

A FASCINATING GIRL

BY F. W. ROBINSON.

Author of "For Her Sake," "The Romance of a Back Street," etc.

"You are an extraordinary young woman," exclaimed the major. "You should have been in a better position than that of a refreshment counter. By Jove! I am receiving advice, instead of giving it."



"You are an extraordinary young woman."

"I am very rude, I fear."

"Not at all, don't mention it," he replied. "Like rudeness of this kind; it does one good. You're straightforward, if I'm not."

"I remember. I said last night you were not straightforward, and you were of an..."

"Yes—because—but never mind that. Now tell me, Miss Daly, has my nephew asked you to marry him?"

"Once to marry him—several times to run away with him."

"And you have refused him the 'several times'?"

"Yes."

"And the 'once to marry him'—when was that?"

"Last night."

"I thought so; and you said 'No'?"

"Yes; I can't hear him—I could have him almost—haven't I said so?—if he wasn't such a fool and a child," she added, passionately.

"There, take him away, sir; take him away, and you do your duty for once."

"Upon my word, Miss Daly, I was never talked to in this way before. I have been all my life doing my duty."

"You have failed here, I think," she murmured.

"And have you done your duty, Miss Daly? Let me ask you that in all kindness, and as a man of my age may do to a young lady, at least in the world and exposed to temptation."

"I have tried. We can all but try," she answered. "I hope I have not wholly failed."

"To have been asked 'several times' to run away with my nephew implies a patient listener. I wish you had not said 'several times,' but only once; and then a sound slap to his foolish head, and a gallon of that best tea 'thru' over his ears."

"Yes, it might have been wise," was the quiet response; "but one has to bear a great deal, and take everything as it is, behind the counter, or else the proprietors are very disliking and had tempered, and running the trade. And perhaps it was a jest—'thru' it is difficult to take in earnest everything he says."

"He's a fool, Miss Daly," said the excited major; "a perfect fool!"

"I am afraid he's not particularly clever."

"Perhaps," he added, "if I did look like him a little more, it would not be lost time on my part."

"I don't think it would. He is naturally a good tempered man—most of the Junction girls like to see him at the station."

"And you will not be sorry to part with him?"

"I shall be very glad," she answered frankly.

"It has struck me that a few of the young ladies in your position are fond of attention even from men like young Todd."

"A few, I repeat, but there are not a few deserving of kind words and honest folks' sympathy."

"Trust so."

"Try and believe so, Maj. Crawshaw, when you are inclined to be hard on your judgment upon it," she murmured. "Good day."

"Are you going now?"

"Yes, if you will allow me."

"I would not detain you for the world against your will. I am obliged, deeply obliged, by all that you have said, and I think you have taught me my duty, instead of my teaching you anything," he said. "May I shake hands with you before I go?"

"Certainly," she answered, putting a little gloved hand in his.

"I should like to ask you one question, if you will let me?"

"She bowed her head in assent."

"Are you satisfied with your position at Battlement Junction?" he inquired. "Would you not be happier in a different sphere of life?"

"She hesitated for an instant."

"My mother, who was a widow, died suddenly and left me very poor. I was alone in the world, and Mr. Freshwater, who is my cousin, told me this was the best that I could do for myself."

"He's as big a liar as young Todd," cried the major. "You haven't been happy in a berth of this kind—you're miserable."

"One is never very happy without friends—but with a sudden sigh, 'I exist; and I hope for better days to come.'"

"They will come to such you—better days and truer friends than you have found at Battlement. Good-by, Miss Daly; God bless you! if you will allow an old soldier to say so."

"Thank you," she murmured in reply.

Maj. Crawshaw turned to go, with a formal and to a considerable height, and then started away like a man at the head of his regiment, and Ruth Daly went slowly and thoughtfully homeward.

CHAPTER V.

THE DRESSING MAJOR.

Maj. Crawshaw told his nephew to town with him the very next morning. By what inducements or terrible threats the young gentleman was persuaded or forced to accompany his relative matters not to the purpose of our story; certain it is that young Todd was borne off to London to spend a few days with the major in that office's snug chambers, in the Albany, and that the days lengthened into weeks, and weeks into months, before he was back again at Battlement. Meanwhile young Todd was launched, possibly hurtling into society, which he took to kindly after his first dip, the major having been wise enough to discover for him somewhere one or two congenial souls also partial to billiards and tobacco-smoke—young fellows with no starch in them, but sons of old friends, with nice siles shimmering in the background somewhere, and decided to burst presently upon the enraptured gaze of Todd, as the artificial major very well knew, and even had designed from the first. Six or seven of these were to be his first acquaintance, and he was to turn aside from young Todd's attentions, which became manifest by slow degrees, and after he had heard to Battlement. He was a free man, however; he had not acted precipitately; he was taking time to consider his future course, he thought, and had an idea in his mind that it would be "jolly" after all this society, to see Miss Daly again for a little while. Herein he was disappointed, for Miss Daly was not to be seen at the refreshment counter, and Battlement Junction and Battlement Junction folk knew her no more. She had vanished away, and the young ladies behind the pork pies and the sand-wiches did not know what had become of her. They were not even curious as to what had become of her; and Miss Rackett was rude enough to add: "And a good job, too," when she informed Miss Todd, somewhat spitefully, that Miss Daly had withdrawn from service at the refreshment counter forever and ever, that she had been gone, "oh, goodness knows how long."

"I don't care," said the major, blithely. "Oh, but you will care one day."

"I'm not afraid now of your making a fool of my nephew, or of my nephew's being able to make a fool of you," he said. "And this is the way of the world, and a tower's wife, who he can't have a more sensible wife, and the sooner you settled the matter the better, if it's coming round to that. There,"

and the Battlement girls altogether after this. He went back to London, and to the lady with the wren, and to his uncle, to whom he said not a word concerning Ruth Daly's disappearance from the Junction counter, keeping that little fact to himself for a reason which he could hardly have explained had he been called upon to do so. He liked to keep things to himself, did Master Todd. Nature had not endowed him with a capacious or communicative soul, which was nature's fault, of course, and not his own. He had a faint notion that his uncle would have been very glad to hear that Miss Daly had got the "sack," and so he would not tell his uncle that she had gone. It was young Todd's way, and it saved unpleasant comments at any rate. His uncle might have said, with Miss Rackett, "And a good job, too," and at all events Maj. Crawshaw should not have the opportunity of saying it before one who had been "more dreadful spoons" on Miss Daly than he had ever cared to confess.

And it was absolutely certain that Maj. Crawshaw was unaware of Miss Daly's departure from Battlement, or did that able and indefatigable old soldier know more of that young lady's movements than his nephew? For Maj. Crawshaw was not of a communicative disposition, any more than young Todd was; and he was sly at all events in this matter, though it was for young Todd's good and Miss Daly's that he should keep things to himself, and a cloud forever between them. There was no stability in young Todd's respect for those beneath him in social position, no real love in his entire system; and hang it! little Ruth Daly was too good for the lout altogether. Miss Daly, thought the major, was a clever and sensible little woman, with her pretty head screwed on the right way, and with less infernal nonsense about her than he had discovered in any woman yet, and he respected Miss Daly because she was a girl who knew how to respect herself.

He told Mr. Freshwater this at the International hotel, St. W., Javelins and Freshwater's new and colossal speculation at Lambeth Bridge, where, oddly enough, Miss Daly was to be found in the post of cashier and bookkeeper since promotion which Mr. Freshwater had considered himself justified in offering to Miss Daly, after a quiet little talk, of which Miss Daly was never weary to Mr. Crawshaw and his speculative self.

Miss Daly was surprised one morning to find Maj. Crawshaw being shown into her own little counting house, some three or four months after their last interview at Battlement.

"Here's a gentleman, I think you know, Miss Daly," said Mr. Freshwater, as the major made his best bow and shook hands with her.

"The major?" Miss Daly exclaimed. "I forget your name; but Mr. Todd's uncle, is it?"

Maj. Crawshaw coughed as Mr. Freshwater took his departure. It is not pleasant for one's name to be forgotten, and to stand witness to a short memorial individual's struggling to recall it, and he said he had again with a grim survey of her. Mr. Todd's uncle, too! What a terrible way of recollecting a man, and a major!

"How strange you should find me here! that of Mr. Freshwater—"

Maj. Crawshaw hastened to explain. "I don't at all strange," he said quickly. "I dine here very frequently; there are more life and bustle than at my club—old-fashioned now, and half my friends away at the war, and so on; and Javelins and Freshwater are excellent customers to the British public, and one gets something to eat that is decent—and here I am."

"Oh," said the major, reddening, "a chance word or two with Ditchwater—Freshwater, mean—and his management and his finances are excellent, and he said he found that ladies made excellent clerks, and that he could trust the books of the International to Miss Daly; and then I naturally said, 'What Miss Daly—' not from Battlement, surely? And surely it was! I hope you are very well."

"I am very well, thank you," replied Miss Daly, regarding him thoughtfully, even critically.

"I am very pleased to hear it. This is an agreeable change of life from the Junction refreshment counter."

"It is harder work here," said Miss Daly. "There is more responsibility and less amusement."

"Oh dear! Why, you don't mean to say—"

"No, I don't say anything," replied Miss Daly, with a smile, as if enjoying Maj. Crawshaw's surprise; "only that I prefer my life in the Junction, and that I am indebted to Mr. Freshwater for putting such confidence in me."

"Yes—exactly," said the major; "and I am sure you were never fit for the counter, and feeding the strangers and cads in front of it; a false position, young lady—a totally false position, I assure you."

"You must not be too hard upon my class, major. You remember?"

"How you took me to task," he replied. "I should think I did remember that. I—I—admired—but there, you don't like compliments."

"No."

"And you are very busy?"

"Yes, I am rather busy just now."

"I would not disturb you for the world," said Maj. Crawshaw; "but I thought I should like to see you again for a few minutes, after Freshwater had told me that it was the real Miss Daly in office here. It was almost like coming to see an old friend. Perhaps you would like to see Miss Daly, Freshwater said to me just now; and 'By Jove! I should,' I told him. And that is the reason for my troubling you."

"No trouble at all," said Miss Daly, smiling again and taking up her pen, at which significant hint he turned to go away, holding out his hand once more to her after a moment's hesitation.

"Good evening, major."

"You—you don't ask after my nephew," he said; "what has become of him—whether I am doing my duty by him and looking after him, as you advised me to do?"

"He is well, I hope."

"I thought he was. I see him very often, and he appears to possess all his old health and spirits."

"Good God! has he found you out again, then?" exclaimed the major. "The awful scamp! he has never told—"

"He has not seen me," said Miss Daly, demurely; "but through these my blinks I see him very frequently coming up to luncheon with his friends. I am glad he is well."

"Humph! yes; exactly so. We are all glad," muttered the major. "But if he's out you are here he will be very much astonished and delighted. I—I am afraid."

"Afraid!" murmured Miss Daly.

"Yes, because—but there, I cannot help your meeting. I don't know that I should try, if I thought—Dash it! Good evening, Miss Daly—good evening."

Maj. Crawshaw's role away in a condition very much perturbed, and the International hotel, S.W., echoed not with his martial tread for many a day afterward.

CHAPTER VI.

A CRISIS.

Two months had gone by before Maj. Crawshaw entered the huge caravanserai again. It was six in the evening when he came, and he found that it was half past eight ere he had finished it. It was a quarter to nine when he took the liberty of proceeding to the counting house, which Miss Daly was thinking of closing for the night as he approached.

"Good evening, Miss Daly. I trust you will excuse so late a visitor."

"Certainly, major."

They shook hands together, and then Ruth Daly asked if he had been in the country or abroad.

"Why should you think that?" he asked, almost pre-emptively.

"I thought you dined here very frequently—at least I understood you to say so," replied Miss Daly.

"I did say so. I used to dine here very frequently, said the major; 'but I have altered my habits lately.'"

"Indeed?"

"Indeed," he added, with a suddenness which made Miss Daly jump, "I did not want to be a spy again upon you and my nephew. I thought if he chose to come here, and had made up his mind to come here, I had better keep away, and leave you to yourselves."

"That was very kind of her," said Miss Daly, quietly; "but his people would have been very much alarmed, and not at all obliged to you."

"I don't care," said the major, blithely. "Oh, but you will care one day."

"I'm not afraid now of your making a fool of my nephew, or of my nephew's being able to make a fool of you," he said. "And this is the way of the world, and a tower's wife, who he can't have a more sensible wife, and the sooner you settled the matter the better, if it's coming round to that. There,"

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