

HOSTILE VALLEY



By
Ben
Ames
Williams



Jenny assented without reservation; but when she told Marm Pierce, days later, this word of Will's, the old woman said frantically: "That's just like a man! Once you get an idea into the critter's heads, there's no knocking it out again. A man's worse than a broody hen! Only sure way to break her is to cut her head off. A woman like Huldy, all she deserves is a knock on the head. 'Stead of that, you and him will go on eating your hearts out, and she'll gad around with this one and that one. . . I'll like to lay a hand on her once. I'd trim her comb!"

Yet the girl was content, and when winter broke and the feeble pulse of spring began to flutter, Jenny had come to a certain happiness. She was happy in serving Will, going almost daily to clean up the kitchen and cook a batch of doughnuts, or make biscuits, or concoct a pie. To see him, to be alone with him was for the time bliss enough for her.

But when the frost was out of the ground and plowing to be done, the handicap under which Will must labor began more fully to appear. He was able to do the barn chores; but field work presented problems hard to solve. Bart and others helped him when they could; but Will's restless zeal sought an outlet in great works about the farm, and the neighbor folk had their own tasks to do.

For this problem which Will faced, chance brought what seemed a fortunate solution. Toward the foot of the Valley there was a farm long owned by old Fred Dace, whose father and grandfather had dwelt there before him, and who lived there with his son, Nate. But Nate had died a year or two before; and this spring the old man likewise sickened and came to his quick end. He had no kin about, but there was a son who four or five years before had gone west, and this son now came home.

Zeke Dace was a lean, wiry man in his middle twenties, who wore a wide-brimmed hat of a western pattern, and rode plow horses with a stock saddle, and rolled cigarettes with one hand, and had a laughing, ready tongue. He had come home, he said, to stay. The cow business was busted, jobs on the range were hard to find.

But the Dace farm promised no great return from even a vigorous cultivation; and Will Ferrin sent for Zeke and hired him as a hand. Jenny approved the arrangement. She liked the newcomer; and he and Will were from the first a congenial pair.

There were others who liked Zeke, too. Amy, Bart's sister, was one of them. She was older than Jenny, but not yet old enough to begin to fade in that quick, relentless fashion which hard farm work may impose upon a woman. Since Huldy's departure, whether by accident or not, Bart had fewer boarders; and Seth Humphreys' steam mill was shut down, abandoned and deserted now. So Bart and Amy were much alone, and Bart went often for a word with Will, and Zeke as often came down the hill to stand in the door of Amy's kitchen and talk with her a while. He had a teasing, laughing tongue that could whip color to her cheeks; but she liked it, and she sometimes nursed happy dreams.

So this early summer in the Valley passed serenely; and Jenny was a part of this serenity. She had no least warning of what was to come.

It was mid-July when Huldy returned. Zeke and Will were busy with the harvest. Will could drive the mowing machine, or the rake; and when it came to load the hay cart, or to put the hay in the mow, he nailed a board across the foot of his leg to make a sort of snowshoe which enabled him to stand securely. Jenny had gone this day early to the farm; had helped for a while in the fields, pitching hay up on the cart with Zeke while Will stowed it there.

But later she went to the house to get dinner ready for them; and at a convenient time they came stamping into the kitchen, washed themselves at the sink and so set down. Jenny served them, set the heaping dishes on the table, then seated herself to eat with them; and the three were laughing together at some word Zeke had said, when a car drove into the yard.

A car with a man at the wheel and Huldy by his side.

They saw her through the open door; saw her, and sat still and frozen while she descended and came toward them. The man stayed in the car.

Jenny thought that Huldy was

as beautiful as ever. She found herself on her feet, facing the door. Will half turned in his chair as though to rise; but that board nailed across the end of his leg cramped under a rung of the chair, and prevented. Zeke looked questioningly at Will, and then at Huldy; and Huldy stood smiling in the doorway.

Then she laughed. "I see you ain't lonely, Will?" she said. He tried again to get up. "Where's your crutch?" she inquired derisively. "Want me to fetch it for you?"

Jenny asked: "What have you come for?" Her tone was steady, her heart still.

"Don't worry," Huldy told her. "I don't aim to stay. I left some clothes here; come to fetch them. Unless you've been wearing them!"

"They're in a box in the attic," Jenny said, ignoring the taunt. "I put them away."

"Moved in, have you?" Huldy commented. "Seems like you was in quite a hurry. I waited till he married me, anyway!"

Jenny's cheek was white; yet she curbed her tongue, and Huldy turned to Zeke. "I don't know you," she said amiably. "But you look like you had sense enough to realize three's a crowd!"

Zeke grinned, deriding her. "From what I hear, three wouldn't crowd you none," he retorted.

Her brows lifted. "So you been hearing about me, have you?" Then she smiled, flatteringly. "But you'd find that one's enough for me, if he's a whole man," she said.

Will wrenched the board off the end of his leg, with a squeak of drawn nails, freeing his foot. He stood up to face her. "Huldy," he said huskily, "you mind your tongue. Come in if you want. You're always welcome here. But mind your tongue."

Huldy was for the moment silenced; but Zeke spoke to Jenny. "Where's this box?" he asked scornfully. "I'll fetch it down for her."

"In the attic, the far end," Jenny said. "By the window."

Zeke turned toward the attic stairs, behind the stove; but Huldy spoke to him. "You're in an awful hurry to get rid of me," she protested.

Zeke hesitated, looked at Will. "I'll pack her back in the car out



"I Might Decide to Stay," She Said Softly.

there if you say, Will," he offered, his cheek hot.

Huldy whispered mockingly: "I guess you don't like me at all!"

"Not a bit, lady," Zeke assured her. "Nor any of your kind."

"How do you know my kind?" she challenged.

"I've seen enough of 'em, in gutters and around," he said mercilessly.

But Will turned upon him. "Zeke, you hush up," he said. Then to his wife: "Huldy, he'll fetch your things!"

Huldy stood, leaning indolently against the jamb of the door, smiling at them all. "He don't have to hurry. I might decide to stay," she said softly.

confessed. "I can cure some hurts, this here is too much for me."

And later she said: "You put a pillow under his head, and a blanket over him, to keep him warm."

But when these things were done they could only keep vigil, till after a long hour the doctor did arrive.

When that which had now to be done was done, Jenny was left drained and empty, her muscles limp, her heart sick. Throughout, she and Marm Pierce had helped the doctor; the old woman administering chloroform drop by drop under strict direction, Jenny holding

this and that as she was bidden. With the first stroke of knife, she was stunned as though by a head blow; had thereafter no sense or strict consciousness of what went forward here at all. This still form on the table ceased to be the man she loved; she helped like an automaton, her cheek white as stone, her hands precise and strong, while flesh and blood and bone of good Will Ferrin were reduced to carion. The overpowering physical experience would leave its traces on her thereafter in lasting ways; yet she was for the moment spared emotion.

When at last she was no longer needed, she went weakly into the kitchen to wash her hands and clean her garments; she returned to her own room to change into her other gear. Time had flown; dusk was purple in the Valley. When she returned to the dining room, Will had somehow been moved so that he lay, breathing in long gasping inhalations, on the couch; and Jenny found the doctor gone, and only Marm Pierce and Luke Hills remaining here.

The old woman looked at Jenny in the lamp's pale light, and saw the girl's exhaustion; and she came to say to her softly:

"Jenny, there's nought to do here for a while. It will be long enough till he knows us, or knows anything. You get out of doors, get some air, breathe life back into you, child. You're pale as a gone thing yourself, this minute. I'll tend all here."

And Jenny, moving with a curious passivity, obeyed the old woman as she was used to obey, and went out into the thickening darkness.

This was a still, cold night, with threat of another frost before dawn. The stars prickling overhead, stooping low, peered brightly down like the eyes of curious children. The girl heard the rumble of a distant automobile, somewhere toward the steam mill, and saw a sweeping ray of light above the trees as though a car were turning there, its headlights like a searchlight's beam.

They would be taking Seth Humphreys' body away, she thought; and she thought Will had killed him, and thought of the law and what the law would have to say to this; and she thought loyally that none could blame Will. Blame Huldy, it might be; but not Will.

And slow anger began to wake in her, to supplant the terrible stricken grief because a part of Will was gone, and the sweet flesh she loved was now reduced to a noisome thing that must be disposed of secretly and swiftly. Anger woke in her; at Seth Humphreys for his active part, and at Huldy for her secret, passive role.

Seth was dead, beyond reach of Jenny's wrath; but Huldy lived!

And Jenny found herself going at long strides, like a swift avenger, toward the brook, along the wood path, toward Will's farm—where Huldy now would be.

Jenny went in wrath; but her deep, abiding anger was bound in fetters not easily to be broken, for Huldy was Will's wife, and the girl had wit enough, deep sense enough, sound wisdom enough to understand that this was no seemly hour for a woman's brawl. To shame Huldy would be to shame Will; and with sudden clear perception Jenny knew that this she would not do. So by the time she had crossed the brook and climbed the steep trail and come up through the orchard to the house, she was steady again, bent and bound first and above all else to protect Will from ugly tongues.

She came through the barn into the farmyard; and through the unshaded window of the kitchen she saw Huldy within. And sight of Huldy checked the girl; for Will's wife was dressed in an unaccustomed fashion, in a skirt and coat of some dark stuff. Also Jenny saw that Bart Carey stood beside her, bending down to her, speaking intently; and she saw Huldy's slow, mocking smile as she looked at the man, her head tilted backward, the smooth line of her throat sweeping deep into her bosom.

This much Jenny saw, not particularly intent on Bart, but startled by the fashion of Huldy's dress; and she went quickly to knock upon the kitchen door.

Huldy called: "Come in!" So Jenny entered.

The two faced her from beyond the table; the lamplight was strong upon them. Huldy sat with her head a little on one side, her dark eyes shadowed, her lips curled in that deep smile; Bart, beside her, stood half-erect, one hand still upon the arm of her chair, as though he had been bending over her in some stern or ardent urgency.

And Jenny said slowly: "Mis' Ferrin, I guess you don't know it, or you'd been there; but Will's hurt over to Granny's house. The doctor—cut his leg off. You'll have to come on over!"

Bart straightened up, his face not. "That's what I've been telling her," he said, yet not convincingly; and Huldy's eyes turned toward him, with a sardonic upward twist of her brow.

"He'll be coming to, soon," Jenny urged. "When the chloroform wears off. And he'll want you there."

Bart insisted: "Yes, Huldy! He'll want you! You'd ought to go along with Jenny!"

Huldy sat at ease, one knee crossed over the other, one foot moving slightly in a tight little rhythm. Jenny saw that the other woman's hat lay on the table by the lamp.

"You were getting ready to come?"

she hazarded. "I guess Bart told you about it. I thought you mightn't know." Huldy did not speak at all; and Jenny asked Bart: "How did you know?"

"They telephoned from my house," he reminded her. "I was fishing, down brook, with a man that's been staying at my place. Amy told me, when I got home, a while ago. I come right up here . . ."

"Quick as a tomcat," said Huldy, with a mocking glance at him; and he said hotly, virtuously:

"It looked to me you'd need some one. You'd have the chores to do . . ."

Jenny remembered something forgotten. She cried: "Oh, Bart! Will says his team's up on the ridge road. He lost a nut off the wagon. You'd better go fetch them back to the barn."

Bart hesitated; but Huldy said, watching him cruelly: "Go along, Bart. You can make up to a horse, maybe!"

Jenny perceived, without understanding, a baffled anger in Bart; she thought he was provoked by Huldy's heartlessness, and she touched his arm. "Go on, Bart," she urged. "Go fetch the team back and unhitch them and give them some feed. . . I'll take Huldy over home."

There was sweat on Bart's brow; he looked from Jenny to Huldy and his dark eyes fixed on Will's wife. "You stay here till I come back," he muttered. "I want to talk to you."

"I've heard all you've got to say," Huldy told him. "Get away from me, and stay away!" There was no heat in her tones; no trace of anger; rather a slow, maddening scorn.

Bart snatched at his hat. "I'll come back," he insisted, almost threateningly, and then was gone. So these two women were left alone, and Huldy looked at the girl with narrowed eyes, and she said tonelessly:

"I guess you feel bad about Will."

"Yes," Jenny assented. "Yes, I do!"

Huldy shifted her position, spoke in casual inquiry. "Is he hurt real bad?"

Jenny watched her, remembering that this woman was the source from which catastrophe had sprung; and Huldy waved a careless hand. "Will, he's always one to look for trouble," she reflected. "He come tramping in the house, and flew off the handle at nothing, and went out again a-running. That's all I know." Her lips twitched with amusement. "You can go on and tell me," she urged.

Jenny explained: "Will and Seth, they fit, down't the mill. Seth had a gun. . ."

"That was Bart's gun," Huldy interrupted. "Seth borrowed it, claimed he wanted to shoot a wild bull." She laughed softly. "As if Will was wild, or a bull either, matter of that! But Seth always would lie."

"Seth shot Will," Jenny persisted, her tones shaken. "The bullet hit Will's leg and broke the bones all to pieces. It went smashing down into his foot; and they fetched him to the house, and the doctor—cut his leg off."

"Seth ought to been ashamed," said Huldy chidingly. "I'd give him a piece of my mind, shooting my Will that way, if Will hadn't already 'tended to him plenty." And she asked with wide innocent eyes: "Did you see them cut his leg off?"

"I helped the doctor," Jenny answered.

Huldy was all surface sympathy. "That was hard on you—with you loving my Will so!" Her last word bit and stung.

And Jenny breathed deeply, and was strong. "I do love him," she assented gravely. "But you're not likely to know what that means." She added insistently: "Can't you come to him now?"

Huldy smiled and shook her head. "I ain't coming," she said calmly. "You can have him. Tell him I said I never could be satisfied with half a man!"

The world shattered into fragments, as a mirror shatters under the impact of a thrown ball. Jenny rocked to and fro as though she had been struck; and her lips were dry. The lamp was smoking; a thin thread of smoke like a black line rose from the chimney top, to billow into a faint plume in the rising air current above the flame. The girl leaned forward to turn the lamp down a little.

"Wick needs trimming," she muttered.

"You'll take care of all such things for him," Huldy predicted. "You're such a housekeeper! But—tending a cripple would weary me. I'm going away!"

"You'd not go when he's hurt, and needs you?" Jenny whispered almost pleadingly.

"I'd rather be wanted than needed," Huldy retorted. "But that's a riddle to you."

"You're bound to go?" Jenny asked, still incredulous.

"I am going. In a little now."

"Where?"

"An old friend of mine," said Huldy lightly. "He's been fishing down at Bart's. Soon's he gets his clothes changed, he's coming to fetch me."

(Continued next week)

NOTICE TO COURT WEEK VISITORS

Someone will be in The State Port Pilot office every day next week to receive payment on subscriptions. Arrange now to keep The Pilot coming to you every week throughout the coming year.

Many of our readers visit Southport only once or twice each year. Keep posted on what is going on in your county by reading your home newspaper.

The State Port Pilot
(Office in The Ruark Building)
SOUTHPORT, N. C.