

Arms" it would be visited by stalwart young fellows from all the country side, who wanted to get a word with her; while the older men liked to be served by a pretty girl who had a laugh and a jest for them when they were merry, or a word of consolation when they were sad.

All things come to an end, and with the death of Mrs. Hallard, Margaret began to think that it would be well for her to make a change.

* * *

"If you go," said Nicholas, slowly, "it will be the end of the old house, for good and all."

"Oh, no, it won't, Nicholas," said Margaret, almost pleadingly. "You will get a good housekeeper, and perhaps a fresh servant—that girl Sally is no good at all—and there would be just as many customers as ever."

"And how many are there?" said Nicholas, sourly. He was seated at the centre table of the bar-parlor, where Margaret was looking after his wants, just as if he had been one of the guests himself. There was some excuse for this, seeing that he had been out all day and had come in soaked to the skin with rain. Possibly the bad weather—or some ill-success in his business affairs—had affected his temper, for his dark face wore an expression which was singularly gloomy and unpleasant. He was a tall man with broad shoulders, but a somewhat ungainly figure—loose-jointed and awkward in movement. His face would not have been bad-looking but for the sullen discontent with which his brow was usually disfigured. But the brow was narrow, the dark eyes small and rather deep set, and the thin lips, though half concealed by a growth of black beard and moustache, were anything but amiable.

"The old chaps that used to come in my father's time are dropping off, one by one, like dead leaves from a tree, and as for the farmers' sons and clerks from Burley, well, we all know what they come for. And a precious lot we shall see of them when you're gone."

"Oh, don't say that, Nicholas," said the girl, looking down with a troubled face. "It sounds, somehow, as if I were trying to get them here for my own sake, and you know very well I should not care if I never saw one of them again."

"There's no denying it but that you're a good looking girl, and they come to look at you. I should be glad enough to see the last of them if I hadn't to make a living; but, of course, if you take yourself off, there will be very little of a living to be got, and I may as well sell the business for what it will fetch, and go to Klondyke or South Africa."

Margaret stopped short and stared at him, her blue eyes full of wonderment, and her fair cheek growing a trifle paler. "But you would never do that, Nicholas? Why, your people have had this house for nigh upon two hundred years."

"There won't be much left of it in a year or two longer then," said Nicholas gruffly. "It's mouldering away before your eyes. It would not sell for much. The price would not cover the expenses of the last two or three years, not to speak of the fire insurance. I can't tell why my father insured it for such a lot of money; the place isn't worth it."

"Your mother always said that he loved the old inn," said Margaret, softly, "and I don't wonder at it, I'm sure. Of course, it's dark, and it's old fashioned; but I like the oak beams and the settles and carved chests much better than the smart, new furniture at the hotel in Burley."

"Why don't you stay here, then?"

Margaret's face flushed, and she turned it away while she took a plate from the fender. "Well, Nicholas," she said, "to put it plain, Mrs. Thistleton has been here, talking to me, and she says that I oughtn't to stay unless you will get an older housekeeper as well. I know you can't afford to do that, so I think the best thing will be for me to take myself off and get a place. I shouldn't like

to do anything that would make folks think ill of me."

"I have asked you before," said Nicholas, his black eyes flaming, "and I ask you again, why won't you stay with me as my wife, and mistress of the place that you are so fond of? That would satisfy Mrs. Thistleton or any other busy-body." "You are very kind, Nicholas," said the girl, "and if I could marry you I would; but I can't."

"And why can't you, I should like to know?"

"That is no business of yours. I have said 'No' to you half a dozen times, and I shall say it to the end of my life."

"That is no answer," said Nicholas. "It is because you have got somebody else in your eye. I know that. I suppose it is Harry Medicott."

Margaret's eyes fell, and the color once more rose in her cheeks; but she changed his plate, and brought his cheese and bread without remark. His lean, sinewy hand came down upon her wrist at the last moment, and held it tight.

"Speak the truth," he said. "Is it Harry Medicott, or is it not?"

"Well, since you ask me straight out, I don't mind telling you," said Margaret, "that it is."

"But he has not been home for eighteen months," said Nicholas, in a choked voice.

"No, but he asked me before he went, and he writes to me."

"Does he tell you how many sweethearts he has in the ports he goes to?" Nicholas sneered. "You can't trust a sailor. He is here to-day and gone to-morrow, and no dependence can be placed on any one of them."

"I can depend upon Harry," said Margaret, almost sharply.

"Ah, you are like all women," said Nicholas, with a sort of snarl. He released her hand, and pushed his plate away. "You love to be wheedled and taken in by the first man with bright eyes and curly hair that speaks to you; but I am your cousin, if I am nothing else, and I shall settle with Harry Medicott when he comes home again. You may be glad enough to take up with Nicholas Hallard yet."

"Even if Harry stayed away from me forever," said Margaret, with spirit, "I don't see how it would make me love you any better, Nicholas. We have always been very good friends; but I do wish you would learn, once and for all, that I don't want to be anything else."

"It is all or nothing with me," said Nicholas, pushing back his chair, "and if you won't have my love, you will have my hate, and then, perhaps, you will wish that you had spoken differently."

Mrs. Thistleton had recommended Margaret to a friend of hers at Burley, and the girl had almost made up her mind to take the place that had been thus found for her; but she was a little undecided about the day of her departure from the inn, and wondered whether she ought not to stay at least until Christmas was well over, so that she might help with the guests, of whom at that time there were usually a goodly number.

But when she hinted this to Nicholas, she found, to her surprise, that he was not very anxious for her to stay over Christmas, seeing that she did not intend to remain in perpetuity. "If you go at all," he said to her, "it's no particular matter to me when you go. As good one day as another."

"But have you got a housekeeper?" asked Margaret, anxiously.

"No; and don't want one. I shall shut up the place when you are gone."

"Oh, no, Nicholas."

"I tell you I shall. I shall sell the old place for what it will fetch, and start off to make my fortune somewhere else if I can. I am not going to be saddled with it much longer." And then he walked off, muttering something about stock and prices and insurance, which she did not understand.

She was forced, therefore, to choose a day for herself; and on inquiry she found that she could go to her new situation almost as soon as she

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