HOSTILE VALLEY

BY

Ben Ames Williams

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SYNOPSIS

[illegible]

CHAPTER IX—Continued

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Then Jenny faced the sheriff steadily and she said: "Mac Ferrin looked at me, and for moment twinkled into a kind of laugh, and she said something."

And the girl went on: "First off, I confess near her. She was awful weak, and I helped done and I said to her: 'It's all right, Mac Ferrin!' And she laughed at me. . . I mean, her mouth twisted as if she was trying to tell. And this time I heard what she said."

Marm Pierce exploded in a fierce impatience: "Get on with it, Jenny! What did she say?"

And Jenny answered: "She said I could have him now!"

"I guess I kind of moved back, at that, away from her. It sounded so sharp-sweet, now. Her voice was gone and she spoke almost like a child. 'I didn't know what to do,' she go on. 'I didn't know what I'd do.' And I guess I moved a little. I said to her: 'Did you tried to tell me it was all right, and I told her Will was coming?'

Her voice sank to a whisper.

"And then she said it."

"And then she said it," she repeated. "She sort of crouched. She sort kind of sagged and weak. 'Will proposed me, Jenny.' And she had to wait a minute, and then she said: 'He did not.'"

The girl's voice sank for an instant before she went on.

"The room was still ahead of laughing," she murmured. "Mac sort of crouched. I guess that was when she died. A deep-breaths shade one, but her face was gone [illegible] pale, indeed pale, and her mouth sagging as mine. But I know she was held by them [illegible] . . . about . . . and more."

She paused and was still, waiting. And somehow Jenny was very tired, dreading what was to come.

Yet for a while no one spoke at all.

CHAPTER X

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Jenny's disclosure, for a moment hushed them all. Marm Pierce was the first to speak.

"Whew!" she exclaimed. "I declare, it's not as love is out time, here!"

Bart opened the door into the shed to admit some air. The shed was a gloomy cavern; the darkness in it was a black screen behind which anything might hide.

The sheriff crossed his feet and sat in a deep embarrassment. His shoes scraped on the floor; and Marm Pierce said:

"I smell a lamp smoking."

The lamps here were all in order, but when she opened the door into the dining-room where Huldy lay, a reek of soot and smoke emerged. The old woman bustled in there, complaining, scolding the absent Joe Matthews.

"Takes a man to make a mess of things," she protested. She brought out the lamp, its chimney black. "He left it turned up too high," she declared; and replaced it with another lamp, and they heard her raise the windows a little from the bottom. "I'll air out a mite," she explained, talking to herself in the other room.

Then she returned, shut the dining-room door again.

"Well!" she ejaculated. "I declare, I've had about enough of the goings on this day. Jenny, why didn't you tell me this here before?"

Jenny looked at Will, and she said: "Because first off I was afraid it was true." She added quickly: "Then I wanted that even if it was, I didn't care."

"Huh," he said [illegible] "you didn't guess the sheriff asked, in a dull [illegible] voice."

But Jenny ignored Marm Pierce's question. Marm Pierce, seeing in it a sort of challenge, said: "I'm [illegible] a good Samaritan," she said. "I've lived a lot of years, and I've got to go on [illegible] Huldy Ferrin knew that she was [illegible] . . . I guess I loved her anyway."

"And somebody blamed him for hitting Huldy," Bart insisted, quick to Will's defense. "She needed it, bad! But he never meant to knock her off the bench."

Jenny cried sudden, and passionate: "Who never meant to hurt Bart?"

"I know he didn't," Bart loyally agreed. "But I'm just saying, if he did."

"He didn't!" Jenny repeated crisply. The sheriff looked up at her. "How come you to be so sure, Jenny?" he asked in calm tones. "Outside of feeling about him the way you do, how come you to be so sure?"

"If I wasn't sure," Jenny challenged, "I'd should I'd ever have told you, or anybody, what she said?"

"You wouldn't want to marry a man that'd kill his wife, would you?" Sobier argued, and Jenny's eyes met his fairly, and hers were misery with deep tiredness.

"He didn't," she insisted steadfastly. "But I'd want no misery. Will, any way it come, and no matter what he done."

"Well, that's what I'm trying to tell you," the sheriff repeated doggedly. "What made you sure, all of a sudden, now?"

"I'm coming to my senses," Jenny decided. "I was kind of numb for a whiles but then after I'd been with Will for a spell, I was sure."

The sheriff, surprisingly, chuckled. "I'd admire to hear you testify like that in court," he declared. "I'd like to see what the judge would say." He became grave again and looked at Jenny at Will. "How about it, Will?" he suggested soberly. "Anything you've got to say?"

Will, with all their eyes upon him, wiped his hand across his mouth. The man was drawn and [illegible]. He spent a moment searching for words. "If it was any one but Jenny tells me I wouldn't believe Huldy said it," he declared.

"I don't guess I blame you," she said.

"No, No—it isn't true."

The sheriff frowned. "How come she to say a thing like that, then?" he protested. "Don't seem as if a woman would tell a straight out lie, thinking she's before she died?"

"She was out of her head, I reckon," Will replied.

But Jenny said: "No, Will, she was sense as always. She knowed me. Knowed every word she said."

The man had a almost pleadingly: "Jenny, you wouldn't tell a thing like that, only if she was crazy or out of her head, or something?"

Marm Pierce had been silent long, but now she spoke, in sharp and angry tones.

"Will Ferrin, you're a fool!" she exclaimed. "I guess most men are where a woman's concerned; but you're a bigger fool than most. You know as well as anyone that Huldy was no good!"

His head lifted as though he would speak, but her voice rose. "Now don't try to skin me up, Will Ferrin!" she cried. "For I'm going to have my say! Land knows why Huldy married you, but everybody knows she was a bad wife to you. She was bad from her toes up. Dead as she is, I'll say so, if it's the last word I do say. She'd have done any man that wa'n't a saint or a fool to kill her long ago; but you didn't kill her. You always would speak soft to Huldy, and stand anything from her, and come down hard on anyone that tried to tell you the truth about her!"

She turned as though on a sudden thought to the sheriff. "Will didn't hit her," she insisted. "He wouldn't have the spunk to! He always did treat Huldy like a lady, no matter how she behaved. Maybe if he'd took a hoop-pole to her long ago . . ."

But she checked the word, swung to Will again.

"Will, you listen to me," she commanded him. "Huldy knowed what she was saying, all right; and she knowed she was dying, too. But if she could make Jenny believe you killed her, there couldn't ever be any happiness between the two of you; and that's what Huldy wanted. That's why she said what she did. So's to make it hard for you, and bitter hard for my Jenny."

And she said with a sudden passion in her tones: "Just for that, I'd set her out of my house this minute, dead though she be, if it wasn't for you, Will. As it is she can stay; but you better get some sense into your head! She was a mischief-making, lying trouble-making woman, and there's the truth of it, and I'm glad she's dead, if you ask me!"

She rose and stood handling with her corset cover made and looked at Will as though in challenge; as though she dared him to deny her words. And Jenny glanced to Will's side, her lovely face, but ready there and loyal.

Then Will spoke slowly: "Ma'am," he said to Marm Pierce, "I guess if it comes to that, I knowed Huldy better than most. But I don't want folks to talk about her so!" There was gentleness in his tones.

"There, that's you play the dumb fool to me!" said off Marm Pierce angrily. "Twenty what's as plain as day! She always would make trouble when she could. She set Zeke on Bart two years ago, and she'd set Jenny against you now, if she could . . ."

She looked at Bart as though he would confirm her word; but Bart was watching Will.

The sheriff leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "But, just the same," he mused, "she wouldn't think that up, about Will hitting her and knocking her off the ledge, unless someone, Will or someone else, did hit her?" He looked at Marm Pierce. "Mac Pierce," he asked in a low tone, "wasn't there a place on her face like she'd been hit?"

"Like she'd hit a tree, or a stone, when she fell, yes," said the old woman, grudgingly. "But no man alive could hit that hard!"

He nodded. "Seemed to me I remembered your saying that," he agreed. "Saying her face was—bunged up?" He looked troubled; and then he stood up and turned to Will.

"Will," he said gravely. "My job is just to do the best I know." He hesitated, and silence waited on him. "The law is that if a person is dying, and says something, you've got to take it for true, less'n there's proof to the contrary. That's one thing! Then if Huldy did have a bunged place on her face, it's likely someone did hit her! And you was down to the ledge, looking for her, by your own tell."

He added, in an apologetic tone: "S'pose you did find her down there, and she started talking about Jenny? I guess if she got you mad enough, you might hit her, Will. Same as any man."

Will answered him: "I didn't, Sheriff," he said.

Sobier was uncomfortable. "I don't know's you did, Will," he agreed. "But I've got to go on her say so. I'll take it as a favor if you was to come along back to East Harbor with me."

Jenny felt her spine cold with fear; but Will's eyes were firm. He said at last: "I can see how you're placed, Sheriff. Only—but knowing where Zeke is, or whether he'll come home or not, I'd have to get someone to do my chores for me."

Bart cried: "Don't worry about that, Will! I'll hold to things. If the varmint's so blamed dumb!"

But Jenny, coming close to Will, said: "If you go, Will, I'm going too! I'm not ever going to leave you now!"

Then Marm Pierce spoke, in her sheriff tones, still angrily. "I declare," she exclaimed, and stamped her foot. "For fools, give me men every time! If you ask me, Huldy's better dead, and everybody else is better off with her dead, too. No sense in making such a fuss about it. But Will didn't kill her."

"Then who did, ma'am?" the sheriff asked, reasonably.

"Why, I'll tell you," said the old woman. "If you're too blind to see!"

CHAPTER XI

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Jim Saladine was a man of wit and sense, and he was quicker than most men at reading the riddles life may day by day present. But all this day, he had been deeply at a loss. He was a stranger to these folk, and they to him; and for any appraisal of their characters and their capacities for good or evil, he had to depend upon what his eyes could see, or upon what this one said of that one.

Huldy he had seen, alive, beautiful, seductive; Will he had seen and liked; Bart he had had time to weigh and to appraise, and had found that young man bold and headlong, yet well enough; Zeke he had glimpsed briefly, and held in pity, though he had not been blind to the dangerous passion in the man. Old Win Haven he knew only by repute; yet that repute was ill. A cowardly old man, willing to spite a woman, or to affright a woman if he chose; willing perhaps to kill one, too?

But Saladine, even while he recognized his own limitations, recognized also that here were forces in play which could not easily be calculated. Such a woman as Huldy Ferrin had emanations which must affect the lives, the very souls, of all those about her. Even Jim himself—and he was not a susceptible man—had after leaving her known a vague uneasiness, a nervous sense of being spied on, of being trailed through the sodden wood.

And he recognized that fact that if in those few moments she could disturb him so, then she must in other men have set up conflicting currents capable—if once released—of any violence.

She was, he thought, a sort of pagan. She was vicious, beyond doubt; yet—there were not the marks of vice upon her, but rather of abounding life and deep undisciplined vitality. Saladine could even pity this woman, ruled and driven by forces whose nature and depth she herself did not in the least comprehend. She must have loved her own body, that warm beauty it could albeit must have served it like an acolyte, fetching to it whatever sacrificial offerings were at hand.

But Saladine, though he might be a mystic, was a realist, too; and—here had been murder done. The woman who, by the powerful spell her presence cast, had wrecked and distorted other lives—had worked her own destruction in the end.

Yet—through what human means? Through Will, the husband she so bitterly had wronged? Or through Zeke, reduced from strong laughing manhood to a weary and tormented ember? Or through old Win Haven whom she had flouted? Or through Bart Carey here, who had hated her for her betrayal of his friend? Or through some casual passer-by? Saladine did not know; had no sure conjecture in his mind at all.

It seemed to him not impossible that some stranger was involved. His own experience with Huldy helped his acceptance of this hypothesis as a possibility. She had sought to detain him, on that hidden ledge above the Valley; he had escaped by a sort of flight, as though he broke away from an actual physical restraint. Such women as Huldy must provoke in some men a sort of violent repulsion; and Saladine recognized this feeling in himself. If she had, for instance, tried by physical means to prevent his departure, had clutched his arm with her small hands, he could imagine himself flinging her with a violent and shuddering distaste backward and away. Thus cast aside, she might easily enough have tripped, or stumbled, and tottered off the ledge. He thought grimly that he himself, as well as any other man, might thus have hurled her to death today.

So Saladine could conceive the machinery of this tragedy; but it remained to discover the man. He had for a while almost forgotten this necessity in watching Jenny, during her disclosure of Huldy's dying accusation; he had seen the fine trust and tenderness in the girl. Her clean devotion shone against the dark background of Huldy's ugly passions; and he had forgotten that there was still a murderer to be found, till Marm Pierce by her word to the sheriff brought his attention back again.

The old woman said she would tell them who had killed Huldy; and Saladine, whose thoughts had been absorbed in dim abstractions, returned to a keen alertness.

On Marm Pierce's promise, silence for a moment held them; and the old woman said briskly: "It's cooled off in here by this time. Will, chunk up the fire. Bart, shut that shed door!"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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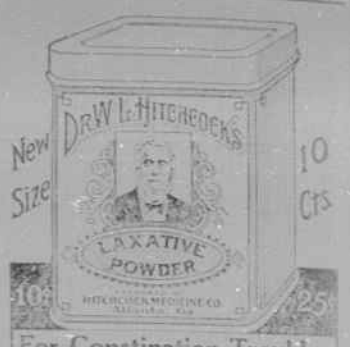
Talcum powders account for but a small part of the talc used, according to Field Museum News, an organ of the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. For every pound of talc ground for talcum powder forty pounds are used in other ways.

Romans Were Thoughtful

The Romans zoned their cities to keep industries out of central areas, and to limit height of buildings.

SORROW

Though sorrow must come, where is the advantage of rushing to meet it? It will be time enough to grieve when it comes; meanwhile, hope for better things.



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