

UNCLE JOHN AND THE RUBIES.

BY ANTHONY HOPE.

(Concluded.)

"You have not shaken it?" asked the father.

"Upon my word, no, sir," answered Dawson earnestly. The poor man had a wife and family.

My father gripped the bottle delicately with the napkin and examined the point of the corkscrew.

"It would be a great pity," he observed gravely, "if anything happened to the cork."

Nothing happened to the cork. With infinite delicacy my father persuaded it to leave the neck of the bottle. Sir Matthew was ready with decanter, funnel and muslin.

"We must take care of the crust," remarked my father, and we all nodded solemnly.

My father cast his eyes up to Uncle John's portrait for an instant, much as if he were asking the old gentleman's benediction, and gently inclined the bottle toward the muslin covered mouth of the funnel.

"If only my poor uncle could be here!" he sighed. Uncle John had been very fond of port.

"I should be delighted to meet him!" cried Sir Matthew in genuine friendliness.

The vicar took off his spectacles, wiped them and replaced them. My father tilted the bottle a little more toward the funnel. Then he stopped suddenly, and a strange, puzzled look appeared on his face. He looked at Sir Matthew, and Sir Matthew looked at him, and we all looked at the bottle.

"Does old port wine generally make that noise?" asked Sylvia.

For a most mysterious sound had proceeded from the inside of the bottle as my father carefully inclined it toward the funnel. It sounded as if—but it was absurd to suppose that a handful of marbles could have found their way into a bottle of old port.

"The crust"—began the vicar cheerfully.

"It's not the crust," said my father decisively.

"Let us see what it is," suggested Sir Matthew very urbanely.

"I've done nothing to the bottle, sir," cried Dawson.

My father cleared his throat and gave the bottle further inclination toward the funnel. A little wine trickled out and found its way through the muslin. My father smelt the muslin anxiously, but seemed to gain no enlightenment. He poured on under the engrossed gaze of the whole party. The marbles, or what they were, thumped in the bottle, and with a little jump something sprang out into the muslin. Sir Matthew stretched out a hand. My father waved him away.

"We will go on to the end," said he solemnly. And he took it up, the object that had fallen into the muslin, between his finger and thumb and placed it on his plate.

It was round in shape, the size of a very large pill or a smallish marble, and

of a dull color, like that of rusted tin. My father poured out, and by the time that the last of the wine was out no less than seven of these strange objects lay in a neat group on my father's plate, one lying by itself a little removed from the other.

"I have placed this one apart," observed my father, pointing to the solitary marble, "because it is much lighter than any of the others. Let us examine it first."

"I propose that we examine the six first," said Sir Matthew in a tone of suppressed excitement.

"As you will, Sir Matthew," said my father gravely. And he took up one of the six that lay in a group. "The surface," said he, looking round, "appears to be composed of tin."

We all agreed. The surface was composed of tin. A line running down the middle showed where the tin had been carefully and dexterously soldered together. Sir Matthew having felt in his pocket, produced a large penknife and opened a strong blade. He held out the knife toward my father, blade foremost, such was his agitation.

"Thank you, Sir Matthew," said my father in courteous and calm voice, reaching round the blade and grasping the handle.

Absolute silence now fell on the company. My father was perfectly composed. He forced the point of the knife into the surface of the object and made a gap. Then he peeled off the surface of tin. I felt Sylvia's eyes turn to mine, but I did not remove my gaze from my father's plate. Five times did my father repeat his operation, placing what was left in each case on the tablecloth in front of him. When he had finished his task, he looked up at Sir Matthew. Sir Matthew's face bore a look of mingled bewilderment and triumph. He opened his mouth to speak. A gesture of my father's hand imposed silence on him.

"It remains," said my father, "to examine the seventh object."

The seventh object was treated as its companions had been. The result was different. From the shelter of the sealed tin covering came a small roll of paper. My father unfolded it. Faded lines of writing appeared on it.

"Uncle John's hand," said my father solemnly. "I propose to read what he says."

"Aren't they beautiful?" whispered Sylvia longingly.

A glance from my father rebuked her. He began to read what Colonel Merridew had written. Here it is.

That old fool Marston having made the life of everybody on board the ship a burden to them on account of his miserable rubies and having dogged my footsteps and spied upon my actions in a most offensive manner, I determined to give him a lesson. So I took these stones from his cabin and carried them to my house. I was about to return them when he found his way into my house and accused me—me, Colonel John Merridew—of being a thief. What followed is known to my family. The result of Sir George's intemperate behavior was to make it impossible for me to return the rubies without giving rise to an impression most injurious to my honor. I have therefore

placed them in this bottle. They will not be discovered during my lifetime or in that of Sir George. When they are discovered, I request that they may be returned to his son with my compliments and an expression of my hope that he is not such a fool as his father.

JOHN MERRIDEW, Colonel.

Continued silence followed the reading of this document. The maharajah's rubies glittered and gleamed on the tablecloth. My father looked up at Uncle John's picture. To my excited fancy the old gentleman seemed to smile more broadly than before. My father gathered the rubies into his hand and held them out to Sir Matthew.

"You have heard Colonel Merridew's message, sir," said my father. "There is, I presume, no need for me to repeat it. Allow me to hand you the rubies."

Sir Matthew bowed stiffly, took the maharajah's rubies, counted them carefully and dropped them, one by one into his waistcoat pocket.

"Take away that bottle of port," said my father. "The tin will have ruined the flavor."

"What shall I do with it, sir?" asked Dawson.

"Whatever you please," said my father, and, looking up again at Uncle John's picture, he exclaimed in an admiring tone: "An uncommon man indeed! How few would have contrived so perfect a hiding place!"

"Sylvia," said Sir Matthew, "get your cloak." Then he turned to my father and continued, "If, sir, to be an expert thief!"

My father sprang to his feet. Sylvia caught Sir Matthew by the arm. I was ready to throw myself between the enraged gentleman. Uncle John smiled broadly down on us. The vicar looked up with a mild smile. He had taken a nut and was in the act of cracking it.

"Dear, dear," said he, "what's the matter?"

"Sir Matthew Marston," said my fa-



"My dear friends," expostulated the vicar, "pray have reason."

Then, "ventures to accuse the late Colonel Merridew of theft, and that in the house which was Colonel Merridew's."

"Mr. Merridew," said Sir Matthew in a cold, sarcastic voice, "must admit that any other explanation of the colonel's action is—well, difficult, and that in any house, whether Colonel Merridew's or another's."

"My dear friends," expostulated the vicar, "pray have reason. The presence of these—or articles in this bottle of port, taken in conjunction with the explanation afforded by the late Colonel

Merridew's letter, makes the whole matter perfectly clear." The vicar paused, swallowed his nut and then continued with considerable and proper pride. "In fact, although there is no reason whatsoever to think that Colonel Merridew stole the maharajah's rubies, yet any gentleman may well suppose and has every reason for supposing that Colonel Merridew did steal the maharajah's rubies."

Sir Matthew tugged at his beard; my father rubbed the side of his nose with his forefinger. The vicar rose and stood between them with his hands spread out and a smile of candid appeal on his face.

"There is no reason at all to suppose Uncle John meant to steal them," observed my father.

"I have every reason for supposing that he meant to steal them," said Sir Matthew.

"Exactly, exactly," murmured the vicar, "what I say, gentlemen; just what I say."

My father smiled. A moment later Sir Matthew smiled. My father slowly stretched out his hand. Sir Matthew's hand came slowly to meet it.

"That's right!" cried the vicar approvingly. "I felt sure that you would both listen to reason."

My father looked up again at Uncle John.

"My uncle was a most uncommon man, Sir Matthew," said he.

"So I should imagine, Mr. Merridew," answered Sir Matthew.

"And now, papa," said Sylvia, "give me the maharajah's rubies."

"A moment," said Sir Matthew. "There was a matter of £5,000."

"We cannot," said my father, "go behind the verdict of the jury."

Sir Matthew turned away and took a step toward the door.

"But," my father added, "I will settle twice the amount on my daughter-in-law."

"We will say no more about it," agreed Sir Matthew, turning back to the table.

So the matter rested, and before long I saw the maharajah's rubies round Sylvia's neck, but as I sit opposite the rubies and under Uncle John's portrait I wonder very much what the true story was. Uncle John was very fond of a joke. Was the letter the truth, or was it written in the hope of protecting himself in case his hiding place was by some unlikely chance discovered, or was it to save the feelings of his descendants, or was it to annoy Sir George Marston's descendants? I cannot answer these questions. As the vicar says, there is no reason to suppose that Uncle John stole the rubies, yet any gentleman may well suppose that he stole the rubies. Uncle John smiles placidly down on me, with his glass of port between his fingers, and does not solve the puzzle. He was an uncommon man, Uncle John!

At any rate, the vicar was very much pleased with himself.

THE END.

The Selkirk Grace.

This was an improvement on being asked to say grace at dinner while on a visit to the Earl of Selkirk.

"Some had meat, and some had drink,
And some had eat that want it,
But we had meat, and we can eat,
And so the Lord be thanked!"

BREX.

When dusting, use a slightly damp cloth, for this will gather up and hold the dust far better than a dry duster. This plan, however, should not be followed in the case of black polished furniture, as the damp cloth frequently gives it a smeared appearance.