

A FASCINATING GIRL

BY F. W. ROBINSON.

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

CHAPTER III.

WHILE THE IRON WAS HOT.

Miss Crawshaw was not in "good form" that particular evening. He had been wanting in perspicacity; he had blundered egregiously last night, facing the enemy whose machinations he had come to baton especially to circumvent, he felt himself still more at a loss. He did not know what to say on the spur of the moment; the real Miss Daly was not expected to find, but a calm, self-possessed young lady, whose service behind a refreshment stand had not spoiled or rendered "flashy." This quiet being might have been taken for a lady anywhere—might have held her place in any society, he thought, she had had the discretion to hold her tongue. For, of course, she would be as sharp and jerry as Miss Racket when she began to discourse—all refreshment stand conversation being essentially jerry, keeping time with the money as it rattled in the till. No; he was mistaken again; Miss Daly's voice had not an atom's worth of jerriness in it.

"Your name is Daly?" the major said, with the want of a better question to start with. "Yes, sir. What do you require of me?" "I should be glad of a little private conversation, Miss Daly," he said. "At what time do you leave this place?"

Miss Daly looked somewhat astonished, and Miss Racket, who was standing behind her, had been all kinds of strange beasts prowling about her path since her novitiate. The eyes that encountered hers were clear and sharp gray eyes, that were difficult to associate with any guile. For the present, at least, and despite the singularity of his question, she could afford her interlocutor the benefit of the doubt.

"Have you any particular reason for asking me?" she said.

"What is it?"

"I wish to speak to you on business of importance."

"I do not believe in any business of importance between you and me," said Miss Daly, coldly, "unless," she added, quickly, "unless you have heard from my uncle—have been sent to tell me all the news."

"I have not," said the major, "I am a member of your family, Miss Daly," said the major, "and the business of importance to which I allude affects my family rather than my own."

"I can have nothing to do with it."

"Unfortunately you have."

"If you will kindly explain?"

"Not here," said the old soldier, very sternly; "certainly not at this counter, and with these young women listening to us."

"You have my full permission to speak out, sir."

"Where do you live when away from this place?"

"I do not feel called upon to tell you," was the grave reply.

"And you will not tell me, possibly?"

"No, sir, I will not."

"Confound it!" he blurted forth, "what are you afraid of?"

"I am not afraid of you, certainly," said Miss Daly, very calmly. "I hardly doubt you, but I am not disposed to put my trust in you."

"You distrust me?"

"I distrust any one who is not straightforward," replied Miss Daly.

"Very well—very well," said the major, turning very red, "this is the first time in all my life I have been told I was not straightforward. I—I can't mention the nature of my business without rendering you an object of ridicule to the rest of the young ladies present. They are listening now, for heaven's sake, look at them."

Miss Daly laughed pleasantly and momentarily at this.

"Ah! yes—they listen a little; and, with a sigh, they listen a little more. I am not one of them quite."

"I hope you'll never be such a young fool as to try and imitate their ways," said the major.

"Oh, they are not as they seem," said Miss Daly. "They are very good and kind sometimes; they are honest, and hard working, and they take care of themselves bravely, considering what defenseless women most of them are."

"Bravo! Miss Daly," said the major. "Let me shake hands with you for sticking up for your class."

Miss Daly did not accept the invitation; she was indignant now, and disposed to turn from him.

"By Jove! you're a brave little woman," he continued; "and it was beastly unfair of me to sneer at that fashion at you. Not that I meant to sneer exactly—I intended to advise you, as your own father might do—and I'm old enough to be your father, say and child, remember that—and—Holla, you sir! What the devil brings you down here?"

"Good gads! uncle, is that you?"

"Yes, it is," said his uncle.

"Do they know you are coming, up at the house?" asked Mr. Todd.

"I thought I would give them an agreeable surprise," was the uncle's evasive answer. "It's a year and a half since I was at Battleton last."

"So long as that!" said the uncompromising nephew. "I shouldn't have thought it. Will you—will you take anything?" he stammered forth.

Miss Crawshaw glanced from her nephew to Miss Daly. The nephew was staring hard at the lady; the lady was looking down demurely at the marble counter.

"Too innocent," murmured the major. "Like a dove, he put the lady down as 'major'—very, very, and a woman of whom to be wary from that time forth. She had blushed and giggled and leered, as Miss Racket would have done, he would not have been afraid of Miss Daly; but the semblance of utter unconsciousness was an awful proof of the power of the difficult nature of the task which he had set himself. He was not very wary in this business."

He replied to his nephew's offer, "No, thank you, nothing more till we get home," and he linked his arm in that of Edwin's forthwith.

"I didn't think of going to the house just at present," stammered young Todd; "I have only just left it."

"It's so long a time since I have been this way, that I am very likely to miss it without your guidance," said the major.

"Yes—but—"

"And surely there is nothing here that is worth a second glance over," he added, sarcastically; "the refreshments are bad; and the waiters can leave to the passengers, porters and shopmen."

"Ah!—yes—exactly. Shall I call this?"

"No, we will walk, Edwin. The luggage is loaded to follow me. What a time it is since we have had a long talk together!"

But young Todd was not to be led away wholly without an effort; he had had time to reflect on the position.

"One moment, uncle," he said, disengaging his arm; "I always have a cigar after dinner. I'll keep you a moment."

He stood at a little distance from the counter, and watched his nephew approach Miss Daly and give the order required. Already the truth was very patent to him that there was an understanding of some kind between Edwin Todd and Miss Daly, and that they were neither inclined to trust him in the matter. Already they both suspected him, and guessed the object of his coming; it would be necessary to strike while the iron was hot. He was a man of action, quick and prompt; he thought a thing, or said a thing, he carried it out at once. There had been no shilly-shallying at any period of his existence. "That able and indefatigable officer" he had once been styled in a dispatch to headquarters, and it had brought him promotion and made him a proud man. Able and indefatigable he was—who knew that better than he—and he was not going to be baffled at the outset by a pig-headed boy and a chit of a girl. No; he was too old a soldier and too used to campaigning.

Young Todd was muttering something to Miss Daly—making fresh arrangements, it possibly—when the major said sharply: "Come, Edwin, we can't hang about here all night."

"All right," said Edwin, evidently in some fear of his uncle at present, "I am ready."

A few more words from him to Miss Daly, the same instant expression on Miss Daly's face after they girls, if this any authority here. By Jove! Ed! after the whole business, I don't think half the town goes there. I don't know," said Edwin Todd, mildly. He was a mild young man of outward aspect, and very difficult to argue with. He had an unpleasant habit of agreeing on any point for the sake of peace and quietness, and keeping his own opinion to himself, and this was always the difficulty with young Todd.

"You go there," said the major, suddenly, "for one."

"Yes; but I'm not half the town exactly, and—"

"And you're always there, Edwin; you know you are."

"Who told you so? Mother?" asked his nephew; "or my sisters?"

"I don't know," said the major, "but I wrote to say she was unhappy about you—that she was afraid you had formed an attachment to one of these young women, and that I had better run down and see what mischief was done, and what mischief could be prevented, and here I am. There."

It was no wonder that Miss Crawshaw's feelings were hurt, when Miss Daly had hinted that he was far from straightforward; there was no beating about the bush in this instance. He had told his nephew plainly what was the object of his visit, and within a quarter of an hour of his meeting with him, too. That was brisk and frank and soldier-like, at any rate.

Young Todd smiled in a galvanic kind of fashion, and shifted his stick from his right hand to his left.

"There's no mischief done, uncle, and there's no mischief to prevent," he said at last.

"That's well. I'm glad of it."

"The women folk are foolish and nervous about it, and—"

"About what?" asked the major, interrupting.

"About my going to the station and having a little chat now and then—as young fellows will you know—with a pretty woman. I don't say you have done it yourself in your day, uncle."

"Hundreds of times," was the ready answer; "but it was all fair sailing, sir, and no less sentiment or false principles behind it all. Do you understand me?"

"Yes—no—I think so."

"I wasn't fool enough to fall in love with any woman of that kind."

"I suppose not."

"Are you?"

"In love! Oh, no!" said Edwin Todd, with a feeble little laugh; "not exactly; but I've had my share of love."

"Although, if I had been in love, I should have been man enough to own it," continued the major. "There's something simple in it, and nothing disgraceful, if it's an honest affection."

"Precisely," said Todd; "if my opinion, uncle."

"But you're not in love!"

"Not I. Not a bit of it," said the vulgar young Todd, with a rather feeble laugh. "You're too sensible a fellow, I hope?"

"I'm very glad to hear it, Edwin, for your mother's sake as well as your own; but don't speak with your teeth closed; it aggravates me," said the major. "And now to the second and more important point. Are any of the girls at the Junction in love with you, do you think?"

Young Todd blushed and stammered, and even hazarded a wink at his uncle.

"I shouldn't like to say; really, one can't say exactly, you know," was his shy and hesitating answer.

"I should say it was extremely unlikely," remarked the major, after looking askance at his nephew; "but women are easily flattered into thinking a man is in love with them, and their silly heads are turned in all directions but the right."

"That's their fault," was young Todd's comment.

"And their misfortune always, poor women. Why, I consider that a man who feels an affection does not feel, and so misleads a girl out of her sense to think of him, is an infernal scamp—a most infernal scamp, sir."

"Why, yes," said young Todd, fairly alarmed at this sudden exhibition of fierceness, "so he is, unless—"

"Unless she encourages him, and leads him on—knows that he is not likely to marry her, and still prefers his company to other fellows. Don't you see that?"

"I see a woman going fast to the devil, then," said the major, "and I say God help her! that's all. But as for the man, he's either a fool or a scamp, and I say God help him, with all my heart. He doesn't deserve any sympathy; surely you don't think he does?"

"No—no; certainly not."

"But we will have a long talk over this presently, now that we have cleared the briars and brushwood away; there's been a little nonsense going on at the refreshment stand but I am glad you tell me there's nothing serious between you and that Daly girl."

"Serious?" said young Todd, with another unpleasant laugh; "of course not."

"Your mother will be glad to hear it."

"I have told her so a thousand times already," said Edwin Todd, and for the first time rather mildly.

"Ah! but not as you have spoken to me, as one man can speak to another, face to face, and without a lie between them," said the major.

"Yes—exactly," murmured the nephew; "but I don't meet his uncle face to face then, but looked down upon the flinty path of the old town and set his teeth closer together than ever."

The major was a man of tact, and did not "worry" the question. They walked on in silence after this; he had spoken out and paved the way to a complete understanding; he was disposed, being a truthful man, to believe his nephew, if not wholly and implicitly, and to think that the women folk had made the usual mistake out of the customary moloch. So far, so good. It was a very fair beginning, considering that this was the first of his arrival; and the major let his nephew's arm, strode forward, pushed open the great swing gate, and entered first.

"You'll find them all within, uncle," said Edwin; "I shall not be long."

"I shall be back in a few minutes; I have forgotten something for to-morrow—in the town, you know; and young Todd was off like a leaping."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAJOR SETTLES IT SATISFACTORILY.

Ruth Daly, prayer book in hand, was coming quietly home from the church following day, when across the last meadow between the church and town she encountered Miss Crawshaw. She recognized very quickly

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the tall, inquisitive gentleman of the preceding evening, and would have passed him had he not stood direct in her way in the little footpath that ran across the fields there.

"Good morning, Miss Daly," he said, raising his hat.

Miss Daly bowed slightly, but did not respond to his salutation.

"I thought you would come this way," he continued, "I have been looking for you."

"Indeed?"

"They told me at your lodgings that you had gone to church, so I came to meet you."

"They had no right to tell you where I had gone, and you had no right to ask, sir," said Miss Daly, drawing herself up very proudly now.

"Pardon me, but I had a right."

"To persecute me because I serve at Battleton Junction. Ah, well, you are not the first gentleman who has thought that," she said satirically.

"I have not persecuted you, young lady," said Miss Crawshaw, very gravely, "and I have no intention of doing so."

"Then good morning."

"But I have an intention of speaking to you about my nephew; I have come from London expressly for that purpose."

"You had better speak to your nephew himself."

"I have done so, as you," he added, with emphasis, "are perfectly aware."

"He told you so last night, after he had given me the slip in a most ungentlemanly fashion. Did he not?"

"He told me that your nephew, Miss Crawshaw, and that he was very much afraid of you. But I am not, sir," she added looking at him fearfully, "and I will trouble you to let me pass to my home."

The major half drew aside to allow her to pass, and then altered his mind and looked at him fearfully, "and I will trouble you to let me pass to my home."

"No, I can't be put down in this fashion," he said firmly. "I must speak, and I will speak, and if you are not afraid of me, you have no intention of doing so."

"Very well; come to the counter to-morrow and leave me in peace to-day."

"I don't wish to go," said the major, indignantly. "I have had enough of this senseless banter of the two of you. You know my nephew is waiting for you well enough."

"Where is he?"

"Outside your own door—hanging about like a thief."

"He told me he would never do that again."

"He would tell you anything, my child; he's an abominable liar," said the major.

"Yes, he is not very truthful," said Ruth Daly, thoughtfully.

"You had better listen to an old man like me; the major remarked, 'though he may tell you some plain truths, than to a weak Miss Daly, after all.'

Ruth Daly looked at the uncle's earnest face attentively, and her manner changed for the better, and became more natural.

"Perhaps it would. Come along, then," she said.

"Yes; away from him, please," she added, with a little shudder.

"You don't like my nephew?"