

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

"THE MAN IN RATCATCHER."*

This book of short stories takes its title from the first, which is of a quality to make us anticipate a high standard throughout. "The Man in Ratcatcher" (Danny Drayton) disappeared when his world fell in ruins about him, and John Drayton & Son went smash for half-a-million. Later he was officially killed on the Somme, and under the name of John Marston ventured to attend a meet of the South Leicestershires, at which his heart was harrowed by the sight of the master's daughter. "He had told himself frequently that he had forgotten the girl who stepped out of the car with her father. Now he knew he had not forgotten—would never forget—and it was not the least part of the price he had to pay for the criminal negligence of his late father."

We meet him first in the jobber's yard, selecting his mount.

"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? And the quods. 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 of 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 iron-monger'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 man laughed. 'I think I'll risk it,' he answered. 'Where did you pick him up—at a jumble sale?'

"'E ain't much to look 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.'

"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

*By Sapper (Cyril McNeile). Hodder & Stoughton.

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. 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-seater racing car pulled up in the yard, and a young man stepped out. . . .

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

"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 like half a mile if we get going," he remarked. 'You want a horse if hounds find in Spinner's Copse—not a prehistoric bone-bag!'

"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, sitting on the branch of a tree, 'uggin' a waxwork doll?'

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

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

It was when Molly Gollanfield's horse bucked and bolted, with the disused slate pit straight ahead, that the consummate horsemanship of the man in ratcatcher was put to the test.

"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."

Then followed a grim race and Molly was saved but her rescuer lay at the bottom of the quarry. "All's well that ends well," and the man in ratcatcher had his heart's desire.

Two men tiptoed silently downstairs again after one glance through the sick room door.

"Damn this smoke," said David Dawlish, gruffly. "It's got into my eyes again."

"You're a liar, David," grunted Sir Herbert. "And a sentimental old fool besides. So am I."

P. G. Y.

WORD FOR THE WEEK.

How calm and quiet a delight

It is alone

To read, and meditate, and write,

By none offended, nor offending none:

To walk, ride, sit, or sleep at one's own ease,

And, pleasing a man's self, none other to displease.

Charles Cotton, 1630-1687.

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