

Blue Ribbon Award!

By Henry C. Rowland

SYNOPSIS

Young Matthew Holmes, who is up to his neck in trouble. His temporary success as a novelist has dried out. His uncle, Jeremy Taylor, whom he believed to be on his deathbed, has recovered and married his pretty nurse. Matt is in disfavor with both, due to the fact he had made preparations to conduct himself as he believed the heir to a huge fortune. When the story opens he is facing the alternative of paying a large income tax or going to jail. Desperate, he starts for Uncle Jerry's, purposing to interest him in a patent fire extinguisher. But on the way Matt's boat is wrecked and while attempting to land at a forbidden mansion known as the "old Putney place" he is greeted by three ferocious dogs and a swartly foreman, who admits he let Matt's crew for help on unheeded. Matt turns his extinguisher upon both dogs and man, and soon a rescue car, piloted by one Bill Emerson, takes him away. He tries to explain about the mysteries of the Putney place, but Bill has thrilling news of another sort. Sylvia Gates, daughter of old John Gates, was millionaire, has disappeared while out in her canoe. Sylvia was engaged to Freddie Griscom, a penniless millionaire, and Sam Sprague, a sturdy young shipbuilder, was in love with her. Much to his surprise, Matt is given a cordial welcome by Uncle Jerry, who regards him as a rescuer. It seems pretty Nancy, his wife Mary's sister, is at Otter Rocks, and is "running the place." Matt is enjoying a relaxing his adventures with the fire extinguisher.

SECOND INSTALLMENT.

The Battle of Wits Begins.

MATT'S mind had reverted again to the haughty tenants of the old Putney place. He found his mind once more dwelling on the singularity of his reception. It was quite one thing for these intolerant folks to forbid their premises to lobstermen or Sunday picnickers and another to treat with such dangerous hostility a gentleman in distress arriving on their friendly shores in a sinking but stylish speed launch flying the pennant of a prominent yacht club.

"Do you happen to know through what agent they rented the place?" he asked.

"Luke Simmons, I reckon," answered the boy. "He handles most of the big business hereabouts. Or it mighta bin some Boston agent." And again he dropped unobtrusively a precious pearl of information. "They let old Putney's gardener go and brought a man of their own. John Dorrin, Putney's gardener, was right sore about it, 'count o' his havin' growed up on the place. Folks say o' man Putney's garden, but they ain't takin' their takin' John with the place to sorta protect his interests like."

This was about all the information that Matt was able to extract, but he felt that he had got his dollar's worth. The boy apparently felt otherwise about it, for presently he said with some regret:

"Wish I could tell yer more, mister, but folks don't take much interest in them people after the way they acted. But I don't reckon you need worry about your boat. They wouldn't dare do her any hurt, or you could have the law on 'em, for the boys had not unaccountably attributed Matt's interest in the unpopular transients to solitude about his damaged launch. "Wal—here we be!"

As the flivver drove in, Matt saw his uncle, a gaunt, big framed man of about fifty-five, with a craggy and forbidding face, standing at the corner of a new veranda, leaning on a stout stick, with a light wooden scarf about his shoulders, for the day was cool.

Telling the driver to wait, Matt got out and walked toward his uncle in some considerable doubt as to his welcome. To his intense surprise the old man's keen but sunken eyes showed a gleam of satisfaction at sight of him.

"How are you, Uncle Jerry?" said Matt cheerily. "Mighty glad to see you looking so fit."

"That's more than you would have been six months ago," growled the bridegroom with a smile of sardonic humor. "Have you come to visit or merely to pay a call with the usual motive?" "I'd scarcely come to visit without an invitation, uncle, now that you're a benedict," said he. "How is my new aunt?"

Uncle Jerry ignored this polite inquiry. He was looking at his nephew with interest, but not unpleasantly, and Matt wondered why.

This unspoken query was immediately solved.

"Well, I'm not sorry to see you, nephew. Just because I refused point blank to pay your silly bills and gave you to understand that you had nothing more to expect from me does not mean necessarily that I cherish any animosity against my sister's foolish child. But if you want to stop here, with us for a fortnight I'm sure that May and I will be glad to have you."

Matt made rather an unsuccessful effort to conceal his astonishment at such unexpected hospitality. It struck him that the quality was a most uncertain one. Where, about an hour before, he had looked with perfect right for aid and succor and kindly treatment he had encountered bare fangs, and here, where he had expected a rebuff, a certain graciousness obtained.

The answer to the problem was immediately forthcoming. Uncle Jerry led him to a rustic bench placed in the sun, and, seating himself in a somewhat brittle fashion, bade Matt sit down beside him.

"Your arrival just at this moment is not ill-timed, nephew," said he. "My younger sister is here for a visit, and she's making a confounded nuisance of herself. She's a strong minded baggage just out of college, and thinks she knows it all, and shows a disposition to run the place. You may be able to divert her zealous activities into other channels."

"Anything you say, uncle," said Matt happily. "I'm a great little-shouldered pilot, his face fell. "I must say, I slipped up this morning, though," and in a few brief words he described his recent contretemps.

Uncle Jerry, himself a veteran fighter, though chiefly in financial circles, listened with astonishment which grew up to the incident of Matt's final routing of the enemy when the older man burst into a harsh cackle of laughter.

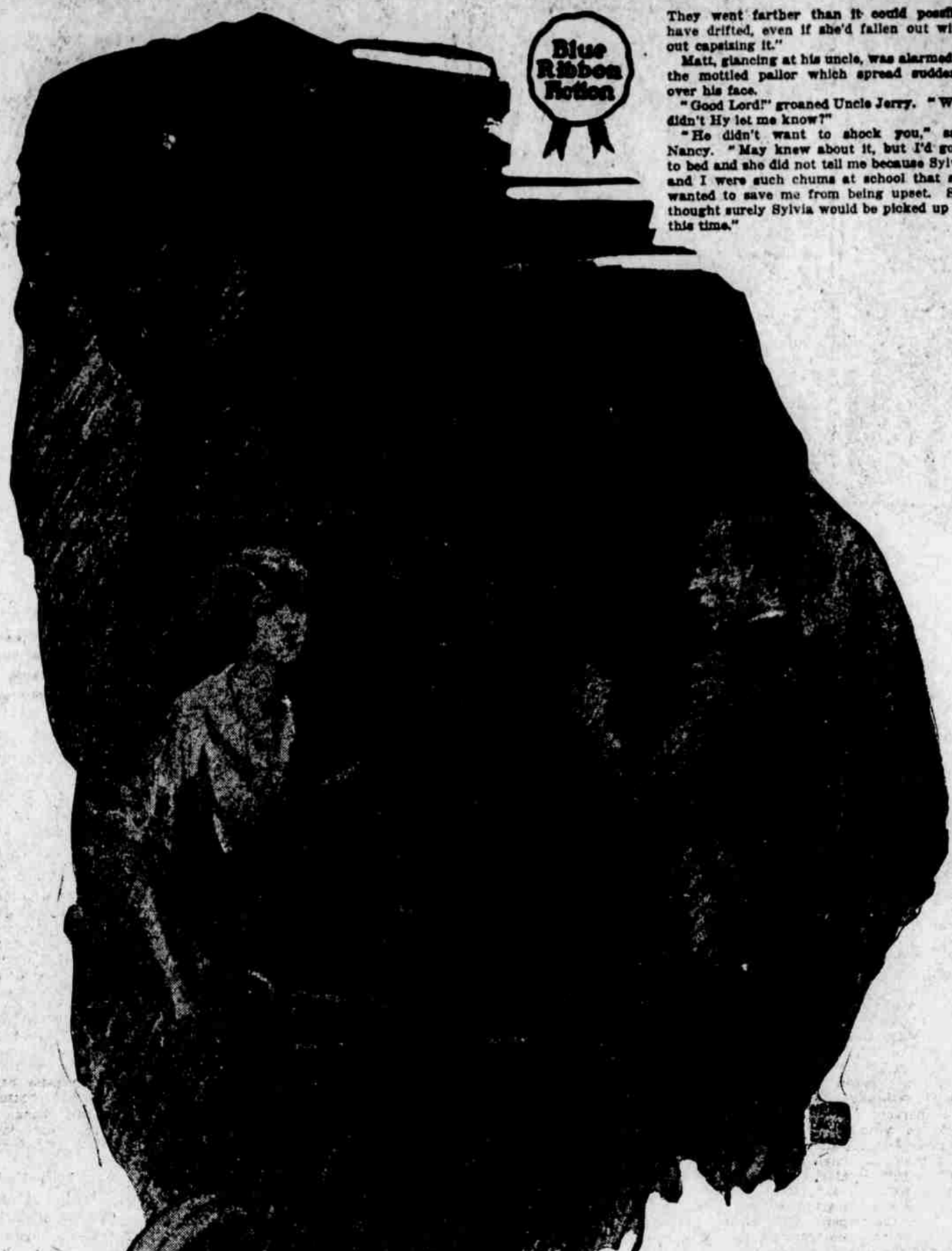
"Well, I'll be jiggered," said he. "Who are these people anyhow?"

"I can't imagine, sir," said Matt. "but I take it they're rich South Americans of the diplomatic crowd accustomed to ride rough shod over people in their own rotten country and can see no reason for not carrying on here in the same high handed way."

"Get your things and pay off your driver," said Uncle Jerry, wiping his eyes.

"I haven't any things but the extinguisher, uncle," said Matt. "I'm introducing it to the market. It's really a wonder. A single squirt will quench a blazing boiler or a pack of dogs or a South American rotter without the slightest damage to textiles or wall paper, or hide or hair, or flannel clothes. If my friend hadn't been in such a hurry I might have sold him an outfit for his place. You really ought to be equipped, uncle. Let me install one in your room. No doubt it would reduce the rates of your fire and burglar insurance."

He strode to the car, paid off the boy with



Mat suppressed with difficulty a startled yelp at finding he was not alone. . . . "I'm going, too," said Nancy.

another present, the more generous for his kindly reception, and returned with the extinguisher to where his uncle was seated. "You don't need to order hands up when you turn this on a second story guy. He will raise them of his own accord—to his face."

Uncle Jerry chuckled again and wiped his eyes. "That's the first laugh I've had since Nancy arrived," he said.

"If the worst comes to the worst we might turn it on suggested Matt. "By gorry, I've sometimes felt like it," growled Uncle Jerry. "Even her sister's getting fed up on her. She pokes her pug nose into everything. She's a sort of combination dry cleaner and furniture mover. She tells me I've ruined May, and that it's only a question of time before May ruins me. I've got her to thank for all these cursed carpenters and painters and plumbers, and now nothing will do her but a tennis court. It is a serious business, nephew, because I've got a hunch she's come to stay. But now you're here, we can try fighting her with fire."

Matt gripped the extinguisher with a determined look.

"Well, I've come heeled, uncle," said he. "But I don't know how long I can stay, as unless my income tax is paid I may be seized and thrown in jail."

Uncle Jerry stunted. "If you'll take that girl off my chest for the summer I'll pay your income tax," said he.

"At that rate, uncle," said Matt, with a moment's pause for calculation, "if I take her off your hands for life it ought to be worth thirty thousand dollars a year."

"Well," admitted Uncle Jerry, "I'm not sure but what it might be worth it, and you'd earn it all. Here she comes now."

Matt looked toward the side door of the house and saw emerge a well developed girl figure in a middy blouse and white linen skirt. She stood for a moment, as though surveying the progress of the work upon the new veranda, and Matt thought that he detected a certain increase in the activity of the carpenters. Coming down the steps the girl paused for a moment to glance in the direction of an elderly gardener, smiling toward the house with a basket of vegetables, and as this ancient benchmark discovered her presence he appeared to step upon his accelerator. A pair of Alfreddes, mole hunting unobserved in a flower bed, jerked up their heads at her sibilant hiss and retired in confusion. Then a housemaid, who had thrust the burrow upper segment of her through an open window to exchange a pleasantries with a young painter just under it, caught sight of Nancy and popped it in again.

"She appears to have a good tone effect, uncle," observed Matt, who had not missed any of these minor details.

"As a slave driver," admitted Uncle Jerry, "I have never seen her equal, but all trouble is, her discrimination between mas-

ter and slaves is faulty."

"At least," said Matt, "she is not unimpaired to the eye."

"No," said Uncle Jerry grudgingly, "she looks a lot better than she sounds. May has a mind of her own, but this sassy piece doesn't stop there. She supplies the mind for everybody in sight. She's just the sort of wife for you, my nephew, since you've shown yourself a little lacking in your top hamper."

The young lady in question approached them with a step which was no less graceful than assured. As Matt rose she favored him with a challenging stare, then glanced at the extinguisher which he was holding a little nervously in his hand.

"I don't think we care to buy any fire extinguishers, do we, Mr. Taylor?" said she, "and I don't think that you are yet quite strong enough to be annoyed by agents and peddlars and things."

"This is my nephew, Matthew Holmes, Nancy," said the bridegroom. "Matthew, this is Miss Opton."

"I've heard all about Mr. Holmes," said Nancy, "and I've even read his last abiding shocker. Have you wisely abandoned literature, Mr. Holmes, to sell extinguishers?"

"I'm trying to pursue both occupations, Miss Opton," Matt retorted.

The girl flushed, the more so as Matt's eyes passed coolly the length of her, mistaking apparently no detail from the coil of snugly coiffed reddish hair to a pair of ankles which left her low shoes to ascend some distance with every promise of perfection.

"Well," she snapped, "then let's hope that the extinguisher proves a success," and without bothering over further amenities she said to her brother-in-law, "The most dreadful thing has happened, Mr. Taylor. I just learned about it over the phone. Her voice seemed to break, and to Matt's surprise and immediate concern the tears gushed into her eyes, which brimmed over so that two astonishingly large ones rolled down her pink cheeks and hung pendant for a moment like a pair of gems, which flashed in the sunlight from either side of her combative chin.

"What's the matter now?" grumbled Uncle Jerry, with a poor attempt at jocularity.

"Has Mrs. Oat been poisoned?"

"Please don't joke! Sylvia Gates went out last night in her canoe to paddle around for an hour and not the slightest trace of her has been discovered."

They went farther than it could possibly have drifted, even if she'd fallen out without capsizing it."

Matt, glancing at his uncle, was alarmed at the mottled pallor which spread suddenly over his face.

"Good Lord!" groaned Uncle Jerry. "Why didn't I let me know?"

"He didn't want to shock you," said Nancy. "May knew about it, but I'd gone to bed and she did not tell me because Sylvia and I were such chums at school that she wanted to save me from being upset. She thought surely Sylvia would be picked up by this time."

Cousin or Nephew, or whatever he is, silly books."

"Well, then," said Matt, serenely, "forge ahead and give us one of your own."

Nancy hesitated for a moment. Matt was rather pleased to note this hesitation, because his impressions of people were impulsively and most times accurately formed, and any hesitation on the part of this positive young lady struck him as being alien to her nature, like the tears. It lasted for a very brief instant, and the following explanation of it gave him pause:

"Well, then," said she, "I think that your theory is fantastic and absurd. But now that you've eliminated the possibility of an accident, or at least the probability of one, I believe that Sylvia has done precisely what I have feared for some time that she might do. I think that she has eloped with a man named Sprague and that we shall hear all about it tomorrow morning."

Uncle Jerry sat up straight. "Sam Sprague?" he demanded, then leaned back and laughed softly at the sky. "By gorry, I believe you're right. I hadn't thought of that. I hope she has. Sam is twice the man that this Griscom milkop could ever hope to be. Won't John Gates be wild? He chuckled with that peculiar fenshish glint which sometimes inspires older men on learning of the discomfiture of a friend whose sudden success has aroused a sort of senile jealousy. Then, turning to his nephew, he asked: "Well, what do you know about that, Mr. Story Writer?"

Matt shook his head and glanced up to find Nancy's blue eyes fixed upon him with a sort of hostile challenge.

"Strikes me as rather weak," said he. "For one thing, Sam went off mad when he learned of Sylvia's engagement to Griscom—in his year in the hands of the foreman and cleared for somewhere down east."

Nancy gave a gasp. It may have struck her that here could be little short of clairvoyance. "How do you know that?" she asked.

Matt shrugged. "We writers have a way of interesting ourselves in human documents at which we are permitted now and then a glimpse," said he. "In the present case I believe your surmise to be entirely wrong because it is not consistent with Sylvia's character."

And proceeded entirely in the dark to set forth his reasons for this premise. Leaning back on the bench, Matt toyed with the extinguisher, which had a pleasant nickle-plated and was the sort of object one rather likes to handle.

"You see, Miss Uppity," said he, "your theory does your chum a grave injustice, Sylvia may be headstrong and temperamental but she is devoted to her father—he glanced at Uncle Jerry—and she would never for an instant suspect good old Hy to be any such horrible anxiety as this. Besides, why should she—Hiram may have got set up a little over his sudden increased wealth, but at the same time he knows perfectly well folks say he's a profligate, and when all is said and done Sam's just as good a man as he is, or as his father was, even if he did have the biggest sail loft in Boston and a rope walk in Gloucester. Sam's all right. Everybody likes Sam, even if he is a mile rough at times, and let me tell you a few things that did good, honest work for Uncle Sam during the war. If Sylvia wanted to marry Sam there's no reason under heaven why she shouldn't tell this milkop of a Griscom to go chase himself, and then up and marry Sam."

And deep down in his heart Matt said: "I would have been the last person to put anything in the way of it."

The astonishment with which Nancy listened to this discourse (inspired as the result of the half heard commentaries of the loquacious driver, imagining on profound meditation) was even surpassed by the amazement with which Uncle Jerry surveyed this nephew whom he had been previously inclined to regard as a bit of an inspired ass.

The gleam of satisfaction in Uncle Jerry's deep set eyes held also a new respect, as of one mistaken in his findings and almost ready to admit his error.

"Where did you get all this about Hiram Gates and Sylvia and Sam Sprague?" he demanded.

Matt pursed up his lips and raised his eyebrows. "We writers," said he, "find it an essential part of our profession to pick up the loose ends of anything which promises to be an interesting suggestion for a romantic situation and try to piece them together. During your illness, uncle, I came here off and on, and in the course of these brief visits I could not help but hear a little of the gossip of the neighborhood. Putting two and two together in the present juncture, I am convinced that Sylvia, who though possibly a bit set up by her father's sudden elevation of wealth through turning his sail lofts to the manufacture of teigs for the government, is nevertheless a devoted daughter who would never willingly subject a kind father whose she loves to any such ordeal as this. He fixed Nancy's blue eyes suddenly with his piercing gaze. "You know yourself she wouldn't," he shot at her with violence.

"Well, faltered Nancy, "I really—never would have thought it of Sylvia—"

"No more would I," said Matt sternly. "Sylvia may have had her head turned a bit, but I am convinced that her heart is in the right place. If I am wrong, then she must be a very cruel, wicked girl. But I am not wrong. She has not eloped. There was no reason for her to elope. She has been kidnapped." Matt barked out this statement in a manner which made Nancy jump.

Uncle Jerry looked puzzled, less perhaps from an effort to grapple with this idea than from the display of so much acumen by a nephew whom he had hitherto regarded as brilliant of surface but of shallow depth.

"I must say, Matthew," said he, "you are deeper than I had thought. You seem to have got a pretty good slant on the affairs of this community."

Matt waved his hand with a deprecatory gesture.

"Besides," said he, "from what I know of Sam Sprague, he is not the sort of man to lend himself to any such expedient, even to gain a bride. You see, Nancy—he fastened her with his hypnotic gaze—"there are two sorts of men in this world, as you may find when you have been a little longer from the boom of your alma mater—"

"I'm learning it right now," Nancy interrupted. "Those who mind their own business and those who don't."

"If that is a slip," said Matt, "permit me to turn the other check. I might point out that it is the first essential of an author's business to study human nature, its traits and motives, and that can't be done from books."

"Not from your books," said Nancy; "but do go on. You are at least amusing."

"Well, then," said Matt, whose mind was

fronatic in regard to sticking to a point. "There are front door men and back door men, and unless I am much mistaken, Sam is the front door sort."

Uncle Jerry nodded. "You're right, nephew," said he. "Sam might batter down the front door with a maul or pick to get his girl, but he'd never sneak her out the back way. I knew his father, Jim Sprague, and Sam's a chip off the old block."

"Quite so, uncle," said Matt pleasantly, "and I might add that the front door and back door simile applies to girls as well—"

he turned his serene gaze upon Nancy's angry face. "Now, which sort do you consider your friend Sylvia to be?" he asked.

Nancy found herself trapped. She was bound to admit that it would be a very mean trick for Sylvia to cause her devoted father many hours of anguish of mind when as a girl of high spirit she might have said: "I find that I love Sam Sprague and I don't love Freddy Griscom. I'm going to marry Sam and that's all there is about it," and, as a matter of fact, Nancy's knowledge of her chum's character told her that this was precisely what she would have done.

She looked angrily at Matt to find his eyes resting exultantly upon her face.

"Well, what do you think yourself?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered shortly. "You're so smooth and plausible that you mix me up."

"Do you believe that she is drowned?" Matt asked.

"I do not. Sylvia had the college championship for swimming and diving, and she was as much at home in a canoe as you might be in a lady's boudoir."

"Then do you believe that she sneaked off to elope with Sam?"

Nancy shook her head. "Not now," said she. "I'm obliged to admit that you're probably right about that."

"He is about Sam," muttered Uncle Jerry, who, although inclined to quarrel with his friends, was loyal to them when attacked.

"Well, then," said Matt, "by a process of elimination my kidnapping theory seems to be the only one left, unless a whale came along and swallowed her, canoe and all. Why not, anyhow? There are cases of kidnapping reported every few days in the papers. Sylvia is the only and beloved daughter of a new made millionaire, and supposedly engaged to marry another. Paternal love in one case and love in the other would seem to guarantee a prompt payment of the ransom."

Uncle Jerry looked convinced. "Here comes May," said he. "Let's see what she's got to say about it. She's got a good clear head."

Matt rose, laying down the extinguisher. "How do you, Aunt May," said he affably. Mrs. Taylor surveyed him coolly, then offered her hand. She was not a virginal or revengeful woman, and having occupied and entrenched herself in an invulnerable, strategic position, saw no good reason in bearing malice for her defeated adversary.

"Good afternoon, Matthew," said she; then glanced curiously at the extinguisher. "What are you doing with that thing?"

"I have been testing the qualities of this wonderful all round extinguisher, with a view to interesting myself in it—"

Matt began, when Nancy interrupted him impatiently.

"We've heard all about Sylvia, May," said she. "You might have told us sooner."

"I had hoped that by this time there would be some news of her," said May, "and I thought I might as well spare you both anxiety. I've just been telephoning from the garage."

"That's how I happened to hear it," said Nancy. "Mr. Holmes has got a crazy idea that she's been kidnapped."

May looked at Matt thoughtfully. "Well, said she, "I'm not sure that it's so crazy. The same thing has occurred to me."

"But how could she have been?" demanded Nancy.

"Easily enough," May answered. "She has a habit of paddling along the shore at night, and a speed launch might have been lurking in the shadows and slipped up alongside and grabbed her."

"Then chucked some rocks into the canoe and tipped a hole in it, and let it sink," added Matt.

"Precisely," said May. "But if that is what has happened, it is a ransom job, of course, and we should soon hear about it."

"I think I'll get in the car and run over to the Gates'," said Uncle Jerry. "This idea may not have occurred to them, and while it's pretty bad, it's better than believing her to be drowned. Want to come, May?"

"I have been testing the qualities of this wonderful all round extinguisher, with a view to interesting myself in it—"

Matt began, when Nancy interrupted him impatiently.

"We've heard all about Sylvia, May," said she. "You might have told us sooner."

"I had hoped that by this time there would be some news of her," said May, "and I thought I might as well spare you both anxiety. I've just been telephoning from the garage."

"That's how I happened to hear it," said Nancy. "Mr. Holmes has got a crazy idea that she's been kidnapped."

May looked at Matt thoughtfully. "Well, said she, "I'm not sure that it's so crazy. The same thing has occurred to me."

"But how could she have been?" demanded Nancy.

"Easily enough," May answered. "She has a habit of paddling along the shore at night, and a speed launch might have been lurking in the shadows and slipped up alongside and grabbed her."

"Then chucked some rocks into the canoe and tipped a hole in it, and let it sink," added Matt.

"Precisely," said May. "But if that is what has happened, it is a ransom job, of course, and we should soon hear about it."

"I think I'll get in the car and run over to the Gates'," said Uncle Jerry. "This idea may not have occurred to them, and while it's pretty bad, it's better than believing her to be drowned. Want to come, May?"

"I have been testing the qualities of this wonderful all round extinguisher, with a view to interesting myself in it—"

Matt began, when Nancy interrupted him impatiently.

"We've heard all about Sylvia, May," said she. "You might have told us sooner."

"I had hoped that by this time there would be some news of her," said May, "and I thought I might as well spare you both anxiety. I've just been telephoning from the garage."

"That's how I happened to hear it," said Nancy. "Mr. Holmes has got a crazy idea that she's been kidnapped."

May looked at Matt thoughtfully. "Well, said she, "I'm not sure that it's so crazy. The same thing has occurred to me."

"But how could she have been?" demanded Nancy.

"Easily enough," May answered. "She has a habit of paddling along the shore at night, and a speed launch might have been lurking in the shadows and slipped up alongside and grabbed her."

"Then chucked some rocks into the canoe and tipped a hole in it, and let it sink," added Matt.

"Precisely," said May. "But if that is what has happened, it is a ransom job, of course, and we should soon hear about it."

"I think I'll get in the car and run over to the Gates'," said Uncle Jerry. "This idea may not have occurred to them, and while it's pretty bad, it's better than believing her to be drowned. Want to come, May?"

"I have been testing the qualities of this wonderful all round extinguisher, with a view to interesting myself in it—"

Matt began, when Nancy interrupted him impatiently.

"We've heard all about Sylvia, May," said she. "You might have told us sooner."

"I had hoped that by this time there would be some news of her," said May, "and I thought I might as well spare you both anxiety. I've just been telephoning from the garage."

"That's how I happened to hear it," said Nancy. "Mr. Holmes has got a crazy idea that she's been kidnapped."

May looked at Matt thoughtfully. "Well, said she, "I'm not sure that it's so crazy. The same thing has occurred to me."

"But how could she have been?" demanded Nancy.

"Easily enough," May answered. "She has a habit of paddling along the shore at night, and a speed launch might have been lurking in the shadows and slipped up alongside and grabbed her."

"Then chucked some rocks into the canoe and tipped a hole in it, and let it sink," added Matt.

"Precisely," said May. "But if that is what has happened, it is a ransom job, of course, and we should soon hear about it."

"I think I'll get in the car and run over to the Gates'," said Uncle Jerry. "This idea may not have occurred to them, and while it's pretty bad, it's better than believing her to be drowned. Want to come, May?"

"I have been testing the qualities of this wonderful all round extinguisher, with a view to interesting myself in it—"

Matt began, when Nancy interrupted him impatiently.

"We've heard all about Sylvia, May," said she. "You might have told us sooner."

"I had hoped that by this time there would be some news of her," said May, "and I thought I might as well spare you both anxiety. I've just been telephoning from the garage."

"That's how I happened to hear it," said Nancy. "Mr. Holmes has got a crazy idea that she's been kidnapped."

May looked at Matt thoughtfully. "Well, said she, "I'm not sure that it's so crazy. The same thing has occurred to me."

"But how could she have been?" demanded Nancy.

"Easily enough," May answered. "She has a habit of paddling along the shore at night, and a speed launch might have been lurking in the shadows and slipped up alongside and grabbed her."

"Then chucked some rocks into the canoe and tipped a hole in it, and let it sink," added Matt.

"Precisely," said May. "But if that is what has happened, it is a ransom job, of course, and we should soon hear about it."

"I think I'll get in the car and run over to the Gates'," said Uncle Jerry. "This idea may not have occurred to them, and while it's pretty bad, it's better than believing her to be drowned. Want to come, May?"

</