

Blue Ribbon Action!

By Henry C. Rowland

SYNOPSIS

Matthew Holmes spent last night in a new way to interest his uncle, Jerome Taylor, in a new fire extinguisher. Landing at the old Putney place, he is greeted by the former's wife and a mysterious stranger. He turns the extinguisher upon all four, and is taken away in a car piloted by one Bill Emerson. The next day Sylvia, heiress of Hiram Gates, the millionaire and fiancée of Freddie Grisco, is kidnapped while canoeing. Much to his surprise, Matt is credited warmly by Uncle Jerry, who has risen from his supposed disability to marry Mar Olson, his pretty nurse. Matt has been in disgrace with both, but now Uncle Jerry regards him as a rescuer, as beautiful Nancy, his wife's sister, is "running" the place. Matt promptly dashes to a battle of wits. Nancy asserts Sylvia either has been drowned or has eloped with San Sprague, the shipbuilder. Matt explains she has been kidnaped for ransom, having in mind the foreigners at the Putney place. Nancy wishes him over to the Gates place, where they find a reward of \$100,000 has been offered for Sylvia's return. Accompanied by the fire extinguisher and Nancy, Matt visits the Putney place and sees a launch slide out. Sylvia is being taken away," he thinks. But the launch takes no passengers. Soon it returns and three men load its cargo of wooden crates into two limousines. "Whisky runners!" cry Matt and Nancy disgustedly, and go home. Nancy wears the theory the bootleggers may be holding Sylvia captive, and the two trail a suspected "bootlegger's ship" to a nearby island, then they back to the mainland. Next day they raid the Putney place, but too late. The foreigners have fled. Matt goes to the island to trap the bootleggers. Finding of his trail and the driving rain, he hunts up a cabin, but as he nears it he sees a light. The bootleggers and Sylvia, he claims, are in the nearby cottage. The bootlegger creeps to a window and sees inside the cabin. There he sees Nancy, who has refused to be left behind. The complete fixing up of the cabin mystifies both.

SEVENTH INSTALLMENT

"Kiddners!"

61 EXPECTED you a little sooner," she said. "Did you get lost?"

"Wha-at are you doing here?" croaked Matt.

"Making myself quite comfortable, thanks," said Nancy, "which seems to be more than you can say."

"You crazy girl—where's Murphy?"

"He has taken the wagon home, according to orders. I had him set me and my few effects ashore on the edge of the rocks."

"So Murphy's crazy, too?"

Nancy looked a little puzzled. "I don't think I quite get you, Sherlock," said she. "What has Murphy got to do with it. I've been thinking that these bootleggers do themselves rather well. I had understood that this was just a fisherman's shanty, but it seems to have most of the comforts of a home. There's a new pump over in the corner, and it sucks up nice fresh cistern water. Now, Murphy could scarcely build a cistern in the course of an afternoon, and it hasn't rained enough to fill it."

"I see that I've nosed off on the wrong trail again," said Matt. "Somebody has fixed up this shack quite recently for some definite purpose, and it's got to be the bootlegger's because nobody else has been camping out here, or if they had they wouldn't go off and leave things in such apple pie order. But what stumps me is that none of this crowd that's been out here hunting for Sylvia has reported it."

"The same idea struck me," said Nancy. "Perhaps this island is so many miles off shore that they figured it impossible for her to drift so far."

"Well, they would be right," Matt admitted. "As a matter of fact, she couldn't; but all the same somebody would be certain to land here on the off chance and look it over, just as when anything is lost somebody might look for it in some spot where there did not seem to be any possibility of its being found."

Nancy nodded. "You have your lucid intervals, Matt," said she. "To claim kin to the relative occupants of your great mind, I may say that the same idea occurred to me. Somebody must certainly have landed here, if only to comb the beach for Sylvia's corpse or the canoe."

"And in that case," said Matt, "curiosity alone would have prompted a look into this cabin, and then they must have wondered why she didn't show up and why."

"And where the devil they were?" said Nancy.

"It's all past me, Nancy," said he wearily. "Just as you are. I think you've done an absurdly foolish thing, and you may or may not forgive me for saying that I haven't much sympathy with this present day young girl assurance. I wish to heaven you were out of this."

In the gray dawn Nancy was awakened from a fitful sleep by hearing Matt moving about on the other side of the partition. She rose quickly, fastening the clothes which she had not removed, lifted the lamp, and going to the pile of stores, got out a jar of ground coffee and another of sliced bacon with some eggs. A comforting odor pervaded the room when there came two smart taps on the closed door of Matt's room.

"Come in," said Nancy.

Matt in boots and khaki breeches and flannel shirt, his face flushed and his thick wavy hair neatly brushed, entered.

"Good morning," said he. "This is mighty good of you, but you needn't have bothered."

"Why the sack?" Nancy asked.

Matt answered this question by slipping the extinguisher into it. They stepped out into the swirling gusts of drizzle, Matt turning to close the door behind him.

"Holy mackerel!" he gasped.

Nancy swung about to see his eyes fixed with horror upon an end of twelve inch spruce plank which had been tacked upon the door. This bore the rude inscription which looked as if it might have been made by a finger dipped in a mixture of grease and lampblack, and read:

SMALL-POX. KEEP OUT.

For a moment Matt stared at this forbidding legend. Then he laughed. Nancy gave him a startled, frightened look.

"You've got a curious sense of humor," said she.

"Bunk!" said Matt. "These boys wrote to scare off any possible visitors, or maybe it was the bootleggers."

"All the same, it might be true," said Nancy.

"Well, in that case, the worst is yet to come," said Matt. "The next time we go camping together we'll take a little vaccine virus. But it's a bit late now."

Picking their way along the shore, they came presently to the little cove where Matt had disembarked the night before, and here almost immediately they struck a warm scent. For above high water mark the loose shingle and sand showed unmistakable traces of having been disturbed.

So now Matt's sudden excitement aroused first Nancy's contempt for what she was pleased to consider his romancer's failing for being carried up in the air and dangled from the heights by a slender thread.



Matt dealt Nancy's assailant the perfect mate of what the first had got, and Nancy, finding herself free to go, fall back a few paces to Matt's rear. By this time two others had arrived on the scene.

"You see those tracks," and he pointed to a mixture of sand and gravel.

"Quite so," mimicked Nancy.

"Well, now, I'll walk beside them." He did so. "Do your bright eyes detect any marked difference between my tracks and these others?" he asked.

"A lighter tread," said Nancy, "as though from the habit of pussyfooting and from which one would argue a stealthy character."

"Possibly," Matt admitted, "but even in that case one hundred and seventy-five pounds is bound to make its due impression, and it is a little above the average. But if you look closely you may observe that, whereas the imprint of my heel is clearly distinct, these others have gouged deeply into the sand. And there has been a scuffle of the toe. Now, what would that seem to indicate?"

"That these campers whose hospitality we are enjoying landed their stuff here and carried it up the bank," said Nancy.

"That is encouraging," said Matt, "but not convincing. Do you think that campers with imagination enough to leave a smallpox warning on the door of their cabin would land their heavy duff here and jackass it a half a mile when it would have been just as easy to land it on the rocks fifty yards from the cabin?"

"Other jackasses have done it," Nancy answered. "Wasn't your blanket roll and sack of supplies pretty hard to carry in the dark last night?"

"Yes," Matt admitted, "but I had no intention of going to the cabin until some fairy whispered in my ear that I might find a kindly welcome waiting for me there. Besides there was only one of me, and there seems to be about half a dozen of these footprints in the sands of hard times. And they are all gouged pretty deep. Now let's try to follow this trail."

"I think we have been baying on the back track."

"The back track from where?"

"From the track of the seas. I believe that booze was landed here on the ocean side in quiet weather and packed across to the cove."

"What would be the sense of that?" Nancy asked.

"Less chance of being spotted and arousing curiosity on the part of small boats ramming about between the island and the shore. In that case the schooner may have run out here not to hide her stuff but to get what was left, since the place ashore was to be abandoned."

"That sounds more reasonable," Nancy agreed. "Then let's go back to see if we can find where it was hidden."

So back they went and made a careful search of the rocks along the shore and gullies and thickets of blueberry and scrub line, but without result. Matt sat down upon a stone and lit his pipe.

"We are no longer going about this thing logically," said he. "Instead of trying to puzzle out the trail and determine the clever, cunning maneuvers of the quarry we are merely guessing like children playing hide and seek without the planissimo or fortissimo to tell us whether we are hot or cold."

"It doesn't matter much," said Nancy, "because I think they merely carried it across the island and took it aboard the boat."

"Still, if there is any yet hidden," said Matt, "I don't think that it would be ashore."

"The way to get a line on anything of this sort is to think what you would do yourself under the same circumstances."

"Well, what would you do?" Nancy demanded.

"Sink it on bottom a little way out, then lead a small line ashore and fasten it to a rock at low water mark," said Matt. "Then they could pick this up with a boat hook and haul the stuff up aboard their boat. If they bought it somebody else would get inquisitive and haul it up."

Nancy looked down at the water's edge. "It must be dead low tide now," said she.

"Lower than usual from the look of the weeds," said Matt. "Let's take a snop along the shore. You go east and I'll go west, and keep your eyes out for a lead of small tarred line fastened to a rock."

"But scarcely had Matt gone fifty yards when he heard Nancy hallooing him in wild excitement, and he turned to see her backing up the beach and tugging with all her strength at such a length of tarred hemp as the lobster man used to buoy their pots or the fishermen their nets. Matt hurried to her aid with even greater exultation than a castaway might have on finding pirate's gold. For pirates' gold is not much good when all is said and done where there is no chance to spend it, but this does not hold true of hidden spirits."

When Matt arrived on the spot Nancy had fetched up at the end of her snop seemed securely anchored to some very solid object over there at the bottom of the cold, green water. Matt took a tug about his waist, when both heaved with might and main. The rope was evidently new and tough and strong, but whatever was at the other end mopped their efforts to draw it any closer. Matt loosed himself and sat down with a groan.

"I've had some tantalizing experiences," said he, "but this takes the prize. Either the stuff's too heavy or jammed behind a ledge, or anchored with a killick. We can't do anything without a boat."

They kept on along the shore, picking their way over the big broken stones. The bank was about twenty feet in height, roughly sheer and rocky, and as Matt had hoped, they came presently to a spot where a great triangular mass of granite had fallen out to leave a sort of wide mouthed cabin where a

dosen people might have found rough shelter from the rain. Being on the lee side of the island, it was also free of wind and with a floor of stone and sand.

"Not so bad for an outpost," said Matt. "With a book of verses and a loaf of bread and jug of wine and thou beside me scolding in the wilderness, one might worry through the day somehow."

"I don't see what you can possibly hope to gain," said Nancy. "What if they should come back here to pick up their contraband? They would do so with a small boat and probably not land at all. You can't capture a schooner and her crew with your silly snop, though I'll admit you may be quite crazy enough to try."

"No," said Matt, "as I remarked last night, there are limits to the scope of even such a splendid engine of war on fire and firewater smugglers. But I have got my field glasses and I could at least identify the schooner with certainty, and maybe some of her people. In such a case as this the prime necessity is to know just what you happen to be chasing."

Nancy did not answer, though admitting to herself the truth of this. It had now begun to rain very hard again, so they sought shelter under the V-shaped roof of rock and seated themselves on a ledge. Even then the physical conditions were far from comfortable, and at the prospect of their passing many hours under such Matt heaved a sigh. Such outpost duty was nothing new for him and infinitely better than a great deal of the sort he had experienced, but there seemed no sense nor reason for subjecting Nancy to it.

"I say," Matt protested, presently, "why don't you go back to the cabin and keep warm and dry? There's no good in both of us roosting out here all day like two bedraggled chickens under a coop."

"I thought you would soon begin to grumble," said Nancy. "You have a way of jumping into a mess and then wriggling out of it again. Go back to the cabin yourself. I'm all right. Now that I'm here I mean to see the business through."

"Very well," sighed Matt, hopelessly; "then if you insist, I'll make a couple of trips to the cabin and bring our rugs and some reading matter and the makings of a little fire and some ration."

"So that if they should come they'll see the smoke or smell it," Nancy said.

"No fear," Matt answered. "There'll be time enough to chuck wet sand on it when we sight them. But if we can't be comfy we'll be as comfy as we can."

"Just as you like," said Nancy, indifferently. "But I really wouldn't be justified in leaving you here alone. If they should come, which isn't likely in such weather, there's no telling what silly idea might pop into your head." She turned her shoulder to him and stared out across the dreary waste of sullen sea and rain flogging sky.

Matt rose wearily, slipped off his slung

atlas and the extinguisher, and started back over the half mile of soaking moor for the cabin, reflecting as he strode along on the stuporous, almost phenomenal obstinate persistency which could induce a girl of Nancy's sly nature to maroon herself on a bleak little island with a man whom she most evidently detested merely for fear lest she miss something. He decided that such a motive was not sufficient to explain it, and that she could not endure the prospect of his possibly acquiring the greater share of merit for achieving Sylvia's rescue. It must be jealousy, Matt thought, and then another reason suggested itself. Nancy had harped so much on his desire to win the big reward offered that some object might be lurking in her own mind, now that there seemed an actual chance for the accomplishment of this.

Matt did not blame her greatly, if such were, indeed, the case. She was unquestionably a high, if sharp spirited girl, and he thought it probable that for some time she had been peculiarly dependent first on the efforts, then on the generosity of her sister May. If she could win her share of the promised reward it seemed to Matt that she was quite entitled to it. But her pride would balk at this, a just claim and the result of her own efforts and risk, and no gratuitous concession on his own part. He did not question the efficacy of her accepting a reward for helping to restore her best friend to her family. Mr. Gates could easily afford to bestow nothing more than that it should be quickly earned, and Nancy had no particular friendliness of sentiment for Mr. Freddy Grisco. Matt had heard her admit as much as this.

It struck Matt also as particularly unfortunate that a girl as attractive as was Nancy in a number of ways should be afflicted with so abstruse a disposition. She was far prettier than the average, and like her sister, possessed charms which should by right have been generous and sweet, but in the case of Nancy bitter. She was also, as Matt had proved, possessed of uncommon courage, and one to face undismayed crises of danger at which most girls would have recoiled. He had also discovered that where her affections were concerned, she had no lack of warm heartedness. Uncle Jerry had testified to her executive ability and efficient management of a household, for May, wholly occupied in the care of her husband, had detailed Nancy for the duties of housekeeper.

It seemed therefore a great pity that a young woman so fully endowed with desirable traits should permit them to be discredited by the indulgence of a quick temper and a sharp tongue and the persistent refusal to allow even the most polite tentativeness of friendship and chivalry on the part of the young man with whom she happened to be associated under such peculiar circumstances. Then Matt began to wonder if, after all, he had shown himself as polite and chivalrous as he might have done. He reflected that he had not received her first remarks with the patience that no doubt he should have shown, and turning this in his mind, was obliged to admit that he had been guilty of snapping back. Nancy might be a show-off, but there was record of show-offs having been tamed, though not by such measures as Matt had employed, the mere indulgence in biting repartee.

As he plowed along through the rain he began to feel stricken with remorse. It would have been impossible for him to determine accurately his sentiment for her, but he was surprised to find a certain tenderness about it. She had been under a great deal of strain over the uncertainty of Sylvia's fate, and her nerves had been on edge, and now as Matt thought of her sitting there alone in the depressing gloom of the fissure in the rocks he became growingly conscious of a warmth and a sort of curious tenderness. He decided at any rate to make this last experience as little trying as could be managed and not permit himself to be tempted into any more cutting remarks. In which it may be seen that he was making some progress toward a higher mentality. After all, he reflected, it was precisely in such situations as were here that a man was given opportunity to show his better qualities.

With these laudable resolutions Matt reached the cabin, where he bled up their rugs with some food in an old oak which was hanging on the wall, drew a bucket of fresh water from the cistern, and thus laden made his way back to the cave. Nancy was sitting crouched in the same mood of silent contemplation as he had left her.

"A little fire will help things," said Matt, cheerfully.

Nancy nodded, for she was beginning to feel the chill. Matt went back again to the cabin, where, not finding anything convenient in which to carry the wood, he contrived with some pieces of cord to make a pack. Then halfway back and laboring under his considerable load, it occurred to him that he had forgotten to supply himself with some reading matter. So he laid down his burden and went back to fetch it. There were still some glowing coals on the hearth, and it struck Matt that it would be a delicate attention to take back to Nancy his thermos full of strong, hot tea. He set the water on to boil, and as usual, when in a hurry, the water took its time about it.

The operation finally accomplished, Matt set out again, the thermos in the pocket of his raincoat, and, coming to his stack of wood, he hoisted this upon his shoulders and made his way laboriously back to the cavern. And then as he started to mount a little slope from the top of which the cove would come in view he fetched up with a gasp.

For two masts poked up over the brow of the mound, and just as his eyes fell on them there reached Matt's ears a faint and tremulous scream.

He threw down his burden, flung off his raincoat for greater speed, and set off at a pace which might have won a marathon. It flashed across his startled mind that here was history repeating itself, and that just as Sylvia had intruded on the operations of the bootleggers and been carried off by them, so now was Nancy in danger of the same calamity. The boat must have been put in just after he had left, when Nancy, rashly determined to score a beat, had attempted something of the sort that she had accused him of being fool enough to do, to hold parley with them and demand what they had done with Sylvia. Or perhaps they had landed to pick up the end of the line and, finding recent tracks in the sand and shingle, had traced them to the cave.

Matt made a record for the two or three hundred yards, leapt over the edge of the bank, fell over on the soft sand beneath

and as he scrambled up beheld a spectacle which roused all of the fighting instinct not far beneath his calm and whimsical exterior. A fishing dory was grounded on the beach of the cove. There was a man just getting out of her and another starting to run up the beach, evidently to the assistance of a pair of ruffians who were dragging Nancy in the direction of the boat, one holding her by either arm. And even at that distance to a hundred yards it was evident to Matt that they were having their hands full, for Nancy was a strong, athletic girl and she was fighting her best.

Matt had plumped down from above within a few paces of the shelter, and, although roused to frenzy at sight of what was going on, he did not lose his head. He rushed into the shallow cove, grabbed up his haversack containing the extinguisher from where he had laid it down, and, snatching out the implement, continued his charge on the abductors. These had discovered him as he leapt from the top of the bank, and now, deciding that they could not hope to get Nancy to the boat before his arrival on the scene, or perhaps from other motives, the two in custody of Nancy stopped where they were, while their mates ran up to reinforce them.

Matt did not slacken his speed. In fact, a disinterested observer would have said that he was going too fast to stop. He was acting on the impulse to reach Nancy and release her before the second pair hurrying up in the opposite direction could throw out a line of interference. And Matt realized that for the moment the extinguisher could not be brought into requisition without danger to Nancy, any more than a machine gun could be employed to disperse a squad escorting prisoners. He threw it aside and drove an eager fist at the jaw of one of Nancy's captors.

So far so good. This enthusiasm of attack on the part of one apparently unarmed man on four was not without a marked effect. To the bootleggers it may have smacked of madness, in which case they were right, for Matt was very mad. He dealt Nancy's other hanger on the perfect mate of what the first had got, and Nancy, finding herself free to go, fell back a few paces to Matt's rear.

But by this time the other two had arrived on the scene, hurrying men of a swarthy aspect and known to Yankee fishing fraternity as "Geeses." One of them was tugging at his belt, and Matt, judging the moment ripe to bring up his artillery, leaped to the spot where he had thrown down the extinguisher, whipped it up and directed his fire on the reinforcements.

But the immediate effect of this was disappointing, for, just as a machine gun has been known to jam at a critical moment, so now something went very wrong with the extinguisher. Sand, while an essential requisite for fighting men, is yet the natural enemy of guns of any sort, and Matt's weapon when flung down had landed on its muzzle, which had got plugged. So that now, instead of delivering its fire full-bore and with precision, there squirted out two thin, random jets nearly at right angles. One of these was lost in the swirls of circumstance mist, while the other by some curious freak of destiny sprayed Nancy, standing at a five yard interval to Matt's left.

For some brief moments immediately following a busy, if not a good, time was had by all who had come to the party. The guests at the schooner, who had as yet no knowledge of the character of the liquid refreshment Matt was so eager to serve, rushed him in mass formation, while Matt, suffering from the embarrassment of a hitch in his arrangements for their reception, was in no position to receive them. Like many another who depends on some patent safety device that through no fault of its inventor happens to fall of operation at the crucial moment, he continued the effort to apply it instead of doing the next best thing.

In the present crisis this would appear to have been Matt's severing himself from his weapon as might any soldier have done with a gun which was plugged and could no longer shoot, and to which the bayonet was not fixed. He might have used the extinguisher to fatal advantage as a club, swinging it by its drawn out handle. But before he could get around to this the enemy swarmed upon and over him. He struck out once or twice with his fists, then went to the sand as the nucleus of a sort of human push ball smelling strongly of garlic and salt fish, incompletely cured. The Portuguese fishermen gripped at any part of him which offered hand hold, as though grappling with and tying up a bit of heavy, flapping canvas in a squall. They were sturdy sailors and quickly made a job of it, and Matt, gurgling with rage, found his wrists and ankles lashed about, the focus of four pairs of eyes which stared at him with the conviction of a triumphant party of sailor hunters in quest of big game to be taken alive.

Matt was quite unharmed, except in his state of mind, this badly torn. He stared fiercely at his captors, then managed to get up on his feet. Looking about for Nancy, he saw her standing a few yards away, bathing her eyes with a handkerchief dipped in a puddle on a rock. She looked back at him with a furious face, then walked up to where he was standing.

"There, you idiot!" she cried, half sobbingly. "Now you see what your silliness has got us into! You've nearly blinded me, and not so much as made one of these brutest sneezes!"

Not finding any appropriate defense of this charge, Matt glared at his swarthy captors. He was too enraged at his humiliation to speak immediately, also the violence of his futile struggling coming at the finish of a 440 yard dash had left him with the lack of breath. But now as he glanced from one to the other of them he was conscious of two distinct impressions, the first that their faces, though rough and determined, were not the faces one might expect to find on outlaws, but seemed those of honest, simple fisher folk of European breed, and the second that as their eyes met his they showed a curious embarrassment, as though apologetic for the rough handling to which they had felt obliged to subject him.

"Well, what's your game?" Matt panted. "What do you want to do now?"

There was a moment of hesitation. Then one, a short, deep chested man of past middle age and curly, grizzled hair, said with a somewhat doubtful assumption of authority:

"We want you, young fella. And we want da young lady you run away wit." He stepped a pace closer and shook his finger in Matt's face. "You go to jail for feckty da years. And we getta one hundred 'ousand dollars!"

(Continued Next Sunday)
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