Sapper

The Man in Ratcatcher and Other Stories

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goodpress@okpublishing.info

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§ I

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"'E ain't much ter look at, Major, but 'e's a 'andy little 'orse."

A groom, chewing the inevitable straw, gave a final polish to the saddle, and then stood at the animal's head, waiting for the tall, spare man with the bronzed, weather-beaten face, who was slowly drawing on his gloves in the yard, to mount. Idly the groom wondered if the would-be sportsman knew which side of a horse it was customary to get into the saddle from; in fact one Nimrod recently—a gentleman clothed in spotless pink—had so far excelled himself as to come to rest facing his horse's tail. But what could you expect these times, reflected the groom, when most of the men who could ride in days gone by, would ride no more: and a crowd of galloping tinkers, with rank cigars and ranker manners, had taken their places? When he thought of the men who came now—and the women, too—to Boddington's Livery Stable, renowned for fifty years and with a reputation second to none, and contrasted them with their predecessors, he was wont to spit, mentally and literally. And the quods—Strewth! It was a fair disgrace to turn out such 'orses from Boddington's. Only the crowd wot rode 'em didn't know no better: the 'orses was quite good enough—aye! too good—for the likes o' them.

"Let out that throat-lash a couple of holes."

The groom looked at the speaker dazedly for a moment; a bloke that knew the name of a single bit of saddlery on a horse's back was a rare customer these days.

"And take that ironmonger's shop out of the poor brute's mouth. I'll ride him on a snaffle."

"'E pulls a bit when 'e's fresh, Major," said the groom, dubiously.

The tall, spare man laughed "I think I'll risk it," he answered. "Where did you pick him up—at a jumble sale?"

"'E ain't much ter lock at, I knows. Major," said the groom, carrying out his instructions. "But if yer 'andle 'im easy, and nurse 'im a bit, 'e'll give yer some sport."

"I can quite believe it," remarked the other, swinging into the saddle. "Ring the bell, will you? That will give him his cue to start."

With a grin on his face the groom watched the melancholy steed amble sedately out of the yard and down the road.

Before he had gone fifty yards the horse's head had come up a little, he was walking more collectedly—looking as if he had regained some of the spring of former days. For there was a *man* on his back—a man born and bred to horses and their ways—and it would be hard to say which of the two, the groom or the animal, realised it first Which was why the grin so quickly effaced itself. The groom's old pride in Boddington's felt outraged at having to offer such a mount to such a man. He turned as a two-seated racing car pulled up in the yard, and a young man stepped out. He nodded to the groom as he removed his coat, and the latter touched his cap.

"Grand day, Mr. Dawson," he remarked. "Scent should be good."

The newcomer grunted indifferently, and adjusted his already faultless stock, while another groom led out a magnificent blood chestnut from a loose-box.

"Who was the fellah in ratcatcher I passed, ridin' that awful old quod of yours?" he asked.

To such a sartorial exquisite a bowler hat and a short coat was almost a crime.

"I dunno, sir," said the groom. "Ain't never seen 'im before to the best of me knowledge. But you'll see 'im at the finish."

The other regarded his chestnut complacently.

"He won't live half a mile if we get goin'," he remarked. "You want a horse if hounds find in Spinner's Copse: not a prehistoric bone-bag." He glanced at the old groom's expressionless face, and gave a short laugh in which there was more than a hint of self-satisfaction. "And you can't get a horse without money these days, George, and dam' big money at that." He carefully adjusted his pink coat as he sat in the saddle. "Have the grey taken to Merton crossroads: and you can take the car there, too," he continued, turning to the chauffeur.

Then with a final hitch at his coat, he too went out of the yard. For a while the old groom watched him dispassionately, until a bend in the road hid him from sight. Then he turned to one of his underlings and delivered himself of one of his usual cryptic utterances.

"'Ave yer ever seen a monkey, Joe, sittin' on the branch of a tree, 'uggin' a waxwork doll?"

"Can't say as 'ow I 'ave, G'arge," returned the other, after profound cogitation.

"Well, yer don't need to. That monkey'd be the same shape 'as 'im on a 'orse."

§ II

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The meet of the South Leicesters at Spinner's Copse generally produced a field even larger than the normal huge crowd which followed that well-known pack. It was near the centre of their country, and if Fate was kind, and the fox took the direction of Hangman's Bottom, the line was unsurpassed in any country in the world.

It was a quarter to eleven when the tall, spare man, having walked the three-quarters of a mile from Boddington's, dismounted by the side of the road, and thoughtfully lit a cigarette. His eyes took in every detail of the old familiar scene; and, in spite of himself, his mind went back to the last time he had been there. He smiled a little bitterly: he had been a fool to come, and open old wounds. This game wasn't for him any more: his hunting days were over. If things had been different: if only—He drew back as a blood chestnut, fretting and irritable under a pair of heavy hands, came dancing by, spattering mud in all directions. If only—well! he might have been riding that chestnut instead of the heated clothes-peg on his back now. He looked with a kind of weary cynicism at his own mount, mournfully nibbling grass: then he laid a kindly hand on the animal's neck.

"'Tain't your fault, old son, is it?" he muttered. "But to think of Spinner's Copse—and you. Oh! ye gods!"

"Hounds, gentlemen, please." The man looked up quickly with a sudden gleam in his eyes as hounds came slowly past. A new second whip they'd got; he remembered now, Wilson had been killed at Givenchy. But the huntsman, Mathers, was the same—a little greyer perhaps—but still the same shrewd, kindly sportsman. He caught his eye at that moment, and looked away quickly. He felt certain no one would recognise him, but he wanted to run no risks. There weren't likely to be many of the old crowd out to-day, and he'd altered almost beyond recognition—but it was as well to be on the safe side. And Mathers, he remembered of old, had an eye like a hawk.

He pretended to fumble with his girths, turning his back on the huntsman. It was perhaps as well that he did so for his own peace of mind; for Joe Mathers, with his jaw slowly opening, was staring fascinated at the stooping figure. He was dreaming, of course; it couldn't be him—not possibly. The man whom this stranger was like was dead—killed on the Somme. Entirely imagination. But still the huntsman stared, until a sudden raising of hats all round announced the arrival of the Master.

It was the moment that the tall, quiet man, standing a little aloof on the outskirts of the crowd, had been dreading. He had told himself frequently that he had forgotten the girl who stepped out of the car with her father; he had told himself even more frequently that she had long since forgotten him. But, now, as he saw once more the girl's glowing face and her slender, upright figure, showed off to perfection by her habit, he stifled a groan, and cursed himself more bitterly than ever for having been such a fool

as to come. If only—once again those two bitter words mocked him. He had not forgotten; he never would forget; and it was not the least part of the price he had to pay for the criminal negligence of his late father.

He glanced covertly at the girl; she was talking vivaciously to the man whom he had designated as a heated clothes-peg. He noticed the youth bending towards her with an air of possession which infuriated him; then he laughed and swung himself into the saddle. What had it got to do with him?

Then on a sudden impulse he turned to a farmer next him.

"Who is that youngster talking to the Master's daughter?" he asked.

The farmer looked at him in mild surprise. "You'm a stranger to these parts, mister, evidently," he said. "That be young Mr. Dawson; and folks do say he be engaged to Miss Gollanfield."

Engaged! To that young blighter! With hands like pot-hooks, and a seat like an elephant! And then, quite suddenly, he produced his handkerchief, and proceeded most unnecessarily to blow his nose. For Mathers was talking excitedly to Sir Hubert Gollanfield and Major Dawlish, the hunt secretary; and the eyes of all three men were fixed on him.

"I thought it was before, sir, and then I saw him mount, and I know," said Mathers, positively.

"It can't be. He was killed in France," answered the Master. "Wasn't he, David?"

"I've always heard so," said Dawlish. "I'll go and cap him now and have a closer look."

"Anyway, Joe, not a word at present." The Master turned to Mathers. "We'd better draw the spinney first."

Through the crowd, as it slowly moved off, the secretary threaded his way towards the vaguely familiar figure ahead. It couldn't be; it was out of the question. And yet, as he watched him, more and more did he begin to believe that the huntsman was right. Little movements; an odd, indefinable hitch of the shoulders; the set of the stranger's head. And then, with almost a catch in his breath, he saw that the man he was following had left the crowd, and was unostentatiously edging for a certain gap, which to the uninitiated appeared almost a *cul-de-sac*. Of course, it might be just chance; on the other hand, that gap was the closely-guarded preserve—as far as such things may be guarded—of the chosen few who really rode; the first-fighters—the men who took their own line, and wanted that invaluable hundred yards' start to get them clear of the mob.

Slightly quickening his pace, the secretary followed his quarry. He overtook him just as he had joined the bare dozen, who, with hats rammed down, sat waiting for the first whimper. They were regarding the newcomer with a certain curiosity as the secretary came up; almost with that faint hostility which is an Englishman's special prerogative on the entrance of a second person to his otherwise empty railway carriage. Who was this fellow in ratcatcher mounted on a hopeless screw? And what the devil was he doing here, anyway?

"Mornin', David." A chorus of greeting hailed the advent of the popular secretary, but, save for a brief nod and smile, he took no notice. His eyes were fixed on the stranger, who was carefully adjusting one of his leathers.

"Excuse me, sir." Major Dawlish walked his horse up to him, and then sat staring and motionless. "My God, it can't be—" He spoke under his breath, and the stranger apparently failed to hear.

"What is the cap?" he asked, courteously. "A fiver this season, I believe."

"Danny!" The secretary was visibly agitated. "You're Danny Drayton! And we thought you were dead!"

"I fear, sir, that there is some mistake," returned the other. "My name is John Marston."

In silence the two men looked at one another, and then Major Dawlish bowed.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Marston," he said, gravely. "But you bear a strange resemblance to a certain very dear friend of mine, whom we all believed had been killed at Flers in 1916. He combined two outstanding qualities," continued the secretary, deliberately, "did that friend of mine: quixotic chivalry to the point of idiocy, and the most wonderful horsemanship."

Once more the eyes of the two men met, and then John Marston looked away, staring over the wonderful bit of country lying below them.

"I am sorry," he remarked, quietly, "that you should have lost your friend."

"Ah, but have I, Mr. Marston; have I?" interrupted David Dawlish, quickly.

"You tell me he died at Flers," returned the other. "And very few mistakes were made in such matters, which have not been rectified since."

"He disappeared a year or two before the war," said the secretary, "suddenly—without leaving a trace. We heard he had gone to New Zealand; but we could get no confirmation. Do you ever go to the Grand National, Mr. Marston?" he continued, with apparent irrelevance.

The stranger stiffened in his saddle. "I have been," he answered, abruptly. Merciful heavens! wouldn't some hound own to scent soon?

"Do you remember that year when a certain gentleman rider was booed on the course?" went on the secretary, reminiscently. "It was the year John Drayton and Son went smash for half a million: and it was the son who was booed."

"I don't wonder," returned the stranger. "He was a fool to ride."

"Was he, Mr. Marston? Was he? Or was it just part of that quixotic chivalry of which I have spoken? The horse was a rogue: there was no one else who could do him justice: so, rather than disappoint his friend, the owner, the son turned out."

"And very rightly got hissed for his pains," said John Marston, grimly. "I remember the smash well—Drayton's smash. It ruined thousands of poor people: and only a legal quibble saved a criminal prosecution."

"True," assented the secretary. "But it was old Drayton's fault. We all knew it at the time. Danny Drayton—the son—"

"The man who died at Flers," interrupted John Marston, and the secretary looked at him quietly.

"Perhaps: perhaps not. Mistakes have occurred. But whether he died or whether he didn't—the son was incapable of even a mean thought. He was not to blame."

"I must beg to differ, sir," returned John Marston. "The firm was Drayton *and* Son: the Son was responsible as much as the father. If one member of a firm goes wrong, the other members must make good. It is only fair to the public."

"I see," answered the secretary. "Then I wonder who the other member of the firm can have been? The father died soon after the exposure: the son died at Flers." He looked John Marston straight in the face.

"That would seem to account for the firm," returned the other, indifferently.

"Except for one thing," said the secretary, "the significance of which—strangely enough—has only just struck me. There's a certain old farmer in this district who invested one hundred pounds with Drayton—all his savings. Along with the rest, it went smash. A month or two ago he received one hundred and thirty five pounds in notes, from an unknown source. Seven years' interest at five per cent, is thirty-five pounds." And suddenly the secretary, usually one of the most unemotional of men, leaned forward in his saddle, and his voice was a little husky. "Danny! You damned quixotic fool! Come back to us: we can't afford to lose a man who can go like you."

The man in ratcatcher stared fixedly in front of him—his profile set and rigid. For a moment the temptation was well-nigh overwhelming: every account squared up—every loss made good. Then, ringing in his ears, he heard once more

the yells and' cat-calls as he had cantered past the stand at Aintree.

"As I said to you before, sir," he said, facing the secretary steadily: "My name is John Marstoa You are making a mistake."

What Major Dawlish's reply would have been will never be known. He seemed on the point of an explosion of wrath, when clear and shrill through the morning air came Joe Mathers' "gone away." The pack came tumbling out of covert, and everything else was forgotten.

"It's the right line," cried John Marston, excitedly. "Hangman's Bottom, for a quid."

The field streamed off, everyone according to their own peculiar methods bent on getting the best they could out of a breast-high scent. The macadam brigade left early, and set grimly about their dangerous task. The man whose horse always picked up a stone early if the run was likely to be a hot one, and arrived cursing his luck, late but quite safe, duly dismounted and fumbled with his outraged steed's perfectly sound hoof. The main body of the field streamed along in a crowd—that big section which is the backbone of every hunt, which contains every variety of individual, and in which every idiosyncrasy of character may be observed by the man who has eyes to see. And then in front of all, riding their own line—but not, as the uninitiated might imagine, deliberately selecting the most impossible parts of every jump, merely for the sport of the thing—the select few.

They had gone two miles without the suspicion of a check, before the secretary found himself near Sir Hubert.

Both in their day had belonged to that select few, but now they were content to take things a little easier.

"It's Danny, Hubert," said the secretary, as they galloped side by side over a pasture field towards a stiff-looking post and rails. "Calling himself John Marston."

The Master grunted—glancing for a moment under his bushy eyebrows at the man, two or three hundred yards in front, who, despite his mount, still lived with the vanguard.

"Of course it is," he snorted. "There's no one else would be where he is, on a horse like that, with hounds running at this rate."

They steadied their pace as they came to the timber, and neither spoke again till they were halfway across the next field.

"What's his game, David? Confound you, sir," his voice rose to a bellow, as he turned in his saddle and glared at an impetuous youth behind, "will you kindly not ride in my pocket? Infernal young puppy! What's his game, David?"

"Quixotic tommy-rot," snorted the other. "He knows I know he's Danny; but he won't admit it."

"Has Molly seen him yet?" Sir Hubert glanced away to the left, where his daughter, on a raking black, had apparently got her hands full.

"I don't know."

The secretary, frowning slightly, followed the direction of the other's gaze. David Dawlish was no lover of young Dawson. He watched the girl for a moment, noting the proximity of the blood chestnut close to her: then he turned back to his old friend. "That black is too much for Molly,

Hubert," he said, a trifle uneasily. "He'll get away with her some day."

"You tell her so, and see what happens, old man," chuckled Sir Hubert. "I tried once." Then he reverted to the old subject. "What are we going to do about it, David, if it is Danny?"

"There's nothing we can do," answered the other. "Officially, he's dead; the War Office have said so. If he chooses to remain John Marston we can't stop him."

And so for the time the matter was left; the hunting-field, when the going is hot enough for the veriest glutton, is no place for idle speculation and talk. There is time enough for that afterwards; while hounds are running it behoves a man to attend to the business in hand.

The pace by this time was beginning to tell. The main body of the hunt now stretched over half a dozen fields; even the first-flight section was getting thinned out. And it was as David Dawlish topped the slight rise which hid the brook at the bottom of the valley beyond—the notorious Cedar Brook—that he found himself next to Molly Gollanfield.

Streaming up the other side were hounds, with Joe Mathers safely over the water and fifty yards behind them. Two or three others were level with him, riding wide to his flank, but the secretary's eyes were fixed on a man in ratcatcher who was just ramming an obviously tiring horse at the brook. With a faint grin, he noted the place he had selected to jump; the spot well known to everyone familiar with the country as being the best and firmest take-off. He watched the horse rise—just fail to clear—stumble and peck

badly; he saw the rider literally lift it on to its legs again, and sail on with barely a perceptible pause. And then he glanced at Molly Gollanfield.

"Well ridden; well ridden!" The girl's impulsive praise at a consummate piece of horsemanship made him smile a little grimly. What would she say when she knew the identity of the horseman? And what would he say?

They flew the brook simultaneously, young Dawson a few yards behind, and swept on up the other side of the valley.

"Who is that man in front. Uncle David?" called out the girl. "It's a treat to watch him ride."

"His name, so he tells me, is John Marston," said the secretary, quietly.

"Has he ever been out with us before?"

They breasted the hill as she spoke, to find that the point had ended, as such a run should end—but rarely does—with a kill in the open. The survivors of the front brigade had already dismounted as they came up, and for a few moments no one could think or speak of anything but the run. And it was a Captain Malvin, in one of the Lancer regiments, who recalled the mysterious stranger to the girl's mind.

"Who is that fellow in ratcatcher, Major?" Malvin was standing by her as he spoke, and the girl glanced round to find the subject of his interest.

He had dismounted twenty or thirty yards away, and was making much of his horse, which was completely cooked.

"Saw him in Boddington's," remarked young Dawson. "How the devil did he manage to get here on that?"

"By a process known as riding," said Malvin, briefly. "If you mounted that man on a mule, he'd still be at the top of a hunt—eh, Miss Gollanfield?"

But Molly Gollanfield was staring fascinated at the stranger. "Who did you say it was, Uncle David?" Her voice was low and tense, and Malvin glanced at her in surprise.

"John Marston," returned the secretary, slowly, "is the name he gave me."

And at that moment the man in ratcatcher looked at the girl.

"John Marston," she faltered. "Why—why—it's Danny! Danny, I thought you were dead!"

She walked her horse towards him and held out her hand, while a wonderful light dawned in her eyes.

"Danny!" she cried, "don't you remember me?"

And gradually the look of joy faded from her face, to be replaced by one of blank amazement. For the man was looking at her as if she had been a stranger.

Then, with a courteous bow, he removed his hat. "You are the second person, madam, who has made the same mistake this morning. My name is John Marston."

But the girl only stared at him in silence, and shook her head.

"I've been watching you ride, Danny," she said, at length, "and just think of it—I didn't know you. What a blind little fool I was, wasn't I?"

"I don't see how you could be expected to recognise me, madam," answered the man. "I hope you'll have as good a second run as the one we've just had. I'm afraid this poor old nag must go stablewards."

He looped the reins over his arm, and once more raised his hat as he turned away.

"But, Danny," cried the girl, a little wildly, "you can't go like this."

"Steady, Molly." Young Dawson was standing beside her, looking a little ruffled. "I don't know who the devil Danny is or was; but this fellow says he's John Marston. You can't go throwin' your arms round a stranger's neck in the huntin'-field. It's simply not done."

"When I require your assistance on what is or is not done, Mr. Dawson, I will let you know," returned the girl, coldly. "Until then, kindly keep such information to yourself."

"Mr. Dawson!" The youth recoiled a pace. "Molly! what do you mean?"

But the girl was taking not the slightest notice of him; her eyes were fixed on the stranger, who was talking for a moment to David Dawlish.

"You forgot to take my cap." he said to the secretary, with a smile. "If you like I will send it along by post; or, if you prefer it, I have it on me now."

And at that moment it occurred. It was all so quick that no one could be quite sure what happened. Perhaps it was a horse barging into the black's quarters; perhaps it was the sudden flash of young Dawson's cigarette-case in the sun. Perhaps only Uncle David saw what really caused the black suddenly to give one wild convulsive buck and bolt like the wind with the girl sawing vainly at its mouth.

For a moment there was a stunned silence; then, with an agonised cry, Sir Hubert started to clamber into his saddle.

"The quarry!" His frenzied shout sent a chill into the hearts of everyone who heard, and half the hunt started to mount. Only too well did they know the danger; the black was heading straight for the old disused slate-pit.

But it was the immaculate Dawson who suffered the greatest shock. He had just got his foot into the stirrup when he felt himself picked up like a child and deposited in the mud. And mounted on his chestnut was the man in ratcatcher.

"Keep back—all of you." The tall, spare figure rose in the saddle and dominated the scene. "It's a one-man job." Then he swung the chestnut round, gave him one rib-binder, and followed the bolting black.

"Hi! you, sir!" spluttered Dawson, shaking a fist at the retreating figure. "That's my horse."

But no one paid the smallest attention to the aggrieved youth; motionless and intent, they were staring at the two galloping horses. They saw the man swinging left-handed, and for a moment they failed to realise his object.

"What's he doing? What's he doing?" David Dawlish was jumping up and down in his excitement. "He'll never catch her like that."

"He will." roared the cavalryman. "Oh, lovely, lovely—look at that recovery, sir—I ask you, look at it! Don't you see his game, man?" he turned to the secretary. "He's coming up between her and the quarry, and he'll ride her off. If he came up straight behind, nothing could save 'em. It's too close."

Fascinated, the field watched the grim race—helpless, unable to do anything but sit and look on. The man in

ratcatcher had been right, and they knew it, when he had called it a one-man job. A crowd of galloping horses would have maddened the black to frenzy.

And as for the two principal performers, they were perhaps the coolest of all. For a few agonising seconds, when the girl first realised that Nigger was bolting, she panicked; then, being a thoroughbred herself, she pulled herself together and tried to stop him. But he was away with her—away with her properly; and it was just as she realised it, with a sickening feeling of helplessness, that a strong, ringing voice came clearly from behind her left shoulder.

"Drop your near rein, Molly; put both hands on your off, and pull—girl—pull! I'm coming."

She heard the thud of his horse behind her, and the black spurted again. But the chestnut crept up till it was level with her girths—till the two horses were neck and neck.

"Pull, darling, pull!" With a wild thrill she heard his voice low and tense beside her; regardless of everything, she stole one look at his steady eyes, which flashed a message of confidence back.

"Pull—pull, on that off rein."

She felt the chestnut hard against her legs, boring into her as the man, exerting every ounce of his strength, started to ride her off.

The black was coming round little by little; no horse living could have resisted the combined pull of the one rein and the pressure of the consummate rider on the other side. More and more the man swung her right-handed, never relaxing his steady pressure for an instant, and, at last, with unspeakable relief, she realised that they were galloping

parallel with the edge of the quarry and not towards it. It had been touch and go—another twenty yards; and then, at the same moment, they both saw it. Straight in front of them, stretching back from the top of the pit, there yawned a great gap. She had forgotten the landslip during the last summer.

She saw the man lift his crop, and give the black a heavy blow on the near side of his head; she heard his frenzied shout of "Pull—for God's sake—pull!" and then she was galloping alone. Dimly she heard a dreadful crash and clatter behind her; she had one fleeting glimpse of a chestnut horse rolling over and over, and bumping sickeningly downwards, while something else bumped downwards too; then she was past the gap with a foot to spare. That one stunning blow with the crop had swung the amazed black through half a right-angle to safety; it had made the chestnut swerve through half a right-angle the other way to—

Ah, no! not that. Not dead—not dead. He couldn't be that—not Danny. And she knew it was Danny; had known it all along. Blowing like a steam-engine, the black had stopped, exhausted, and she left him standing where he was, as she ran back to the edge of the gap.

"Danny! Danny—my man!" she called in an agony. "Speak—just a word, Danny. My God! it was all my fault!"

Feverishly she started to clamber down towards the still figure sprawling motionless below. But no answer came to her; only the thud of countless other horses, as the field came up to the scene of the disaster.

Sir Hubert, almost beside himself with emotion, was babbling incoherently; the secretary and Joe Mathers were little better.

"Only Danny could have done it," he cried over and over again. "Only Danny could have saved her. And, by Gad! sir, he has—and given his life to do it." He peered over the top, and called out anxiously to the girl below: "Careful, my darling, careful; we can get to him round by the road."

But the girl paid no heed to her father's cry: and when half a dozen men, headed by David Dawlish, rode furiously in by the old entrance to the quarry, they found her sitting on the ground with the unconscious man's head pillowed on her lap.

She lifted her face, streaming with tears, and looked at the secretary.

"He's dead, Uncle David. Danny! my Danny! And it was all my fault."

For a few moments no one spoke; then one of the men stepped forward.

"May I examine him, Miss Gollanfield?" He knelt down beside the motionless figure. "I'm not a doctor, but—" For what seemed an eternity he bent over him; then he rose quickly. "A flask at once. There is still life."

It was not until the limp body had been gently placed on an extemporised stretcher, to wait for the ambulance, that the cavalryman turned to David Dawlish.

"Danny!" he said, thoughtfully. "Not Danny Drayton?"

"Himself and no other," replied the secretary. "Masquerading as John Marston."

The cavalryman whistled softly. "The last time I saw him was at Aintree, before the war. I never could get to the bottom of that matter."

"Couldn't you?" said David Dawlish. "And yet it's not very difficult. 'The sins of the fathers are visited'—you know the rest. He disappeared; and every single sufferer in that crash is being paid back."

"But why that dreadful quod to-day?" pursued the soldier.

"All he could get, most likely. Boddington's cattle are pretty indifferent these days." Dawlish glanced at the stretcher, and the corners of his mouth twitched "The damned young fool could have had the pick of my stable if he'd asked for it," he said, gruffly. "Danny—on that herring-gutted brute—at Spinner's Copse! But he was always as proud as Lucifer, was Danny; and I'm thinking no one will ever know what he's suffered since the crash." And then, with apparently unnecessary violence, the worthy secretary blew his nose. "This cursed glare makes my eyes water," he announced, when the noise had subsided.

The cavalryman regarded the dull gloom of the old pit dispassionately.

"Quite so, Major," he murmured at length. "Er—quite so."

§ III

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"Well, Sir Philip?" With her father and David Dawlish, Molly was waiting in the hall to hear the verdict. The ambulance had brought the unconscious man straight to the Master's house: and for the last quarter of an hour Sir Philip Westwood, the great surgeon, who by a fortunate turn of

Fate was staying at an adjoining place, had been carrying out his examination. Now he glanced at the girl, and smiled gravely.

"There is every hope, Miss Gollanfield," he said, cheerfully.

With a little sob the girl buried her face against Sir Hubert's shoulder.

"As far as I can see," continued the doctor, "there is nothing broken: only very severe bruises and a bad concussion. In a week he should be walking again."

"Thank God!" whispered the girl, and Sir Philip patted her shoulder.

"A great man." he said, "and a great deed. I'll come over to-morrow and see him again."

He walked towards the front door, followed by Sir Hubert, and the girl turned her swimming eyes on David Dawlish.

"If he'd died, Uncle David," she said, brokenly, "I—I—"

"He's not going to, Molly," interrupted the secretary. Then, after a pause, "Why did you put the spur into Nigger?" he asked, curiously.

"You saw, did you?" The girl stared at him miserably. "Because I was a little fool: because I was mad with him—because I loved him, and he called himself John Marston." She rose, and laughed a little wildly. "And then when Nigger really did bolt I was glad—glad: and when I saw him beside me, I could have sung for joy. I knew he'd come—and he did. And now I could kill myself."

And staunch old David Dawlish—uncle by right of purchase with many sweets in years gone by, if not by blood

—was still thinking it over when the door of her room banged upstairs.

"A whisky and soda, Hubert," he remarked, as the latter joined him, "is dearly indicated."

"We'll have trouble with him, David," grunted the Master. "Damned quixotic young fool. He's got no right to get killed officially: it upsets all one's plans. Probably have to pass an Act of Parliament to bring him to life again."

"Leave it to Molly, old man." The secretary measured out his tot. "Leave it all to her."

"I never do anything else," sighed Sir Hubert. "What is worrying me is young Dawson."

"There's nothing really in that, is there?" David Dawlish looked a little anxiously at his old friend: as has been said before, he was no lover of young Dawson.

"There's a blood chestnut stone-dead at the bottom of a pit," returned the other. "However—"

"Quite," assented Dawlish. "Leave it to Molly: leave it all to her."

Which, taking everything into consideration, was quite the wisest decision they could have come to; it saved such a lot of breath.

They both glanced up as a hospital nurse came down the stairs. "Miss Gollanfield asked me to tell you, Sir Hubert," she remarked, "that the patient is conscious. She is sitting with him for a few minutes."

"Oh, she is, is she?" Sir Hubert rose from his chair a little doubtfully.

"Sit down, Hubert; sit down," grinned Dawlish. "Haven't we just decided to leave it all to her?"