

Man Wanted

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A STORY

By Harriet Lummis Smith

It was after midnight and Moulton was returning to his boarding house on bad terms with himself and the world. He had sat through a stupid show for no other reason than that he had nothing else to do. He was wondering how many of these lonely evenings he could endure. He had been in the city six weeks, and was as friendless as when he started, the acquaintances he had made in connection with his business and at his boarding house not appealing to him as possible intimates. But this evening he recognized that he has become desperate.

"Other fellows make friends," Moulton reflected. "They don't need six weeks to do it, either. How the deuce do they manage it?" He told himself gloomily it was partly a question of luck, and the luck was always against him.

What further pessimistic conclusion he might have reached, left to himself, it is impossible to say, for at this instant he was accosted, and by a young woman. She was dressed most peculiarly for the street, guiltless of hat or wrap. Her close-fitting blue frock gave a glimpse of a white neck and the sleeves, ending at the elbow, revealed a pair of plump pretty arms.

"Excuse me," said the girl to Moulton, and paused.

In Moulton's present state of feeling he would have excused any human being who made advances toward acquaintance, but in the case of the girl the need of excuses was especially slight.

"Do you," began the girl hesitatingly, "do you mind—rats?"

In an instant Moulton understood. Her unusual dress, her unconventional halting of a stranger and—when he came to notice it—a certain wildness in her gaze, all pointed to the same painful conclusion: This fair young creature had escaped some inexcessably careless keeper. Moulton had had few dealings with the insane, but he recalled having heard that it was advisable always to agree with them. Her voice had trembled as she asked the question, and Moulton promptly fell into her mood.

"Mind them?" he repeated. "I should say I do. Horrible vermin."

It is never well to trust too much to theories, especially the theories of other people. The girl stamped her foot.

"I never heard of such a thing," she cried. "A great big man—you must be fully six feet—afraid of rats."

Moulton hastened to appease her.

"Afraid!" he exclaimed. "Not a bit of it. In fact, I rather like them, if anything. Playful little creatures!"

"Do you like them so well that you would object to killing one?" the girl asked anxiously.

And at that moment it occurred to Moulton that perhaps there was method in her madness. He murmured something unintelligible which she evidently took for assent, for she seemed relieved.

"In that case," she said, "I'll ask you to come up to the library. It's unconventional, I know, but as a rat has had grandma treed on the library table for two hours, and it is long past grandma's bedtime, it doesn't seem to me a time to stand on ceremony."

She led the way into the house, and Moulton, convinced by her tone that her questions were all method and no madness, followed her, congratulating himself on his own good fortune. The library was on the second floor. Its only unconventional feature was an old lady sitting on the library table, with her feet drawn up under her. On the floor below, a fat terrier gazed fixedly at some object hidden by the drooping cover.

At the door the girl paused. "Grandma," she said, "this is Mr.—Mr.—"

"Moulton," prompted the owner of the name.

"This is Mr. Moulton, grandma, and he is going to be kind enough to kill the rat for us."

The girl climbed nimbly into an armchair as she spoke, and stood with her garments drawn tightly about her. The old lady on the table acknowledged the introduction with much dignity.

"I hope, Ethel," she said plaintively, "you have explained the situation. In a housekeeping experience extending over 50 years, Mr. Moulton, there has never been a rat in my house until this moment."

"I haven't explained, but I will," said the girl, with an air of not relishing the prospect. "Puck, our dog—"

"Your dog, my dear," said the old lady. "And a very worthless animal."

"Puck," repeated Ethel, looking in the direction of the fat terrier, "caught a rat in the back yard this evening. I called him into the house, and he rushed by me and brought the rat upstairs to show it to us. He was so proud of it, poor fellow."

"Dropped it almost at my feet," exclaimed the old lady, with a shudder of disgust. "The beast!"

"And the rat ran under the table," the girl continued. "And when Puck tried to seize him again, the rat bit him, and the poor thing cried just dreadfully."

"The coward!" observed the old lady, in a sepulchral voice.

"And that's all," said the girl, "except that we didn't dare wake our cook, because she has an aversion to rats compared with which ours is a positive affection, and there is no man in the house. So after waiting a couple of hours for Puck to finish him I appealed to you."

Up to this time Moulton had done little of the talking. Now he took a hand. He expressed his pleasure in being able to assist two ladies in such an emergency, and he spoke with a fluency and feeling that surprised himself. Then he seized a brass poker from a little stand near the fireplace and advanced upon the enemy.

The poker was uplifted, but did not descend on any scampering rodent. Moulton's look of ferocity gradually changed to one of perplexity.

"I'm afraid he's gone," he said dejectedly.

"Gone!" wailed Miss Ethel, in accents of heartbreak.

"Gone," repeated Ethel's grandma, with a severity indicating that in this case Moulton was somehow to blame.

"He certainly is not under the table," Moulton replied firmly. "I'll take a look about the room. He may be hiding in some corner."

A careful search, however, revealed no traces of the intruder. "He is not in this room," the older lady said tragically. "Where is he, then? Am I never again to know any peace in my own house?"

"I know I shan't close my eyes tonight," Ethel said with the calmness of despair.

Moulton protested against this extreme view. He thought it would not be a hard matter to get rid of the rat. "You want to set a trap and—"

"But that's the trouble," Ethel interposed. "If we should ask Lucinda to set a trap I'm sure she'd give warning immediately."

"Perhaps," began Ethel's grandmother, surveying Moulton with interest, "since Mr.—er—Moulton has been so kind, he would put us under further obligation"—

"I'm sure, grandma," protested Ethel, blushing divinely, "that we have imposed on Mr. Moulton sufficiently."

Naturally, Moulton took the opposite view. He was to call the next evening, bringing a trap so disguised as to furnish no cue to the wary eye of the timid domestic. He was also to bring the cheese. He left at a late hour in a beatific mood.

After an evening spent in setting the trap and making advances in the favor of Ethel and her grandmother, Moulton spent several listless days. Then one morning the servant waked him with the information that he was wanted at the telephone. Moulton slipped a bathrobe over his pajamas and went to answer the summons.

"Hello! Hello! Is this Mr. Moulton?"

An ecstatic gasp was her only answer, but it seemed enough. "Oh, Mr. Moulton," she burst out. "He's caught!"

"Is it possible? I congratulate you."

"Yes—but won't you come and help us? Now we've got him we don't know what to do with him."

"I'll come immediately; that is, just as soon as — I'll be there very soon."

"Not too soon, Mr. Moulton. I haven't—I mean I don't want to hurry you."

The rat was speedily dispatched and Moulton remained to breakfast. When an eligible man eats breakfast with a charming girl the rest is mere formality. And these two young people reached an understanding in record time.

But Moulton was not allowed to forget to what he owed his happiness. When he asked Ethel's grandmother for her hand the old lady replied with customary frankness:

"Ethel is really too young and silly for marriage," she said. "And I've always had a prejudice against Westerners. At the same time, I am going to give my consent. Ever since that rat episode I've felt that we needed a man in the house."