

emphatically.

Sylvia sprang away from me. A beautiful, stormy color flooded her cheeks.

"You say," she exclaimed indignantly, "that you—that you—that you—that you—well, that you care for me, and yet!"

"The colonel certainly took them!" I cried hastily.

"Of course he did!" said Sylvia, with a radiant smile.

I assumed a most aggrieved expression.

"You profess," said I plaintively, "to have—to have—to have—well, to have some pity on me, and yet!"

"He didn't take them!" cried Sylvia impulsively.

That matter seemed to be settled quite satisfactorily, and we passed into another.

"How dare I tell papa?" asked Sylvia apprehensively.

"Well, I shall have a row with the governor," I reflected ruefully.

"Horrid old rubies! I wish they were at the bottom of the sea!" said Sylvia.

"I wish they were round your neck," said I.

"How can you, Mr. Merridew?" murmured Sylvia.

"I could say a great deal more than that!" I cried. But she would not let me.

Now, as I went home from this interview I was, I protest, more filled with regrets than the maharajah's rubies could not adorn and be adorned by Sylvia's neck than with apprehensions as to the effect my communication might have upon my father. Whether Colonel Merridew had stolen them or not became a subordinate question. The great problem was, Where were they? Why were they not round Sylvia's neck? I suffered a sense of personal loss hardly less acute than the emotion that had brought Sir George Marston posthaste to the colonel's house 40 years before. I was so engrossed with this aspect of the case that, as my father and I sat over our cigarettes after dinner, I exclaimed inadvertently:

"How splendidly they'd have suited her, by Jove!"

Whenever anybody in our family spoke of "they" or "them" without further identification he was understood to refer to the maharajah's rubies.

"Whom would they have suited?" asked my father.

"Why, Sylvia Marston," I said.

When you have an awkward disclosure to make, there is nothing like committing yourself to it at once by an irretrievable discretion. It blocks the way back and clears the way forward. My mention of Sylvia Marston defined the position with absolute clearness.

"What's Sylvia Marston to you?" asked my father scornfully.

"The whole world and more!" I answered fervently.

My father rang the bell for coffee. When it had been served, he remarked:

"I think you had better take a run on the continent for a few months. Or what do you say to India? My Uncle John!"

"Mind you, I don't believe he took them," I interrupted.

"If you did, I shouldn't be sitting at the same table with you," observed my father.

"But she's the most charming girl I ever saw," I remarked, returning to the real point.

"I don't follow the connection of your thoughts," said my father.

There are one or two points that deserve mention here. The Marston property was a very nice one. Combined with ours, it would make a first class estate. Sir Matthew had no son, and Syl-

via was his only daughter. To be personally opposed in everything by a neighbor is vexatious. My father was not really a convinced Home Ruler and had only appeared on platforms in that interest because Sir George was such a strong Unionist. Finally the duchess had said that her patience was exhausted with the squabbles of the Merridews and the Marstons and that, for her part, she wouldn't ask either of them. Now, my father cared as little for a duchess as any man alive, but the claret at Sangbrow castle was proverbial.

"If," said my father at the end of a long discussion, "the man (he meant Sir Matthew Marston) will make an absolute and unreserved apology and withdraw all imputations on Uncle John's memory, I shall be willing to consider the matter."

"You might as well," I protested, "ask him to eat the rubies."

"I believe old Sir George did," answered my father grimly.

I must pass over the next two or three months briefly. Thwarted love ran its usual course. Sylvia (whose interview with Sir Matthew had been even more uncomfortable than mine with my father) peaked and pined and was sent to stay with an aunt at Cheltenham. She returned worse than ever. I went to Paris, where I enjoyed myself very well, but I came back inconsolable. Sylvia's health was gravely endangered. I displayed an alarming inability to settle down to anything. We used to meet every day in highest exultation and part every day in deepest woe. We talked of



"Anyhow, I didn't steal the rubies."

death and elopement alternately and treated our fathers with despairing and most exasperating dutifulness. The month of June found ourselves and our affections exactly where we and they had been in March.

A daughter is, I take it, harder to resist than a son. It was for this reason, and not because Sir Matthew was in any degree less stubborn than my father, that the first overtures came from the Marstons.

Sylvia was brimming over with delight when she met me one morning.

"Papa is ready to be reconciled!" she cried. "Oh, Jack, isn't it delightful?"

"What, will he apologize?" I asked eagerly as I caught her hand.

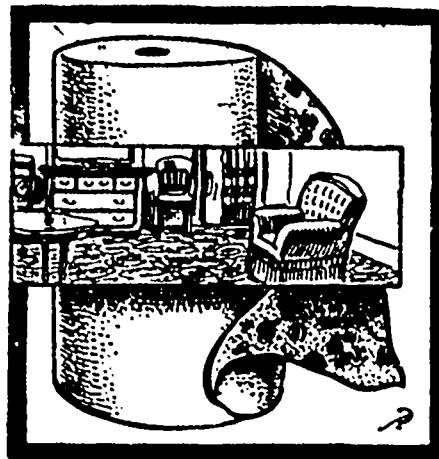
"Yes," she said, with smiling lips and dancing eyes, "he'll admit that nothing has occurred to prove Colonel Merridew's guilt if your father will admit that every sane man must have thought that Colonel Merridew was guilty."

"Hum!" said I doubtfully. "I'll tell my father."

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