

all, it was not to be wondered at, considering what I had gone through that day.

Without stopping to choose my words, I poured into Arthur's ears the whole story of the missing spoon, and Laversha's atrocious behaviour.

His face grew darker as I went on.

"Let us end this," he said at last. "You never made a greater mistake in your life, aunt. How can you accuse Laversha of such a dreadful thing? Do you know who she is?"

"I know she is Margaret's poor relation, and my paying guest."

There! I had let it out at last, but Arthur did not seem at all surprised. He threw his head back and laughed.

"Poor old auntie!" he said; "I see how it is. You wanted me to marry the heiress, did you? Well, but for the fact that Laversha has twenty thousand pounds in her own right, I should have asked her to marry me long ago. As it was, I could not summon sufficient courage until yesterday, and you know now what answer I received. And you thought Margaret was the heiress? Other people have thought so, too, seeing how Laversha lets her lead in everything, but Margaret has scarcely anything of her own. Lady Susan, who wrote to you, is Laversha's aunt, and my intimate friend."

"So you know all about it!" I faltered, feeling utterly crestfallen and a little bit ashamed.

"I have known from the beginning. I did not like the idea at all at first, but it has turned out a good thing for me. Another time you had better confide in me; and whatever you do, never again accuse Laversha of being dishonest. The idea is preposterous!"

I did not sleep much that night. Never in all my

life had I been so utterly nonplussed, and how to atone to Laversha for my unkindness I did not know. She must have been a sweet little thing to have put up with my airs so long.

Before morning I had decided that her disposition was infinitely superior to that of Margaret.

I felt rather awkward as I took my place at the breakfast-table.

Laversha, rosy and smiling, was already in the room, but Margaret had not put in an appearance.

It occurred to me that she was unusually late this morning: a very serious failing in a young person. Laversha was always in time.

A parcel lay beside my plate.

"What is this?" I asked, unfastening the wrapper.

"A small present from me," Laversha said, bending down and kissing me.

I unfolded the soft pink paper, and there, bright and shining, were six spoons, the exact *fac-simile* of my old ones, and bearing the *Lewin crest!*

I looked up into her sweet smiling face, but I could not speak.

"I was so sorry not to have them in time for the garden party," she said, "but they had to be ordered specially, as the pattern is a peculiar one, and there was some difficulty about the crest; so I borrowed one of the old ones for a few hours. I was so afraid it would be missed, and I should be obliged to explain why I had taken it."

I did not know how or what I should have answered, but at that moment Arthur came in, and taking Laversha's arm in his own, presented her to me as his future wife.

And, although she was my paying guest, I did not make a single objection.

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## BROKEN ENGAGEMENTS.

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**S**a promise to marry a really binding engagement? Put in this simple form, the question seems as if it admitted of but one answer. Nine persons out of ten would say, "Of course it is." But the fact is that on this subject, as on many others, the bonds of morality have been stretched, if not altogether loosened, within the last century. The all but universal impatience of any tie which restrains a man from doing what he pleases has greatly weakened the popular conception of the binding character of the most important engagement into which a man can enter. In their heart of hearts a large number of men and women believe that a promise to marry ought not to be kept if—to use plain language—the promiser would rather not keep it. It need hardly be pointed out that a promise which is only to be fulfilled if the person promising does not change his mind is no promise at all.

As usual, modern laxity seeks to justify itself on the ground of superior morality. "No woman," it is said, "worthy of the name, desires to marry an unwilling bridegroom"; and there is in the minds of many people an unspoken conviction that the girl who would be so false to her higher nature as to wish to hold a man to his promise, when he desired his freedom, is an unwomanly kind of creature, who deserves to be left in the lurch.

The truth is that this view of the matter does away with betrothals in the proper sense of the word. It is precisely the resolution and the pledge that changing moods of feeling, changed circumstances, are not to affect the engagement which constitutes its sacred character.

Is there, then, it may be asked, no distinction in point of obligation between a promise to marry and the marriage vow itself? There certainly is a difference. The nuptial vow is absolute; a lover's vow is a



simple promise, which depends for its fulfilment on various circumstances. The husband takes the wife, the wife takes the husband, "for better, for worse"; but no one would contend that if, during an engagement, either party should fall under the power of a vice, such as a craving for alcohol, or become afflicted with an incurable disease, or suffer any great degradation, such as conviction for a crime, the engagement should necessarily be kept. All that is contended for is that a promise to marry is a true promise, as distinguished from a mere declaration of an intention. It ought, therefore, to be kept, even at the sacrifice of personal predilection. There are many who would admit this in principle, but hesitate to advise anyone to carry it out in practice. They would rather try to find an excuse for throwing on the other party to the engagement the burden of saying whether it should be kept or not—not a particularly straightforward or manly way of dealing with the difficulty. There are some who would go so far as to say that no change of inclination, no waning of affection, should be concealed from her to whom faith has been plighted, and that any change of feeling is enough to warrant either party in seeking a release. This is only another way of saying that a promise to marry is, unlike other promises, one which entails no obligation of keeping it.

It cannot be denied that there are states of feeling so well defined, so unmistakable, that it would be madness, and an injustice to the other party to the engagement, to treat them as non-existent. If a man, being engaged, conceives a violent passion for someone else, if—justly or unjustly—he takes a strong dislike to the woman he has promised to marry, or if he entertains an honest and certain conviction that the contemplated marriage would produce, not happiness, but misery, he would generally be justified in seeking a release from his promise, or even in refusing to fulfil it. And for a girl under such circumstances the rule would of course be the same. But changes of feeling are not generally of this violent or decided nature. To take a very common case—two young people meet, and are mutually pleased with each other; they have similar tastes, sentiments, and occupations; they are thrown a good deal together by the force of circumstances; they respect and like each other; and they become engaged, with no great strength of passion on either side. As time goes on the affection of one—say of the girl—increases. She is happy in her engagement, and looks forward to her bridal with joyful anticipation. The young man, on the other hand, does not feel that his affection for his sweetheart is increasing; on the contrary, it seems to be declining. He wishes he had not been so precipitate. He, on his side, looks forward to the wedding-day as to a day which will forge for him, if not fetters, at least shackles which will restrain his liberty all his days. He does not positively dislike the girl, but he would rather retain his liberty than marry her. Many men and most women would say that in such a case the engagement ought not to be kept—at least, there is a strong tendency in society to look leniently upon a man who under such circum-

stances asks, or takes—the distinction is seldom material—the liberty for which he yearns. But a man of good principle and sterling honour who found himself in such an unpleasant predicament would not seek to be set free. He would not simulate affection that he did not feel, but he would strive to love his betrothed as he ought to do if he were already married to her. He would remember that he could not, be he ever so willing, place the girl in the position in which he found her. He would remember that a man's pledged word means something, and that it cannot be broken without loss of honour. And, as a rule, a man who acts thus will find that he is happier in his marriage than if he had followed his own impulse. It is the nature of men—of very many men, at all events—to be fickle, to be dissatisfied with what they have, and to send forth wistful glances at what is beyond their reach; and it seldom happens that the gratification of such longings brings real and permanent happiness. Many an engagement has been broken for no better reason than that one of the parties felt a capricious and unreasonable desire to be rid of a promise voluntarily and deliberately made. If the general tone of social morals had been higher and more chivalrous than it is, these engagements would have been kept, and there is no ground for supposing that marriages so formed would not have been happy ones. Constancy in the betrothed, as in the married state, is very much more under one's control than some people care to believe. A man may not be able to keep his fancy under complete subjection, but he may restrain his thoughts, his looks, his desires. He may decline perilous invitations, and avoid such occasions as are likely to lead his heart astray. So much is his duty, and the probability is that he will gain, not lose, by following it.

There is one privilege of the upper classes which might well be extended to the great middle class of this country, and that is the publicity with which the betrothal of their daughters is attended. One cannot lightly withdraw from the fulfilment of an engagement which has been chronicled in the *Morning Post*. The mere knowledge that if the engagement is broken the fact will be made public in like manner exercises a wholesome deterrent influence on a man's wayward impulses. In Germany the same result is attained by the sending out of cards, and a sort of rite, which might be described as a rehearsal of the wedding ceremony. In England it too often happens that a girl's friends, or even a girl's parents, or even the girl herself, do not know whether she is bound or free. Such a thing as a secret engagement, or a quasi-engagement, or a conditional engagement, ought not to be tolerated. It is always unfair to the girl, and generally ends by bringing her more or less of disesteem and unhappiness. If it were the custom that a betrothal, like a wedding, should be celebrated by some public act, such as a feast, men would be more careful about forming such a tie; and having formed it, would find it more difficult to break than they do now. Few will be found to deny that this, at all events, would be a change for the better.