

THE GIRL WITH A PAST

Involving the Tribulations of a Benedict.

BY KATE MASTERSON

ILLUSTRATIONS by ARMAND BOTH

SHE WAS THE LAST person you would expect to meet at a table d'hôte restaurant where the half bottle of wine is included in the fifty cent dinner. There was a certain dashing refinement about her that placed her above the rather tired out and shabby followers of the professions that gathered nightly at the board of Thurzo.

There was some foreign suggestion in her manner, the tilt of her head and the gay and unquestioning comradeship with the men who came early so they might secure chairs at the little round table where her own place was kept for her each evening.

They were men sufficiently unlike my business self to give them a sort of foreign attractiveness—artists, writers and an actor now and then lured by the magic of spaghetti and the low prices charged for the excellently cooked, cleanly served food—something unusual, I know, at eating places of this kind. The result was that Thurzo, half French, half Russian, was becoming prosperous and his room getting too crowded to be popular.

I am not a sincere table d'hôte. I like a chop and a baked potato in some quiet corner where there is less of the strident gaiety than in the haunts where Art feeds; but Thurzo's was near the Benedict apartments where I lived the lonely life of a middle aged bachelor, engaged in money-grubbing pursuits scarcely conducive to romantic adventure.

It amazed me to realize how much this young woman interested me. I knew there was what novelists call a *story* in her. She was a mystery, although her talk was free and her laughs many.

She was easily the belle of the place, and the other women accorded her only the briefest of nods on her comings and goings, although Thurzo's code called for a strict good-fellowship. You sat so close to your neighbor that his elbows were in your ribs most of the time and you depended on him largely for such favors as the vinegar and oil, the bread and the salt, for there was but one girl to wait on the polyglot company and most of her time was given to carrying the things to and from the kitchen.

Here Thurzo presided, cooking with his own hands the tender boiled beef, beans steamed to an ivory pallor and creamy fibre, sauces glorified with

dashes of strange cordials. Going in to pay him one night, as was the custom, I complimented him upon his dishes and told him that they were like to those that I used to get in my young days at a famous Paris café.

I ventured a remark about Mademoiselle, the mysterious lady who added such beauty and light to the dining room, her laugh just then rippling in to us. Thurzo is a European, and I rather expected him to give me some piquant details. I confess I was quite curious. He smiled in an odd way, lifted his shoulders to his ears, replying in discreet phrases that all who paid might come to a restaurant. He also suggested that the Lady had previously mingled in other walks of life where gold had been in greater plenty.

It was true that her dress was the simplest, but it had its charm. She was slim and boyish of figure, of an age almost impossible to determine, but past girlhood certainly by a dozen years. But she reigned over her little court so royally that even when she smoked, it seemed a graceful and ladylike accomplishment.

A WORN out newspaper woman who sat next to me one evening seemed disturbed by the laughter of the Lady, and I asked her quite casually if she knew who the fair stranger was. She told me that no one knew her; that she was known as Mademoiselle and that while she flirted with the men who thronged about her at dinner, she allowed none of them to escort her home or to call upon her.

"She cultivates mystery," said the newspaper woman; "it's a wonder she doesn't wear a mask. Believe me, that girl has a Past!"

In this way I got to think of her as the Girl with a Past and I pictured it in all sorts of lurid lights. Yet I felt glad that her present, so far as one could judge, was a simple, light-hearted one. For she enjoyed herself hugely during these nightly banquets. Like all men who have never married, I have kept a reverence for women, and I did not like to see her smoke, although it was a treat to see how she poised the cigarette and blew spiral streamers up to the ceiling, like a stage adventuress.

And then it came to me that there was an air of the stage about her attitudes and manner and that

this, possibly, was her profession, in one of its many branches. She left Thurzo's each night at eight or thereabouts. I concluded she was, to me, that unknown quantity, an actress.

I wanted in the worst way to find out more about her, but I could not pursue my questionings there at the restaurant without seeming to pry or to be over-smitten with her charms. I did not mix in much with the others, and while she gave me a glance now and then I do not think she noticed me particularly.

When she went out after paying her score, her crisp pleasant nod took in every one who happened to be in the room, myself as well as the cat. If I had been a younger man I suppose I should have tried to make her acquaintance, or have followed her just to find where she lived. But I have passed my adventurous days, having learned of the strange places they sometimes lead to.

I did not fancy myself in love, but the interest and curiosity I felt were uncanny. It seemed to me that she was fitted for higher conquest than that of the knights of her round table, and I longed to help her to some better level. The drifts of talk that came from them were largely commonplace slang, the stories were not only old, but in bad taste—there was too much of the good-fellow atmosphere for a table at which a lady sat.

The homage was so cheap, and yet it seemed the breath of life to her. At times she raised her wine glass with a toast to some cherished Bohemian delusion, and once as she did so, her eyes met mine across the room and she faltered and put down the glass, like a child caught in some mischief. I suppose I was gazing rather steadily at her; perhaps criticizing.

One night a particularly vile storm of snow and sleet and rain had thinned down Thurzo's clientele to a few nearby birds like myself who came through the door with gusts of windy, biting weather. She came in a little late and her glance fell when she saw her table vacant of its courtiers. I was particularly pleased to realize that I might have a chance of observing her normally reposed and also that so few heads shut out my view of her. I settled well back in my corner affecting to be looking through the *Figaro* file.

SHE went on sadly with her dinner. The light had left her eyes, her voice for once was hushed, her laughter still. She seemed lonely and I was just contemplating crossing boldly to her table when Thurzo, who evidently noticed her depression, slid into a chair near her and ordered a cherry brandy.

He began to speak in rather bad English, trying to be jocular, gallant, (Continued on Page 12)



The girl with a past came in, carrying a note book and pencil



She was a mystery, although her talk was free and her laughs many