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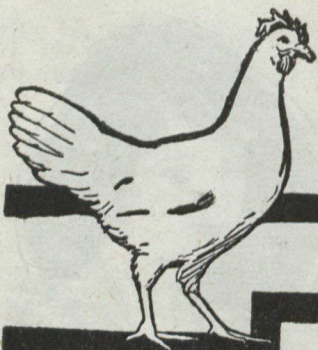
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Pratt's



The Hills of Desire

(Continued from page 51)

that was still sound, a girl had come into the ward singing. He listened, and the words that he heard were these:

"Gyp, Gyp, me little horse?"

"Gyp-Gyp, again, sir."

"How many miles to Dublin?"

"Four score an' ten, sir."

High and sweet as the voice of a robin bird in the trees of the Hills of Desire, he heard the voice of his love. Then the howl and the tearing jaws of death all around had their sway again. He had thought always that Augusta would somehow come to him before the end. But, My God! He had never bargained for this! This was real! Augusta was here, in this death hole! He must get her out of here. What business had she! Who had let her come here?

He was out of his cot and staggering, bumping down the cot frames, toward the voice that rang again triumphant, singing:

"Gyp, Gyp, me little horse?"

"Gyp-Gyp, again, sir."

Now he was coming near her. Now! Another staggering step or two, if he could only keep his feet straight! Now he was just going to touch her, to take her in his arms! He had almost lurched past her in the dark. Now he had her in his arms!

He thought he whispered her name, but it was really a wild yell in her ear: "Augusta!"

In the first swaying, burning instant their hearts leaped together and were one at last. There was nothing from the past; nothing to be explained, nothing to be condoned. Love and truth had burned all things clear and true for them. They belonged to each other. They were of each other. And neither life nor death could touch their love now!

And now, curiously, it was Wardwell who did not resist what seemed to be the conclusion of fate. He did not want to die with Augusta. He had wanted to live with her! But now, if she had foreseen this, that they were to go together in this way: Well, he was willing to take her lead, as always. She should have her way. Her way was always right.

But Augusta had her love in her arms, and he was wounded and fainting and leaning upon her. The fierce, protecting surge of mothering nature rose up in her. She looked into the face of fire, and red murder, and death, and sprang into battle with them all for him. They should not have him! He was hers, and she would have him!

She had come into her ward singing her little song, to help the poor fellows through a bad few minutes. She could not have dreamed that it would be as bad as this fiendish reality, but she had already forgotten her indignation, her pity, her thought of anyone or anything but Jimmie Wardwell, who was swaying leaning upon her breast. To take him out of here to the blessed open, to keep him from being hurt, was the thing, it seemed, for which she had lived her life!

THE SHORT moment of darkness in which they had somehow found each other was blasted out into a white flaring light, and they were shaken stumbling and trembling together by an explosion which completely blew out the end of the building where Augusta had come in.

Looking over her shoulder she saw that she must take him, carry him if he could not help her, out through that band of fire where already the jagged sides and roof of the building were being fringed with scallops of licking flame. She called to him for an effort, pleading with him to try, to put one foot

before another, to help just one little bit. But his weight lay almost dead upon her shoulder. He was fainting from his last effort to come to her and from the shock of the last terrible explosion. She must do all herself. The hoop of fire flamed before her, through which she must drag him, and her mind and reason quailed but her heart fought on for its love, blessing God for the strong sure feet that the hills had given her and the cunning strength in handling the helpless bodies of men which her training had taught her. These things had been given to her for this her moment.

Her ears were full of the fearful cries of men in madness, her eyes were open only to see that ring of fire toward which she was staggering with her burden, but her heart was strong and sure. What cared she for the dreams of a heaven that she had made, when she had the warm body of her love in her arms!

All the women in creation might write love letters to him, but he was hers and she would take him through that ring of fire and out to safety! He was hers, and she would have him.

Men shouted to her, to go back, that help was coming quickly another way, that she was crazy to try to go out that way. But she fought her way out step by step, through all the blurring horror, up to the ring of fire, and, staggering, whispering, praying to her love, she went stumbling through wreck and spitting flames, half carrying half dragging her man out into God's open.

A little way out in the grass, away from the worst of the danger, she stopped—she could go no farther—and let him slip, cunningly and gently as she could, full length upon the ground.

For the moment they were left alone. Men running shouting to the work of rescue did not heed them. And Augusta knelt fixing the big bandage to Jimmie's throat, and whispering to him. For now, when the strength of her body was exhausted, her heart went cold with the fear that he had died in her arms.

But the cool freshness of the grass came up like a reviving shock to Wardwell's body. He stirred easily, drew two or three good breaths, and then he spoke, slowly and easily.

"How is it, dear," he asked, plainly knowing that Augusta was there with him. "Are we going on, or do we stay? Whichever it is, you know, I'm for you."

Augusta gave one little animal cry of pure joy. For, instantly, she knew that all was well, that she would have him again, alive and strong! Then she bubbled over in tears and the hysteria of gladness, crying:

"We're going to stay, Jimmie darling, we're going to stay! And if I wasn't afraid of hurting you I'd hug and kiss you till—!"

"Oh, you might take a chance—" said Jimmie. And he went contentedly off to sleep.

Out of the chaos of noise and the uncertain light a big tall doctor man came striding across the grass to them, dressed in a long white operating coat which he had forgotten to throw off.

Augusta rose to her knees and to her overstrained senses the tall white figure advancing upon her must have taken on some kind of a supernatural appearance. We do not know just what was in her mind, probably it is not important. But she raised her hand in a foolish little salute, and said, somewhat apologetically, to the doctor:

"If you please, God, we've changed our mind. We'd much rather live."

Then she slid quietly down in a faint beside Jimmie.

To this day that surgeon thinks that he did not hear correctly.—(THE END).

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters of "The Hills of Desire"

AUGUSTA'S Mother having met with an accident, Jimmie Wardwell, a writer, being in love with Augusta, married her, and together they tended the sick woman until her death. Augusta, meanwhile, believing that Jimmie had married her only to befriend her. His health required a change, so they bought a caravan and horse from a gipsy and started out to seek their "Hills of Desire."

Being directed by an old man to a beautiful camping spot they meet there a man who calls himself "Smith" and whom they mistake for someone fleeing from justice. Augusta takes a fancy to him, however, and although not knowing who he is, they stay on at the little lake. Finances begin to run low and Augusta decides she will have to sell their trusty friend, Donahue. They discover at last that the man who gave him name as "Smith," and whom they took to be anything up to a murderer, is really John McQuade, who owns the camping ground.

Jimmie's health giving way slightly, he loses interest in his story so Augusta takes up the thread and continues it. He catches her at it, and to another story all her own. Augusta's dearest possession is forced to sell it. It nearly breaks her heart, but Jimmie does not understand this. Finding it cheque for Augusta's story. Her joy is only marred by a feeling that all is not well between them. She begins to brood on his reason for marrying her. Then, unawares, she comes upon a letter a woman has written Jimmie—evidently one of many. She is crushed by this discovery. She decides to go away and leaves him a queer message reading: "We may not live together. We shall not die apart."

Then as she approaches the post office she sees Jimmie in the distance. He had not gone fishing as he had said he intended to do.

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