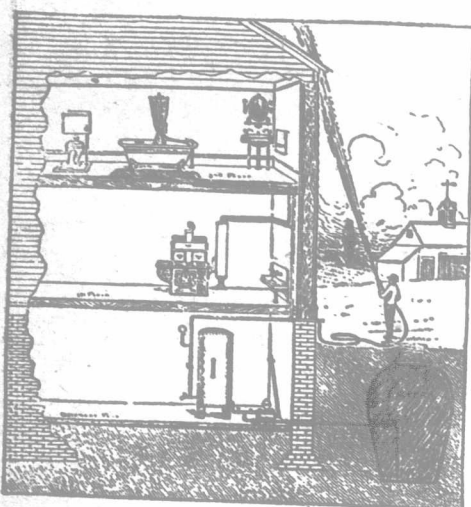




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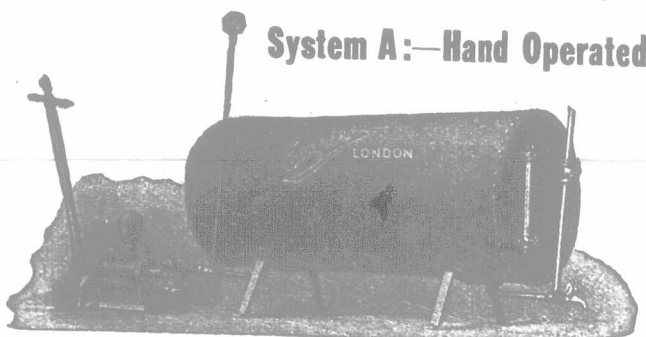
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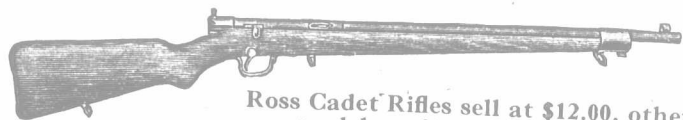


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it was you who were hurt," he stammered.

"Me!" she cried, her eyes dancing. The ray of light was breaking—one with a promise in it for the future!

"Yes,—you, Miss Ruth! Funny, isn't it, how when you are half dead you get things mixed up." Oh, the stupidity of these lovers! Not a thing had he seen of the flash of expectation in her eyes or of the hot color rising to her cheeks. "I thought somebody was trying to tell your father that you were hurt, and I was fighting to keep him from hearing it. But you must thank Bolton for letting you know."

Ruth's face clouded and the sparkle died out in her eyes. What was Mr. Bolton to her, and at a time like this?

"It was most kind of Mr. Bolton," she answered in a constrained voice. "I only wish he had said something more; we had a terrible day. Uncle Peter was nearly crazy about you; he telegraphed and telegraphed, but we could get no answer. That's why it was such a relief to find you at the station."

But the but had not finished banging his head against the wall. "Then I did do some good by going?" he asked earnestly.

"Oh, indeed you did." If he did not care whether she had been hurt or not, even in his delirium, she was not going to betray herself. "It was the first time anybody had seen Uncle Peter smile; he was wretched all day. He loves you very dearly, Mr. Breen."

Jack's hand dropped so suddenly to his side that the pain made him tighten his lips. For a moment he did not answer.

"Then it was only Uncle Peter who was anxious, was it? I am glad he loves me. I love him, too," he said at last in a perfunctory tone—"he's been everything to me."

"And you have been everything to him." She determined to change the subject now. "He told me only—well, two days ago—that you had made him ten years younger."

"Me?—Miss Ruth!" Still the same monotonous cadence.

"Yes."

"How?"

"Well,—maybe because he is old and you are young." As she spoke her eyes measured the width of his shoulders and his broad chest—she saw now to what her father owed his life—"and another thing; he said that he would always thank you for getting out alive. And I owe you a debt of gratitude, too, Mr. Breen;—you gave me back my dear daddy," she added in a more assured tone. Here at last was something she could talk unreservedly about. Something that she had wanted to say ever since he came.

Jack straightened and threw back his shoulders: that word again! Was that all that Ruth had to say?

"No, Miss Ruth, you don't." There was a slight ring of defiance now. "You do not owe me anything, and please don't think so, and please—please—do not say so!"

"I don't owe you anything! Not for saving my father's life?" This came with genuine surprise.

"No! What would you have thought of me, what would I have thought of myself had I left him to suffocate when I could just as well have brought him out? Do you think I could ever have looked you in the face again? You might not have ever known I could have saved him—but I should have hated myself every hour of my life. Men are not to be thanked for these things; they are to be despised if they don't do them. Can't you see the difference?"

"But you might have been killed, too!" she exclaimed. Her own voice was rising, irritation and disappointment swaying it. "Everybody says it was a miracle you were not."

"Not a miracle at all. All I was afraid of was stumbling over something in the dark—and it was nearly dark—only a few of the rock lights burning—and not be able to get on my feet again. But don't let us talk about it any more."

"Yes—but I will, I must. I must feel right about it all, and I cannot unless you listen. I shall never forget you for it as long as I live." There was a note of pathos in her voice. Why did he make it so hard for her, she thought. Why would he not look her in the face

and see? Why would he not let her thank him? "Nothing in the world is so precious to me as daddy, and never will be," she went on resolutely, driving back the feeling of injustice that surged up in her heart at his attitude—"and it is you, Mr. Breen, who have given him back to me. And daddy feels the same way about it; and he is going to tell you so the minute he sees you," she insisted. "He has sent you a lot of messages, he says, but they do not count. Please, now, won't you let me thank you?"

Jack raised his head. He had been fingering a tassel on the end of the sofa, missing all the play of feeling in her eyes, taking in nothing but the changes that she rang on that one word "gratitude." Gratitude!—when he loved the ground she stepped on. But he must face the issue fairly now:

"No,—I don't want you to thank me," he answered simply.

"Well, what do you want, then?" She was at sea now,—compass and rudder gone,—wind blowing from every quarter at once,—she trying to reach the harbor of his heart while every tack was taking her farther from port. If the Scribe had his way the whole coast of love would be lighted and all rocks of doubt and misunderstanding charted for just such hapless lovers as these two. How often a twist of the tiller could send them into the haven of each other's arms, and yet how often they go ashore and stay ashore and worse still, stay ashore all their lives.

Jack looked into her eyes and a hopeless, tired expression crossed his face.

"I don't know," he said in a barely audible voice:—"I just—please, Miss Ruth, let us talk of something else; let me tell you how lovely your gown is and how glad I am you wore it to-day I always liked it, and—"

"No—never mind about my gown; I would rather you did not like anything about me than misunderstand me! The tears were just under the lids,—one more thrust like the last and they would be streaming down her cheeks.

"But I haven't misunderstood you." He saw the lips quiver, but it was anger, he thought, that caused it.

"Yes, you have!"—a great lump had risen in her throat. "You have done a brave, noble act,—everybody says so, you carried my dear father out on your back when there was not but one chance in a thousand you would ever get out alive; you lay in a faint for hours and once they gave you up for dead; then you thought enough of Uncle Peter and all of us to get that telegram sent so we wouldn't be terrified to death, and then at the risk of your life you met us at the station and have been in bed ever since, and yet I am to sit still and not say a word!" It was all she could do to control herself. "I do feel grateful to you and I always shall feel grateful to you as long as I live. And now will you take my hand and tell me you are sorry, and let me say it all over again, and with my whole heart? For that's the way I mean it."

She was facing him now, her hand held out, her head thrown back, her dark eyes flashing, her bosom heaving. Slowly and reverently, as a devotee would kiss the robe of a passing priest, Jack bent his head and touched her fingers with his lips.

Then, raising his eyes to hers, he asked, "And is that all, Miss Ruth? Isn't there something more?" Not once had she mentioned his own safety—not once had she been glad over him—"Something more?" he repeated, an ineffable tenderness in his tones—"something—it isn't all, is it?"

"Why, how can I say anything more?" she murmured in a lowered voice, withdrawing her hand as the sound of a step in the hall reached her ear.

The door swung wide: "Well, what are you two young people quarrelling about?" came a soft, purring voice.

"We weren't quarrelling, Auntie. Mr. Breen is so modest he doesn't want anybody to thank him, and I just would."

Miss Felicia felt that she had entered just in time. Scarred and penniless heroes fresh from battle-fields of glory and desirable young women whose fathers have been carried bodily out of burning death pits must never be left too long together.

(To be continued.)