

# HOSTILE VALLEY

by **BEN AMES WILLIAMS**

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### SYNOPSIS

At a gathering in the village of Liberty, Maine, Jim Saladine listens to the history of the neighboring Hostile Valley, and the mysterious, enticing "Huldy," wife of Will Ferrin. Interested, he drives to the Valley for a day's seeing, and to see the glamorous Huldy Ferrin. "Old Marm" Pierce and her nineteen-year-old granddaughter Jenny live in the Valley. Since childhood Jenny has deeply loved young Will Ferrin, older than she, and who regards her as still a child. Will leaves to take employment in Augusta. His father's death brings him back to the Valley, but he returns to Augusta, still unconscious of Jenny's womanhood and love. Bart Carey, something of a ne'er-do-well, is attracted by Jenny. The girl repulses him definitely. Learning that Will is coming home, Jenny, excited, sets his long-empty house "to rights," and has dinner ready for him. He comes—bringing his wife, Huldy. The girl's world collapses. Huldy becomes the subject of unfavorable gossip in the Valley. Entering his home unlooked for, Will finds seemingly damning evidence of his wife's unfaithfulness as a man he knows is Seth Humphreys breaks from the house. Will overtakes him and chokes him to death, although Humphreys shatters his leg with a bullet. At Marm Pierce's house the leg is amputated. Jenny goes to break the news to Huldy. Huldy declares she has no use for "half a man," and leaves. Will is legally exonerated, and with a home-made artificial leg "carries on," hiring a helper, Zeke Dace. Months later Huldy comes back. Will accepts her presence as her right. Two years go by. Saladine comes to the Valley. Bad roads cause him to stop at Ferrin's farm, where he meets Huldy. Saladine, caught in heavy rain, takes refuge at Marm Pierce's. Bart Carey arrives, carrying Huldy, whom he claims had fallen from a ledge, and seemingly is dead. Marm Pierce declares her dead, but while Huldy and Jenny are alone, the woman, with her last breath, asserts Will killed her. Horrified, Jenny decides to tell no one of the accusation. She goes to notify Will. With him Jenny returns to Marm Pierce's. She has told him of Huldy's death, and he is bewildered. Zeke Dace cannot be found. Saladine informs Sheriff Sohler, by phone, of Huldy's death. The sheriff comes to Marm Pierce's farm.

### CHAPTER IX—Continued

"It rained hard last night," Bart reminded him. "They was fresh today. I see them myself, when I fished down."

The sheriff asked: "Carey, you got any idea who'd want to hurt Mis' Ferrin?"

Bart hesitated. "I wouldn't go to say," he said. He added, with a deep reluctance: "Not unless it was Zeke. Zeke Dace, works for Will. Zeke was kind of crazy about her, and—jealous of her." He might have got mad at her. Yet he added honestly: "But Will don't low that Zeke would touch her."

"Where is Zeke?" the sheriff asked.

Bart shook his head. "Dunno. Nobody's seen him since."

Marm Pierce came out of the dining room. She told the sheriff she was glad to have him here.

He nodded, and asked slowly: "Was Mis' Ferrin dead when she got here, ma'am?"

"As good as," the old woman assured him. "She was all broke to pieces, and bled white, and she died before I got around to it."

"Didn't come to?"

"No," Marm Pierce told him. "No." "You look her over, did you?" the sheriff urged. He explained: "I guess likely I'll want a doctor to see her, but you might have noticed some special hurt on her."

The old woman told him: "Why, she was hurt cruel, Sheriff. Looked like she'd fell on her head and side. There was scratches and cuts all over her; and a deep bad cut on her neck. And her face was banged where she'd hit a tree, or a rock or the like."

"I mean to say," he persisted, "nothing to show . . ."

The old woman shook her head. "Nothing that she couldn't have got from falling the way she did."

The sheriff sighed as though discouraged, and Marm Pierce asked: "You didn't know Huldy, did you, Sheriff?"

"I've heard tell of her," he answered. "Guess the whole county has, if it comes to that," the old woman assented. "But you can see for yourself, a lot of things might have happened to a woman like her."

"It was account of her," Bart reminded them, "that Will killed Seth Humphreys. I dunno as I blame him. I dunno as he went to kill Seth; but Seth had a gun, and Will, with his leg shot to pieces, he had to hang on to Seth's neck or get another bullet in him. But Huldy was back of that."

"I heard she'd left Will, sense," the Sheriff reflected.

"She come back," Bart explained. "She took a shine to Zeke and decided to stay."

"Will take her back, did he?"

"Dunno as he could help it," Bart confessed; and he said slowly: "Will, he always stood a lot from her, Sheriff. He matter what she did, I dunno as he'd-harm her." He added harshly: "But if he did, I wouldn't blame him!"

The old woman's sharp eyes fixed on him. "You trying to let on that Will killed her, Bart?" she asked, in a matter-of-fact tone. "Speak out. No sense in talking around corners."

"I'm not letting on a thing about it," Bart assured her. "I'm trying to see through it, Granny, the same as you."

"I can see a plenty," she said crisply. The sheriff said, frowning: "I'd like to talk to this Zeke. Might be he'd know something. Maybe Will, he'll fetch him. Looks like I'd have to talk to that man."

But when Will and Jenny presently did return, they were alone.

This hour she spent with Will was for Jenny deeply comforting. Huldy's accusation had faded into a cloudy unreality, like the substance of a dream. But Jenny now, more than any other emotion, felt a grievous sympathy for Will, for the remorse she knew he must endure; and she strove in small ways to reassure and comfort him, not by words, but by her steady supporting presence at his side.

They tramped in silence through the woods, the lantern swinging in Will's hand making the black shadows of the trees along the way swing like somber pendulums. They crossed the brook, and climbed the steep trail, and came up through the orchard to the barn; and while Jenny held the lantern, Will let the cows into the tie-up and secured them there. He pulled down hay for them, and went to the kitchen for the pail and returned to milk. Jenny stood silently by, while he sat, his head against the warm flanks of the cows, the lantern here beside him on the floor.

He spoke only once of that which filled both their minds. "I'd like to know where Zeke's gone to," he said. "He'll be around by and by," Jenny promised him. "It's all right, Will."

But her own words faintly startled her; since clearly, if Will must live with the secret knowledge that he had killed Huldy, the world could never be all right for him again; and she wished suddenly to take him in her arms, and tell him that she knew, and held him blameless. But she perceived that to do this, to confess her knowledge of his guilt, would be to open between them a gulf never to be bridged.

So she was silent; and later, when they came back through the wet woods together, she decided that this was a matter none should ever know. And thus resolving, she found strength for the task before her, and was at peace again. Huldy was dead. Let it be by accident. The world would presently forget that Huldy had ever lived. When with Will she came back to the little house in the Valley, she had somehow stilled her fears.

Till she saw the sheriff there.

When they came in, she felt her strength drain away. But then, and by Will himself, her foreboding was turned into fearful certainty; for Will said to this man:

"Why, Sheriff, what fetched you here?"

The sheriff hesitated. "I kind of hoped you'd bring this Zeke Dace back with you," he said, evasively.

Will shook head. "I dunno where Zeke's got to," he admitted in troubled tones. "He wa'n't to home." And he persisted: "But Sheriff, what fetched you?"

Jenny was breathless, waiting for the answer. Then Saladine said gravely: "I sent for him, Will."

Will stared at Saladine. "What for?" he protested, bewildered.

And then the sheriff said: "Why Will, the thing is, it looks to everybody as if maybe Mis' Ferrin didn't just fall off of that ledge. They think someone maybe throwed her off."

Jenny's throat constricted strangely. The hounds were on the trail. As though from far away she heard Will stammer: "Killed her, you mean?"

"Something like that."

Will stood with his head bowed. "I guess not," he said firmly at last. "Who'd do that?"

"I was thinking maybe this Zeke Dace," Sohler suggested.

But Will shook his head. "No, Sheriff," he insisted. "Whatever did happen, it wa'n't Zeke. He wouldn't go to hurt her." And he continued, half to himself: "There might have been some to hurt Huldy; but not Zeke! Why, I'd as soon think I did it myself," he said.

Jenny felt the shock of a great blow. Then Bart chuckled; and Will turned to look at him. "What's the matter, Bart?" he asked. "What's funny?"

"What you said," Bart told him. "That's a joke, Will. I mean, to think you'd hurt Huldy," he explained, and he added hotly: "Not that anybody'd blame you! She needed it!" He spoke to the sheriff. "Anyone around here will say the same!"

Will moved a little toward him. "I don't take that kind of talk from you or anybody. Not about Huldy. Not now."

There was, briefly, silence; but after a moment the sheriff said, half to himself, in almost querulous tones: "It's a pity she didn't come to long enough to tell what happened to her!"

And it seemed to Jenny suddenly that this familiar kitchen was very small, and crowded, and stifling hot. She felt strangled, and her hand flew to her lips, and stark terror choked her. Then she saw Marm Pierce watching her with eyes suddenly keen and shrewd; and she felt smothered, and shrunk back into the corner by the door.

After the sheriff spoke, there was silence for a moment; then Jenny had a respite for Joe Matthews, the undertaker, came out of the dining room. He spoke to Will.

"There, Will," he said. "I've done all that needs doing tonight; and if you want, I'll carry her home." He hesitated, added: "But if you take my advice, let her lay here tonight. I can tend to everything a sight better in the morning."

Marm Pierce said: "She's welcome to stay, Will!"

Will nodded. "Well, likely that's sensible," he agreed.

Jenny, while their attention was thus turned away from her, opened the door and stepped out on the porch, grateful for the taste of cool, moist air. In the kitchen she heard the sheriff say doubtfully: "I guess, Joe, you'll want to go along home now. I don't know as I ought to leave yet, though. I'd like to see this Zeke Dace, first. But I wish't you'd bring Doc Harris in the morning. I want him to look her over."

When presently the undertaker came out to depart, Jenny drew aside out of his way. Sohler and Saladine crossed with him to where his truck



Jenny Stood Silently By.

stood, spoke with him there. Then Bart came out, and said to Jenny casually:

"Hot in there, ain't it." And in a lower tone: "Don't you worry, Jen! Nothing to be afraid of."

He too had seen her terror then! It must have been plain, for them all to see. But even as she thought this, she realized suddenly that she was no longer afraid, and wondered why. And then, without speaking to Bart, she came quickly back into the kitchen where were Marm Pierce and Will. Her hand touched Will's sleeve, and peace filled her; and a deep enlightenment and certainty, like a revelation.

Then the truck departed, and Bart and Sohler and Saladine returned indoors. After a moment the sheriff appealed to Saladine. "Jim," he said. "Looks like you could figure something out of this business. I guess you was the last one to see Mis' Ferrin alive."

Saladine shook his head. "I don't see into it at all," he confessed.

Bart turned to Will. "How about you, Will?" he urged. "Didn't you hear her screech when she fell? I'd have said everybody in a mile could have heard that. It sounded mighty loud to me."

Will shook his head. "The noise wouldn't carry up to the farm, with the hill between, and the trees." He looked at Saladine. "I mind," he said, "when you went off with Huldy, Zeke he come out of the shed like he'd go along after you. I stopped him, made him stay behind." And he continued after a moment: "Seems like I kep' him there a sight longer'n it'd take you to get down to the brook. Supposing you didn't stop any time on the ledge."

"I didn't," Saladine said.

There was silence for a moment; then Will spoke again, gropingly.

"By the time I figured you'd be gone," he explained, "I left Zeke and went into the house; but when it come on to rain, I wondered where Huldy was. I come out on the porch and yelled for Zeke, but he didn't answer, so I went hunting them. I started to go down the path to the brook. But then I decided there wa'n't any use in that." He added with a glance at Saladine: "I see tracks where you'd gone down, where your boots had slipped . . ."

Saladine spoke quickly. "Boots? I've got shoes on. It was someone else," he insisted. "It wa'n't me."

Will said stubbornly: "It was boot tracks that I see. Somebody with boots on had gone down the trail."

And Bart spoke. "Guess Zeke had boom on, didn't he?"

Will considered, and he nodded. "Likely," he agreed. "Yes, he did. I mind, now. He did."

The sheriff stirred. "The way it looks to me," he decided, "Zeke's the

one to find; and we ain't likely to find him, long as we're setting here!"

"Nor you can't find him outside," Marm Pierce cried sharply. "Show some sense, Sheriff! You couldn't see Zeke ten feet away, a night like this, if he was a blind to hide. Set down. Use your head, 'stead of your feet! Use your eyes!"

"What good's my eyes going to do me here?" he urged.

"There's been enough to see, if you wa'n't blind," she told him; and she looked briefly at Jenny. "Jenny," she said sharply. "You were almighty scared a while ago. I think you know something more'n you've told. You was down brook this morning. Did you see anything, hear anything at all?" Her tones were insistent.

Jenny, though her heart was pounding, spoke after a moment steadily enough. The way was clear before her now, all doubts resolved. But she only said: "I told you I heard someone talking, in the woods."

Marm Pierce protested irascibly: "Nothing in that to scare you!" She came closer to the girl. "Jenny, I can see more than most; but I can't see everything. What was it scared you, a while ago? When the sheriff said that about wishing Huldy had come to, before she died? What was it, Jenny?" she demanded.

The girl smiled slowly, as at some secret thought.

"Go on, Jenny," said old Marm Pierce. "Tell the truth and shame the devil!"

Jenny look at Will's bowed head, and her smile suddenly was radiant as the sun. "It don't mean a thing to me now," she protested softly. "Because I can see it wa'n't true."

"What was it, Jenny?" the old woman insisted.

"Huldy did come to, for a minute, before she died," said Jenny then.

Marm Pierce cried in a deep incredulity:

"Jenny, she never did!"

And Bart exclaimed: "She couldn't, Jenny! Why, she was as good as dead before ever I got her here!"

Jenny repeated slowly: "She did, anyway!" And for a moment she said no more. She stood near the cabinet over the sink, where knives and forks and cooking dishes were stowed away. Bart was by the door into the shed. Marm Pierce was between Jenny and the stove; and Sheriff Sohler sat in front of the oven with his greatcoat loose about him.

Will was beyond the stove, near the other door, impassive, waiting.

Saladine, watching Jenny, thought she seemed in this moment to wear a mantle of grace. She looked at Will, and her eyes held his, and her tone was gently mirthful.

"She told me you did it, Will," said Jenny, with a smile on her lips, and her glance serene.

Bart uttered a low ejaculation; but Marm Pierce spoke in brisk insistence: "How come you didn't call me?"

"I didn't want you," Jenny told her gently.

"The more fool you!" said Marm Pierce briskly, her patience near the breaking point. "What happened?" she demanded.

The sheriff spoke heavily. "Mis' Pierce, you let her tell it her own way," he urged. So Marm Pierce was silenced; and Jenny's eyes turned again to Will. The big man shook and swayed where he stood, as though this that Jenny had to say had struck him nerveless.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

**Mastiff Is Considered British Isles' Oldest**

There may be older breed of dogs than the mastiff but not so in the British Isles for here this dog is considered the oldest of them all, its origin dating back to the Sixth century B. C. At that time, writes Albert Stoll, Jr., in the Detroit News, it was brought into Britain by the adventurous Phoenician traders and was adopted by the Britons for hunting and in warfare.

For years the breed was used to hunt the larger wild animals and in bear baiting but as the centuries passed it was adopted as a canine companion for those who fancied the larger breed of dogs.

Mastiffs may be either fawn with a dark face or brindle. They weigh from 150 to 170 pounds and stand about 28 inches high at the shoulders. According to the American standard of perfection they should be large, massive and powerful with a well-knit frame. The legs should be wide apart and squarely set. The coat is short and close-lying but not too fine over the shoulders, neck and back.

**International Childlessness**

In February, 1930, at the first plenary meeting of the inter-allied commission and the Germans, a pretty farce was played out when the German chief insisted on opening the meeting. In spite of the fact that the allies were imposing terms and the Germans accepting them, a compromise on procedure had to be made wherein the German and the allied delegations entered the council room simultaneously.



**A Yuletide Escapade**  
by Helen Gaisford

**Mother's Christmas Story**  
By Alice B. Palmer

**TOOTS** reigned supreme in the Martin household. Except at Christmas time. Then Toots was ordered from his favorite corners, and expressed his displeasure by a switch of his tail.

Toots was a big black persian, with long silky fur and wide yellow eyes. It was pleasant under the kitchen stove, where delicious odors of suet and fowl mingled in the warm air. "Get out of here, ye beast," shouted Cook, who was not quite herself during the holidays. "Sure I can't step but what you're underfoot."

Toots arched his back and withdrew to the parlor. "Never lose your temper," was his attitude. "Never sputter and scratch; express your displeasure in dignity and disdain."

Beside the fireplace were a stool and pillow which were peculiarly his own. Onto these Toots leaped, and curled up for a snooze. "Oh, no, Toots, darling," said Betty. "The tree's going there." And Toots was picked up under one arm, and his stool shoved off to a cold corner. "You must look Christmassy, too," Betty cried gayly, and twisted a red ribbon about his neck, and tied a bow. Toots squirmed indignantly.

"See, Mother? Why, Toots, don't tear it off! That's our Christmas outfit." The badge of merriment dangled just beyond his reach. Disgusted, Toots crawled under the sofa.

Now was his chance. Did he dare attack? The tree, gaudy with bells and tinsel, seemed to mock him.

Cautiously, Toots jumped up on the sofa, sniffed at an extended bough. A slight breeze stirred, and a golden bird in the branches quivered. Toots crouched and sprang.

The tree went down with a swish, and was ablaze in a moment. Toots was surprised and terrified. He clawed at the door, and howled to heaven.

His noise brought the family, and the blaze was soon put out, but not before considerable damage had been done. The tree was a heap of smoldering blackened limbs, and the wall above was badly burned.

"Look," said Bett. "It peels right off." And then she cried out, for a secret crypt had been uncovered, and the hoarded coins of some old tenant were brought to light.

Such excitement as the treasure chest was emptied! Toots sniffed it all inquisitively.

"Toots, darling," cried Betty, "you're a hero!" and squeezed him impulsively. "Just think, if we hadn't heard him crying, we might have been burned out of house and home! And Toots, you shall have a Christmas present."

The parlor was locked up, and Toots' stool and cushion moved to the kitchen underneath the table. Cook was basting the turkey. A plate of goodies was offered him, but Toots only sniffed. He was tired. He found his place under the table and clawed the pillow into shape. He twisted and squirmed. He licked his fur into place. He settled down.

At peace with the world, Toots lay on his very own pillow and slept. From under one paw dangled a piece of red ribbon.

It was Christmas eve and the children had gathered about the snow white Christmas tree, a glistening mass of iridescent lights and icicles, to listen to that long-promised story of the Prince and Princess.

"Once upon a time," began Mother, "there was a tall handsome prince who loved a beautiful princess. They were to be married on Christmas eve—another Christmas eve, long ago."

"The gorgeous castle on the hillside was ablaze with Christmas lights. The Yule log was burning and crackling delightfully and the huge Christmas tree was sparkling gaily. But there were candles, tiny colored candles, children, instead of electric lights. They were lovely! Everything was most beautiful!"

"Oh, Mother," whispered Little Rosebud, "I wish I was in that castle right now, looking at all the pretty things."

"Hurry up, Mother! Then what?" interrupted Danny, impatiently. "What happened next?"

"Well, the prince and princess were married and then they all sat down to the wedding feast. Let me see," mused Mother, "they were all there—all of them, my dears. Right in the center of the table stood the most wonderful wedding cake you ever saw—a gold cake frosted with silver, and because it was Christmas the whole top was decorated with lovely little bells. You see, nothing was too good for the prince and princess, for every one loved them and wanted them to be happy, and they were happy—so happy, children."

"Well, then, did they live happy forever and ever, Mother?" Rosebud wanted to know.

"Why, of course they did," shouted Danny, indignantly. "Did you ever hear of a prince and princess who did not?"

"Only a story," pondered Mother. "Would that I, too, could be made to believe that 'twas only a story."

"The prince!" wilyly shouted the children, as a tall man stood in the doorway. They felt sure they had found the real prince as they clamored for explanation.



"The Prince!" shouted the Children. A Tall Man in the Doorway.

"Oh, look, Mother!" cried Rosebud. "Look what the prince brought—toys and dolls and everything—and a gold cake trimmed with silver with bells on it, too, just like the one in the story."

"Oh, boy!" shouted Danny. "This is the best Christmas we ever had. Isn't it, Mother?"

Mother whispered, "Yes, dear," and then rushed into the outstretched arms of her loving husband, the really true prince who was waiting with a great big Christmas kiss. "And they all lived happily forever after," whispered Mother, through tears of Christmas joy.