight singers brought in to audition for Mr Ziegfeld, who cracked open pistachio nuts throughout the entire performance and spat the shells out on the floor before pointing at her and growling 'That one there' before asking her name.

'You're a difficult creature, aren't you?' said Jack. 'Alright, if you insist upon keeping your name, you must keep it.'

"Leonora Goldberg," she had told Mr Ziegfeld, dropping into a curtsy as if he was the King of England and she his humble servant-girl.

"Not anymore you're not," he'd answered, walking away. "You're Nora Bayes from now on. I can't have a Goldberg in my Follies."

Which was rich, she'd thought, coming from a man called Florenz Ziegfeld.

'I wasn't asking for permission, Jack,' she tells her fiancé.

'Well I'm giving it anyway,' he says. 'So we're in agreement.'

She shakes her head and sighs. It's important, she thinks to herself. She changed it once for a man when she shouldn't have. She has no intention of doing so again.