

## *A Sewer Rat*

### *A Leaf From A Detective's Life*

DO YOU ask me if there was not something extraordinary connected with my marriage? Well, I must confess that the incidents which brought it about *were* rather singular, and if you care to hear how it all happened, seat yourself comfortably in that old armchair, and I will do my best to interest you in the relation of what was really a very strange adventure.

Old Solomon Denton was a hard case truly, and if he had been alone in the world, respectable people would have had nothing to do with him. In his younger days he was as good as the best in our town, for his ancestors were among the original settlers of the place; and, when his father died, leaving him the proprietorship of the oldest and most famous inn then known in that neighborhood, no young man in Rivermouth had better prospects, or was more universally liked.

But time brings many changes. Rivermouth, from a small town, grew to be a large city, and Sol Denton grew to be a hard case, as I have said. The change was gradual in both cases, but not less certain in one than in the other. Love of company and jollity led to the ruin of the landlord of the Bear's Head Inn, and when the town had grown large enough to have a city's reputation for wickedness, Solomon had the reputation of being one of the worst men in it. At the time of which I am speaking he was about fifty years old, and was known as a professional gambler, while the Bear's Head had degenerated into a third-rate tavern and gaming-saloon, frequented solely by sporting men, or, as the police shrewdly suspected, by characters of a still worse type.

But Denton was by no means cast out of good society even then. In the prime of his manhood, when everything looked fair before him, he had married a lovely girl whose family was then, and still remained, among the aristocracy of Rivermouth. Her friends could not desert her, and for her sake they still tolerated him; the fact that he was the owner of the once famous inn serving as an excuse to their pride, and as a cloak to hide his more discreditable pursuits.

It was not alone his wife's influence, however, that kept Solomon Denton just within the pale of respectable society. He had a daughter, an only child, whose loveliness was the toast of all the youth, high and low, in the county, and whose gentle temper made her a favorite with her own sex everywhere. Mabel Denton was, indeed, an angel of goodness and beauty, and men who would have considered it disgrace to be seen in company with the father, would gladly have welcomed the daughter at their firesides, and even urged their sons to pay court to her. Not that the young men who knew her needed urging. Mabel had suitors by the score, the heirs of the proudest families in the county, and others in all ranks, from the humble servant to the princely merchant; but, as yet, none of them had seemed to find favor in her sight, and it was doubtful if any one among her numerous wooers would succeed in winning the precious prize.

It is almost superfluous to say that I was one of the most ardent of her lovers; but, at the same time, I was one among the most hopeless. It is true that, on several occasions, much to my surprise and joy, she had distinguished me above my rivals, and allowed it to be seen that she respected, if she did not love me. But I was of humble rank, compared to many who sought her favor, and I was not egotist enough to believe that I was worthy of her. Still, I was too manly not

to persevere in my courtship, until I had found an opportunity of asking her the momentous question which was to decide my fate; and, consequently, when the events I am about to relate occurred, I was a daily visitor in the little private parlor of the Bear's Head, which was the special sanctum of Mabel and her mother.

For nearly three months before the time of which I speak, the inhabitants of Rivermouth, especially those who had property to lose, had been much exercised in mind regarding a series of robberies, so mysterious as not only to baffle the utmost vigilance of the police in detecting the criminals, but to leave our best officers without a clue as to how the crimes had been perpetrated. The locality of these robberies was in a certain block of warehouses, ten in number, standing detached from all other buildings on the bank of the river, directly in the rear of the Bear's Head Inn, and more than two hundred yards distant therefrom. Each one of these warehouses had been robbed successively, and this in spite of a constant watch, maintained both inside and out, commencing immediately after the first theft was discovered. Every morning the doors and windows were found fastened and unbroken, and no sound or sight had disturbed the watchers of the previous night; but, during each succeeding day, more valuable goods would be missed, until the losses amounted to tens of thousands of dollars.

It was impossible to suspect collusion between the watchers and the thieves, for, during the last nights of this period, the former had been chosen from among our most respected citizens and our most trusty officers. My father was then the chief of police in Rivermouth, and I was on his staff as chief of the detectives. For three nights we watched the place personally, aided by men as faithful as ourselves. From dusk to daylight we patrolled the buildings, and no part of either was left unvisited by at least one of our force for more than half an hour at a time. But that short space sufficed for the cunning robbers. Boxes, and drawers, and cases, were apparently undisturbed, but their contents were gone, and no clue left as to how or when the goods had been taken. If we had been superstitious, we must have come to the conclusion that witchcraft was at work. As it was, we only felt chagrined and angry, and firmly resolved that, as our very reputation was at stake, we would leave no stone unturned to ferret out the mystery.

Such was the posture of affairs when, on a certain bright moonlight evening, in the month of June, just thirty years ago, I entered the barroom of the Bear's Head, and found Solomon Denton in conversation with a sinister-looking man, apparently a stranger and a traveler; but whose dark face and black, sparkling eyes, seemed, at the first glance, quite familiar to me. It was part of my profession to remember faces, and the localities where they had first been met with, when encountered a second time. But, though I thought I knew this man, no effort of my memory sufficed to recall the circumstances of our previous meeting, and I was soon forced to admit to myself that I must be mistaken.

My first idea, however, made me examine him closely, and watch him narrowly for some time; but I could discover nothing particularly suspicious in his manner, or the conversation he held with mine host, which was principally about horse-racing and sporting matters; and by the time that supper was announced, I had come to the conclusion that he was, doubtless, a rogue in a gambling way, but not such a rogue as would make his doings any concerns of mine at that present moment.

I had been invited to take tea with Mrs. Denton and Mabel, in their private parlor, that evening; and, much to my surprise, I found that the dark-faced stranger was to make one of the party. He was introduced to me by the name of Jamieson, as the owner of a celebrated race-horse, which was then making a great stir in the sporting world, and this fact accounted for his presence at Rivermouth, his horse being entered for the races there, which was soon to come off.

As he was a sporting man, I was not surprised that Denton should know him; but I was very much astonished to find him so intimate with Mabel. They conversed together all the evening, seated apart from the rest of us, and I could not but perceive that a very good understanding existed between them. At least, Mabel was evidently engrossed by the subject upon which they were conversing, so much so that she left me to be entertained entirely by Mrs. Denton; and, though she seemed rather to be uneasy and worried, than pleased with what he was saying, their dialogue was conducted in too low a tone not to make me believe that they had secrets together, and, therefore, must have been intimate previously.

It is not to be wondered at, under the circumstances, that when I took my leave at ten o'clock, I was not only jealous, but angry and mortified. Of late I had begun to think that Mabel might be brought to love me in time, for she had plainly encouraged me in many ways, but now my hopes were again dashed to the ground, and I was forced to the conclusion that this Jamieson had won her heart, and that she had kept it secret from all of us at Rivermouth from mere whim and mischievousness. I took a heavy heart to bed that night, and many hours passed ere I forgot my sorrow and anger in the deep sleep of exhaustion.

I did not wake until late the next morning, and then only when roused by a messenger from my father.

The tidings he brought would have waked a lover like myself almost from the sleep of death. Mabel Denton had disappeared! Fled from her father's house, it was said, with the gambler Jamieson!

The messenger had other news to tell—that the famous warehouses had been robbed again, this time with the awful accompaniment of the murder of one of the watchmen—but I scarcely listened to what at any other time would have roused my professional zeal to fever heat, and in less time than it takes to tell it, I was on my rapid way to the Bear's Head. I found that the main fact of Mabel's disappearance was only too true, and the added circumstance that much of her clothing, and all of her jewels, were missing, apparently proved that her flight was deliberate. But that Jamieson had anything to do with her elopement was not so clear.

He had not accompanied her, for I found him in the barroom with Denton, seemingly as much distracted as the unhappy father himself. I was quite confounded when I met him on entering, and if my professional caution had not come to my aid, I should, doubtless, have done something rash. As it was, I forced myself to acknowledge that my jealousy alone caused me to suspect him, and that there was no proof whatever to connect him with the unfortunate girl's flight. My only course, therefore, was to join with him and her half-crazy father in devising plans to trace her, keeping a vigilant watch, meanwhile, on all his movements, and waiting patiently for new developments.

I had not long to wait before a new aspect was put upon this already mysterious case, rendering it still more startling and terrible. My father, finding I did not obey his summons, joined me at the tavern, and imparted to me a most astonishing fact. In the hand of the dead watchman, who had been murdered in the warehouses during that night of horror, a piece of blue ribbon had been found, tightly clutched, as if in the grasp of a mortal struggle. That ribbon, embroidered with Mabel Denton's name by my own sister's hand, had been given as a gage of friendship! I, myself, had seen it on the missing girl's neck the previous evening, and there was now no doubt that she had been abducted, if not slain, by the secret robbers and murderers who had so long baffled our vigilance!

To clinch the proof that this theory was the true one, Mrs. Denton summoned me to a private interview, and in wild, almost incoherent language, gave me to understand that she believed her daughter had accidentally discovered who the robbers were, and the poor mother was sure that their knowledge of this fact had caused them to make away with the unhappy girl in the certainty that she would denounce them.

But this really increased the mystery of the whole affair. How could Mabel, by any accident whatever, discover the robbers' secret, when she never went near the warehouses, and scarcely ever quitted the precincts of her father's house alone? Mrs. Denton, I was convinced after I had closely questioned her, knew nothing more than she had told me, and this she had only learned, from her daughter's lips, on the previous day. Mabel had merely informed her, in a frightened manner, that she thought she knew how the robbers got into the warehouses, and that she meant to tell me when I came to supper that evening, Jamieson's presence, doubtless, prevented the disclosure, and Mrs. Denton herself, until Mabel had disappeared, gave no thought to her daughter's words, believing that the knowledge she boasted was some mere fanciful theory.

This communication seemed completely to exonerate Jamieson from any complicity whatever in Mabel's disappearance; but a feeling that I cannot even now define prevented me from confiding in him, though he appeared to be as anxious and as zealous to discover a clue to our lost darling as her parents themselves. Nor did my suspicions of him lessen. He accompanied us in the thorough search we now made of the warehouses, and was as active and scrupulous in the quest as any one engaged in it; but this very zeal had the appearance of being overdone. I was impressed with the idea that he was acting a part, and during all that day I never allowed him out of my sight.

Nothing came of my spying, and nothing of our search in the warehouses. Absolutely no clue whatever could be found to show how the robbers gained entrance, or carried off the goods, and as for Jamieson, he did nothing but what any honest man might have done in his place.

Sick at heart and despairing, I finally left the mysterious buildings at about ten o'clock in the evening, and took my way toward the inn. In every room and in each cellar of the warehouses we had left two vigilant men, on each of whom we could depend. Everything had been done that our duty required, and I now had leisure to study the riddle of Mabel's abduction, and, if possible, to discover its solution.

Jamieson was with me still, for on various pretexts I had detained him until my own departure, and I had resolved to keep him at my side all night, even though I had to arrest him to accomplish it.

The crowd that had lingered around the buildings during the day had now dispersed, and, save the police patrol, no human being was near us. We were slowly making the circuit of the block, when this fact of my isolation with the man I so strongly suspected flashed upon my mind, and from that moment my vigilance was redoubled. He walked on at my side, however, without making any movement of a doubtful nature, and when we turned into the narrow lane leading from the rear of the warehouses to the stable-yard at the back of the Bear's Head, he was three or four paces in advance of me, proceeding in a leisurely manner, as if evasion or escape was the last thing in his thoughts.

The lane was quite narrow, bordered by tall brick houses, and made a slight curve to the west about a hundred feet from the entrance. When Jamieson reached this curve he was not more than ten feet ahead of me, and he turned the corner without haste or alteration of manner. True to my resolve not to lose sight of him, I quickened my pace, so that ten seconds could not have elapsed before I reached and turned the curve myself.

To my profound surprise and consternation, he was nowhere to be seen! The light of the unclouded moon directly overhead illuminated every foot of the lane, so that the smallest object was distinctly visible. The houses on each side presented only dead walls to the passage, with no doorway, window, or angle of any kind in which he could have concealed himself. The distance to the stableyard-gate was far too great for him to have passed over it in that short time, even at a swift run. There was no box, or cart, or anything else, standing in the lane large enough to bide him, and it really seemed as if he had vanished, as witches do, into the air.

But my professional experience had taught me not to take anything for granted, and it suddenly occurred to me that there might be some hole or depression in the ground in which he could hide. My sole thought now was that he was lying in wait for me, to deal me a cowardly blow at advantage. Accordingly I drew my pistol, and, advancing with great caution, closely examined every foot of the ground and walls as I proceeded.

Scarcely ten feet from the curve my watchful eye caught sight of a place which demanded nearer inspection, and, still glancing vigilantly about me, I approached the place. At the centre of the base of the first dead wall, on the north side of the lane, there was a square stone projection, that looked like a small patch of sidewalk, but was in reality the covering of the mouth of a drain. The opening itself was distinctly visible under the front edge of the stonework, and at the first glance it looked scarcely large enough to admit the passage of my leg. But it was actually of a size to permit my whole body to pass, a fact of which I had positive proof in another minute. From the centre of the roadway an inclined plane, formed of a single large slab of stone, extended down to the verge of the hole. This constituted a smooth channel, to carry off the water and filth from the lane, and at this moment it was covered an inch deep with slime and mud. On the slippery and treacherous surface of this man-trap I incautiously stepped, and then stooped down to peer into the mouth of the drain.

What happened next would have been laughable enough, if it were not for the consequences which followed. By bending down, my body lost its centre of gravity; both my feet slid out from under me forward; with the rapidity of lightning, I first assumed a sitting and then a completely recumbent posture; and thus, on the broad of my back, I slipped down the channel like a ship being launched, and gliding through the hole before I could make any attempt to arrest my descent, I fell, feet foremost, into the sewer below!

Confused by the shock of my fall, it was some time before I could realize my position; but when I did regain my self-possession, I was more astonished than before to find that I could see every object around me quite plainly. It would naturally be supposed that the interior of an underground sewer, by night, would be about the darkest place one could get into. This vault, however, was an exception to the rule, for it was brightly illuminated by a strong light, shining from under a large archway just in front of the spot on which I had fallen. A single glance at my surroundings convinced me that the place was something more than a mere sewer, and rising to my feet, I stole silently toward the arch, feeling certain that Jamieson had taken shelter therein.

I was not mistaken. The place into which I had descended was, indeed, a culvert connected with the sewer under the lane; but the opening I had taken for an archway was merely a semicircular hole broken through the side of the drain, though not low enough down to permit the escape of water. The aperture thus made formed a communication with an extensive vault, probably, as I then thought, the sub-cellar of the house overhead. From the centre of the curving roof of this vault depended a large lantern, burning brightly, and rendering every nook and corner of the place visible. Under this lantern, and occupied in removing it from its hook, stood Jamieson himself, evidently unconscious that I had involuntarily followed him down the drain, but, quite as plainly, in haste to get away from that particular locality.

I had only time to note that his clothes were as muddy as my own, showing that he had deliberately adopted the same mode of getting under ground that I had taken against my will, when he detached the lantern, and moving quickly across the paved floor, disappeared through a doorway in the east wall. A moment sufficed me to reach the same point, and I beheld him moving swiftly along a narrow passage, which led in the direction of the warehouses on the river-bank.

Like an inspiration it flashed upon me that this was the secret of the mysterious robberies, and of Mabel's abduction. My heart beat high with hope and triumph, and as silently and rapidly as the tiger steals upon its prey, I launched myself upon the desperado's track.

Carrying the lantern in front of him, his body cast a shadow behind which would effectually have concealed me, had he chanced to look around. But he had no suspicion that he was pursued, and never paused or hesitated until he emerged from the narrow passage and entered a spacious vault, similar to the one we had just left. I halted for a moment at the entrance, so as to avoid stumbling upon him unexpectedly, but a startling cry a shriek of terror in a woman's tones, echoed wildly through the vault, and banished every thought of prudence from my mind. It was Mabel's voice, my darling's silvery voice, crying to heaven for help! and if a legion of foes had confronted me, I should have dared them all. Uttering a shout of encouragement, I dashed into the vault, and the

single second of time that sufficed to bring me to her side, enabled me, also, to comprehend the whole situation.

This stone chamber was as large as the first I had entered, and several passages, similar to that from which I had just emerged, branched from it in various directions. The paved floor was strewn with rude bundles and scattered goods of various kinds, which my professional instinct told me were the proceeds of the different robberies that had so mystified us, and in the midst thereof was a pile of new blankets, upon which, her wrists and ankles firmly bound with cords, lay stretched the lovely form of Mabel Denton. Over her bent the villain Jamieson, his right hand clutching a gleaming knife, and his left busy with the bonds that confined her wrists. By the light of the lantern on the floor, the quivering flame of which cast a yellow circle of radiance around the group, I saw that his face was turned from her, and his eyes fixed upon me, with a mingled stare of fear and fiendish rage.

Whether he meant to stab her with the knife, or merely to cut her bonds, I never knew, for I gave him no time to do either. Before he could realize the danger that threatened him, my arms were wound round his own, compressing them close to his writhing body, so that he could not use his weapon, and the fearful struggle commenced. To and fro we reeled, now staggering close to the massive wall, and now in danger of stumbling over Mabel's insensible form. But the robber had no chance with me from the moment I seized him. The knowledge that Mabel's safety depended on my triumph, and the sight of her fair self lying, bound and helpless, at our feet, nerved me with the strength of a giant. By a desperate effort, I drew him near the doorway by which I had entered, and then, exerting all my force, dashed his head against the corner of the opening. His muscles relaxed, a loud groan escaped him, and sinking forward on the floor, he became unconscious. Seizing a piece of silk from a pile lying near, I quickly crushed the costly fabric into the form of a rope, and bound him hand and foot. Then, when I was sure he was incapable of further mischief, I sprang to Mabel's side, severed the cruel cords that confined her, and busied myself in restoring her to sensibility.

Ere long, my frantic efforts were crowned with success, and I had the inexpressible pleasure of seeing her smile upon me, in gratitude for her deliverance. When she was equal to the task, we essayed to make our escape from the vault, and by dint of exploring each passage in succession, finally made our way into the open air. The place where we came out furnished me another surprise, not the least among the wonders of that eventful night, and fully explained the mystery of Mabel's abduction. The passage that gave us exit communicated with the cellars of the Bear's Head Inn, and we emerged from them into the stable-yard. As Mabel soon informed me, she had accidentally discovered this secret, and it was her imprudence in taxing Jamieson with a knowledge of the same fact, on the night I came to supper, that had led to her being carried off. The robbers had ascended from the cellars in the dead of night, made their way silently to her room, and, threatening her with death if she resisted, compelled her to dress, and precede them to the vault. Her clothes and jewels were taken, so as to make her flight appear voluntary. She had received no injury or insult, other than being bound and kept prisoner, and it was plain that she was treated thus merely to preserve Jamieson's secret until he and his confederates had time to fly with their plunder.

On examination, the vaults and passages were found to have been the cellars of an extensive factory, which formerly occupied that ground. This was burned, and the warehouses and the buildings on the lane erected in its stead. Some whim of the owner left the original cellars as they were, and as he had long been dead, the fact of their existence was known to very few. Of this number, Jamieson was one, and he, finding that the warehouses were full of valuable goods, conceived the plan of abstracting them through the old cellars. He and his confederates, who had whimsically dubbed their nefarious association with the appropriate title of “The Society of Sewer Rats,” easily established communication from the lower vaults with the actual cellars of the warehouses, carefully concealing the entrances with movable flagstones. Then watching the movements of the guards, they entered each building as the former left it on their rounds, and thus the mysterious robberies were effected with impunity.

Long terms of imprisonment rewarded Jamieson and his gang for their criminal ingenuity. It was shrewdly suspected by my father and myself that old Solomon Denton was connected with the band; but no actual proof appeared against him, and for the sake of his wife and daughter, we were careful not to press the inquiry. He lived only a short time longer, and his family removed from the inn immediately after his death. Within a year after his decease, Mabel rewarded my constancy and devotion by the gift of the most precious treasure she could bestow—her sweet self; and when my wife’s first kiss was printed on my eager lips, she told me that she had loved me long before I rescued her from the power of the Sewer Rat.

*Frank Leslie’s Pleasant Hours*, November 1873