

HOSTILE VALLEY

By Ben Ames Williams



PROLOGUE

WILL BISSELL'S store in Fraternity village is not only a store; but also it is a social center and a clearing house for news of the countryside. After supper, a dozen or a score of men are likely to drop in there for the mail, for a few dry groceries, or for nothing at all except the chance to listen and to speak in turn. Jim Saladine came down the hill from his farm on the Ridge one spring evening and found Chet McAusland there before him, and Gay Hunt, and Luke Hills, and others, too.

Chet, short and straight and vigorous despite his seventy years, was speaking when Saladine came in; speaking, as he was apt to in the spring, of fish and fishing. He greeted Jim with a nod, and finished what he had been saying.

"You hear many a tale of big trout from out there," he confessed, grudgingly enough. "But I'd rather eat a small trout anyway; and I can catch a good mess in the meadow brooks, along toward dark any time."

Gay Hunt retorted with a derisive chuckle: "Just the same, there's something funny about it that you never went out there, liking to fish the way you do."

So Saladine asked curiously: "Out where, Gay?" He was a famous hunter of the deer and of partridge and he liked trout as well as any man.

"Carey's brook, out in Hostile Valley," Gay explained. He pronounced the word to rhyme with "smile," with a long vowel in the second syllable. "Bart Carey was in here a while ago; claimed that a man staying at his place caught three two-pounders one afternoon last week."

Now, a two-pound trout is, for the streams about Fraternity, unusual; and to catch three such monsters in a single day was without precedent. Saladine was interested, yet not immediately credulous. "I've heard such tales," he admitted. "But I dunno. This Carey, he act like a man to tell the truth?"

"Know him, don't you?" Gay protested. "Lives right there at Carey's bridge. His pa used to take boarders, folks that come for the fishing. After the old man died, Bart and his brother had a row and his brother pulled out. Bart's sister killed herself here a year ago."

"I don't know as I ever see him," Saladine confessed. "I never got out to Hostile Valley." He chuckled faintly. "Matter of fact, I always kind of dodged the place. Didn't like the name of it, I guess."

The others nodded understandingly. This Hostile Valley had in fact an ill repute. Hidden away in the hills somewhat north and west of Fraternity, it was a deep gorge between two ridges, and the slopes were bold and black with spruce timber, and they had a trick of catching low clouds and squeezing them of moisture, so that rain fell there and farms did not greatly prosper.

Chet McAusland said now: "I went in there once. It's an awful hole. Once was enough for me."

Guy Hunt assented: "Me, I never liked the sound of it." There was in fact a harsh asperity in the very name, conjuring a picture of a countryside inhabited by dour and silent folk who looked askance at a stranger. "How come it to be called that in the beginning?"

Chet knew the answer to this question, as he was apt to know all the ancient lore of these hills. "It goes back to the sixties," he said. "They had a kind of a war of their own out there. They fit the draft and there wa'n't ever a man from Hostile Valley drafted at all."

"For the South, was they?" Gay asked.

"It wa'n't that, so much," Chet declared. "It was more that the folks out there, you can't ever drive 'em. Old Enoch Ferrin riled them, got their backs up."

And he continued: "Enoch was the boss coon around there then. He had a farm on the ridge this side, and he had four sons and one of 'em had gone to South Carolina and married down there. When the war started, Enoch wrote him to come home and this son—his name was Will—wouldn't do it. So Enoch made his other three sons 'list and told 'em to go hunt up this brother of theirs and kill him for a rebel; and Enoch, he tried to organize a company, out there in the Valley. But he was kind of bulldozing about it, so folks got their backs up and wouldn't go for him nor anybody. So they had a

rough time of it for a while." Saladine asked gravely: "Did they kill Will?"

Chet shook his head. "The other three sons all got killed their own selves," he explained. "It was like it was a judgment on Enoch. After the war his head went queer from thinking about it and he'd have died on the town, but this Will, he come home and took gentle care of the old man till he died." He added: "Will's grandson is the one lives out there now. Name's Will, too. He's an able man."

Gay asked quickly: "Ain't his wife the one . . . ?"

Chet nodded. "She's the one," he agreed in a heavy tone.

There was a moment's hushed pause; the same thought in all their minds. Huldy Ferrin's fame, it was clear, extended far. Luke Hills said in a hushed tone:

"I've seen her!"

He was, it appeared, alone in this distinction; and though no one spoke, there were questions in their eyes.

"I was working in Seth Humphreys' steam mill out there," he explained. "The time Will Ferrin killed Seth for chasing around after her. Nobody blamed Will. I guess Seth started it. Anyhow, he shot Will's leg off; but Will had a hold of his throat by that time and hung on. I helped lug Will up to Marm Pierce's after."

"This Marm Ferrin," some one prompted; and Luke said guardedly:

"Well, I never seen a woman like her. Just looking at her would make a man kind of—lift his comb and strut like a fighting cock."

Saladine commented slowly: "I've heard tell that Will Ferrin is a good man." A nod, here and there, answered him, assenting. "I never heard much about this Bart Carey, though," Saladine added.

Will Bissell, from behind the candy counter, remarked: "Bart, he stops in here once in a while, on his way to East Harbor. He's kind of tall and looks to be able and he speaks right up to you. I'd say he's all right."

Luke Hills supplemented this. "We used to go up to his place, from the mill, of an evening sometimes," he said. "Bart, he'd always have hard cider in the cellar and maybe some rum. He don't farm much. He takes folks to board that want to come and fish the brook. Likes a good time."

And he added: "His sister, this one that killed herself, Amy her name was, she kep' house for him. She was a nice-looking woman, too."

"How come she killed herself?" Saladine asked gravely.

Luke shook his head. "I dunno. That was after I come back here."

But Chet said strongly: "Well, if you ask me, it's enough to make any woman kill herself to live out there. That's a miserable place."

"It's a wonder this Marm Ferrin would stay there," Jim suggested.



"Well, If You Ask Me, It's Enough to Make Any Woman Kill Herself."

"From what you hear about her. What makes her stay, Luke?"

Luke put a guard upon his tongue. "I don't go to talk about a thing that ain't none of my business," he protested. "I see Will when he got hold of Seth. Teach any man with a mite of sense to keep his mouth shut, that would."

Their talk turned presently into another channel; but when by and by Will began to turn out the lights as a suggestion that it was time to go home, Saladine and Chet went out to Jim's car together and in the car started up the hill. Chet's farm

was on the shoulder of the Ridge, where two roads forked; and Jim stopped to let the other man down. "You say you never fished Carey's brook only that once?" he asked then.

"Once was plenty," Chet replied. "Do anything?"

Chet shook his head. "A few small ones. It's a chancy brook," he explained. He added honestly: "It's full of big trout, though. In the deep holes and down through the bog, if a man could get at them."

"Say we try it some day," Saladine proposed.

"Sh." Chet protested, "what's the sense in going so far when you can get plenty nearer home? The roads is awful."

Jim chuckled. "This old car is used to bad roads, Chet. I'm a mind to go. I'd like to have a look at that brook. You come along!"

But Chet would not; and Saladine's curiosity was stimulated by the other's attitude. And two or three days later, when rain and the promise of more rain made farm work a tedious business of turning water-soaked clods which weighed heavily upon the plow, he took the opportunity thus afforded. "I'll be back by dark or a little after," he told Mrs. Saladine when he set out. "I don't aim to do much only look over the creek and try a few holes."

But it would be long after dark before he came home, and many things would happen in the intervening hours. The past is a book which any man may read, but it is impossible to look ahead with certainty through thirty seconds' span. Saladine often afterward asked himself, if he had known what a sequence of events his entrance into the Valley was to set in motion, he would have gone there that day; and he could find no certain answer.

But he set out with no misgivings. It had rained the day before, and in the night; a sharp torrential downpour. The road from his farm to the village was rutted and washed away along the borders, and mud splashed merrily under his wheels. Chains, Jim decided, might be useful; and he stopped at the garage in North Fraternity to buy a pair.

Lon Pride, the garage man, had news to relate. "Hear about the murder out at Liberty?" he asked, with unctious. Jim had not heard, and Lon said: "Old Man Mayhew lived on the road to Mac's corner, they found him dead this morning with his head beat in. They've sent for the sheriff."

Jim knew Sheriff Sohler, but not Old Man Mayhew. Nevertheless he was tempted to turn that way. In the end, he put this temptation aside, but he would be glad to know where the sheriff could be found, before this day was done.

The chains adjusted, he went on; and there was a prickling excitement, a deep sense of adventure, in him as he drove. He had no clear and certain notion of the proper route, knew only in a general fashion where the Valley lay, and steered as it were by compass now. He meant to come to Carey's bridge, at the upper end of the Valley, and fish downstream; so at crossroads or at forks, he took what seemed the most promising turn, and once or twice he passed abandoned farms, with the glass broken in the windows, so that the empty rooms looked out at him with hollow eye sockets.

By and by he arrived at a farm where a man had just felled a knotted old beech across the road, blocking the way; and he pulled up to ask directions. The farmer took off his hat and scratched his head. "You're going all right," he said. "If you want to come to Carey's. 'Course, this here is the hardest way. Bart don't ever come out this way. Will Ferrin, he does, though. It's handiest for him. What do you want to go in there for, anyway?"

Jim said: "Fishing."

The other nodded with a mild mirth in his dry eye. "So they all say," he commented in a sardonic tone. "But I guess full as many stop at Ferrin's as go on to Carey's."

Saladine understood the allusion. He had heard tales enough of this woman who was wife to Will Ferrin. Legend painted her as a figure at once glamorous and sinister, seductive and heartless, enticing and without scruple. Her reputation spread for miles across the countryside; and he thought this man's present incredulity not surprising. He was conscious of some frank curiosity on his own account to see such a woman; wondered whether their paths would cross today.

But just now he listened to the other man's directions, and drove on. The road was miserable. The car, laboring in low gear, ascended steadily, till through a gap in the woods on the right Saladine saw low lands, and knew that he was well up on the slope of the barrier ridge. So he came at last to its crest, and followed that high land for a space, and in a sort of saddle in the ridge he found another road turning to the left, in the direction in which he wished to go. Saladine turned into it without hesitation.

After a few rods, however, he checked the car; for the road emerged upon a naked ledge, beyond which it dipped steeply downward. Directly across, two miles or so away, another ridge rose like

a wall. To his right, the Valley seemed to narrow, pinched between converging ranges of hills. To the left it opened out in some degree; yet there was nothing to see save the blanket of forest, hardwood and evergreen.

Above him, the clouds scurried low and menacing; and they were like a sodden blanket across the Valley. He could discover no least sign of habitation anywhere; nothing save this sweeping forest carpet, the evergreens sodden from last night's rain, the hardwoods still half naked, thinly clad in their just springing leaves.

He saw a solitary crow, silent, flying on swift-beating wings as though even this dark, ill-omened bird only crossed the Valley because it must and was in haste to come to a pleasanter scene.

And Saladine was not cold; yet he shivered. Then he laughed at his own uneasiness, and loosed the brake, and between a double screen of tangled trees and underbrush on either side of the road, began the steep descent into the unknown.

Sometimes in the deep forest the adventurer will come upon a hidden pool, its quiet surface mirroring the trees and the clouds across the sky; and to cast a stone into such a pool is to start a widening circle of ripples, so that every rock and root along the banks is washed by the disturbed water.

Hostile Valley was like such a hidden pool. Whatever strong currents flowed beneath the surface, the lives here were nowadays outwardly serene; yet they hung in a precarious balance. Saladine's coming was the rock thrown into the pool, sufficient to upset this balance, to loose deadly forces, to precipitate a climax long delayed. His simple coming would set all in motion, and by an inevitable process destroy two lives or even three; while at the same time it enriched and perfected others.

But Saladine, though he was full of a lively curiosity, had no prevision of what was to come as he drove now down the hill.

More than 500 acres of snap beans and tomatoes have been planted in Haywood County this season and both crops are in excellent condition.

The pine seed broadcast in Lee and Moore counties in early March did not come up to a full stand though there is a fair stand of the loblolly seedlings. The long leaf seed did not germinate so well.

HOSTILE VALLEY

BEN AMES WILLIAMS' latest and greatest story will appear serially in this newspaper!

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HULDY FERRIN was a thing of beauty and a curse forever to every man in sinister, half-forgotten Hostile Valley, but she met her match in a simple, wholesome valley girl. Passion and murder, hate and happiness, as only Williams can tell of them.

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Don't miss a single chapter of **HOSTILE VALLEY**!

Over 1700 acres have been signed up by Buncombe county farmers for soil erosion control work, announces the county farm agent.

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\$3000.00
CITY OF SOUTHPORT, NORTH CAROLINA
REVENUE ANTICIPATION NOTE
Sealed bids for above note will be received until 10 o'clock A. M., July 23rd, 1935, by the Local Government Commission of North Carolina, at its office in Raleigh, for the above note, dated July 23rd, 1935, and maturing six months after date, without option of prior payment. There will be no auction. The note will be awarded at the lowest interest rate not exceeding 6 per cent for which a bid of principal and interest payable in Southport, N. C. Interest payable in advance. Bidders must present with their bids a certified check upon an incorporated bank or trust company, payable unconditionally to the order of the State Treasurer for one-half of one per cent of the face amount of the note to be served. The right to reject all bids is reserved.
LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION
By W. J. Eassey, Secretary
7-17c.

NOTICE OF APPOINTMENT
PARDON
This is to give notice that the undersigned J. C. Walker will give His Excellency, the Governor of North Carolina and the Commissioner for a pardon in the case of offense of murder in the second degree, said offense having been committed in the County of Wayne and for which the offender is now serving a term of years in the State Prison. All persons desiring to make application are notified to do so in writing to the Commissioner at roles immediately.
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