

HOSTILE VALLEY



PROLOGUE.—At a gathering of cronies in the village of Liberty, Maine, Jim Saladin listens to the history of the neighboring Hostile Valley—its past tragedies, its superb fishing streams, and, above all, the mysterious, enticing "Huldy," wife of Will Ferrin. Interested, he drives to the Valley for a day's fishing, though admitting to himself his chief desire is to see the reputedly glamorous Huldy Ferrin.

CHAPTER I.—"Old Marm" Pierce and her nineteen-year-old granddaughter Jenny live in the Valley. Since little more than a child Jenny has at first admired and then deeply loved young Will Ferrin, neighboring farmer, older than she, and who regards her still as merely a child. Will leaves the farm—his father's—and takes employment in nearby Augusta. Jenny, despite her grandmother's comforting, is desolate.

CHAPTER II.—His father's death brings Will back to the Valley, but he returns to Augusta, still unconscious of Jenny's womanhood, and love. Neighbors of the Pierces are Bart and Amy Carey, brother and sister. Bart, unmarried and something of a ne'er-do-well, is attracted by Jenny, but the girl repulses him definitely. Learning that Will is coming home, Jenny, exulting, sets his long-empty house "to rights," and has dinner ready for him. He comes—bringing his wife, Huldy. The girl's world collapses.

CHAPTER III.—Huldy, at once perceiving Jenny's secret, mercilessly mocks her discomfiture. Huldy soon becomes the subject of unfavorable gossip in the Valley, though Will apparently is blind to the fact.

CHAPTER IV.—Entering his home, unlooked for, Will has found seemingly damning evidence of his wife's unfaithfulness, as a man who he knows is Seth Humphreys breaks from the house. With the echo of his wife's derisive laughter in his ears, Will pursues Humphreys. He overtakes him, and after a struggle chokes him to death, though Humphreys shatters his leg with a bullet. At Marm Pierce's house the leg is amputated. Jenny goes to break the news to Huldy. She finds Bart Carey with the woman. When he leaves, Huldy makes a mock of Jenny's sympathy, declaring she has no use for "half a man" and is leaving at once. She does so.

CHAPTER V

IT WAS in October that Will was hurt, and Seth Humphreys came to his end, and Huldy went away. Will stayed at Marm Pierce's farm till his leg was healed; and Jenny was happy in attending him. She gave him Huldy's message, and he received it uncomplainingly.

"Natural for her to feel so," he decided. "No one-legged man is good enough for her."

There was no bitterness in his tone; but he saw Jenny's loyal anger, and he said appeasingly:

"Huldy's one that takes a lot of stock in the way folks look. Jenny. She was like a cat, always cleaning herself. Took as much pleasure in herself as an old skinflint does in his money. And she lived to have every one around her the same. Farm folk like us, we're apt to kind of forget. If I come into the house with barn on my boots, it always bothered her."

And he added: "I can see how she'd take this. Anybody with two legs is kind of bound to feel that a man with only one leg is no good. It's just like you'll shoot a horse that breaks its leg, or get rid of a crippled cat, or dog."

Jenny, faced by his stubborn loyalty to this woman who, despite the fact that she had wronged and flouted him, was still his wife, felt a reluctant pride in him. If he had cursed Huldy, he would not have been Will Ferrin; not the man she had long loved. So she said no word of blame for Huldy, and the matter thereafter did not rise between them.

But Bart Carey was not so tactful, till Will silenced him. Jenny, in the kitchen, heard them talking together, heard Will's slow tones at last.

"Bart," he said strictly, "I don't want that kind of talk about Huldy. She was used to gay times in Augusta, and when I fetched her here,

Bart protested hotly: "You was mad enough, yourself, when you went after Seth!"

"So I was," Will confessed. "He was a man, and responsible. But I dunno as I can blame Huldy. Any way, not for—leaving now!"

"She was scared," Bart insisted. "Scared for fear you'd treat the same as you did him. She knew it was her due. That's why she skinned out!"

"She had no cause to be scared of me," said Will gently. "I wouldn't harm her. And Bart, you keep your tongue off her, if you're good friend to me."

And Jenny, listening, loved him more and more.

In the matter of Seth's death, Will was held blameless. None had seen the beginning of the encounter between them; but the mill men had seen and could testify that Seth shot Will, and tried to shoot him again; and Bart could testify that Seth had borrowed the gun, as though the thing were premeditated. So, though Will had to answer to the law, he was presently fre again; and when he had learned the use of a peg leg, he went back to the farm on the hill.

He dwelt there alone that winter, and Bart dally tramped up the steep road from his farm to take the heavier chores off the cripple's hands; but by February, Will had become almost as nimble on his peg as he had used to be on his sound foot. Only the work indoors he slighted, as a man will; and Jenny sometimes went to catch up loose ends. Between them during these winter months a bond began to form, and no longer on Jenny's side alone. Will never spoke his mind nor his heart to her, nor she to him; yet to them both the thing was clear. To him it was a trouble and deep concern. From Huldy he had had no word; yet to her he still was bound, and would remain so if she chose.

He told Jenny this one day. They approached the subject guardedly, by long indirection, naming Huldy not at all; until at last Will said, soberly:

"Jen, no use our dodging around the thing. Here's my look at it. A man might want to say a woman wa'n't his wife, if she'd acted wrong. But I don't see it so. The way I see it, I'm bound—any man's bound—long as he's give his word."

And he said: "It looks to me, the worse a woman is, the more like she is to come to a time when she needs a husband to stand by her, and look out for her. A man, if his wife ever come to him, no matter what she'd done, and said he'd got to help her, why it looks to me he'd have to."

Jenny assented without reservation; but when she told Marm Pierce, days later, this word of Will's, the old woman said irascibly:

"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

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 peg 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 sat 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 peg 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.

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 merclessly.

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.

(Continued Next Week)

General News

Bonus Bill Passed

The soldier's Bonus Bill has passed both houses of Congress by an overwhelming majority. Its payment is proposed by issuing "baby bonds" of \$50 denomination, to be paid through post offices. Secretary of the Treasury Morgenthau says that the payment of the bonus will add \$2,000,000,000 to the National debt and that the Treasury will have to borrow \$11,300,000,000 by June 30th, 1937.

STORM DOES GREAT DAMAGE

While Zebulon felt the effects of the storm on last Sunday citizens should feel thankful that the worst of it was elsewhere. Some discomfort and inconvenience and some expense were incurred here, but loss of life and real suffering were not known. Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and other southern states reported deaths, intense cold and wreckage from wind. Near Greensboro a store was demolished, slightly injuring a couple who lived upstairs. Selma, Oxford, Salisbury, Raleigh, Charlotte, Greensboro, Wilmington Wilson, and various other towns report more or less damage. The high winds began between eleven and twelve o'clock in the morning accompanied by torrential rain. A cold wave following sent temperatures to freezing points in this state.

What Causes It?

From a resident of this town, on Arrendall Avenue comes this statement. He says that he has noticed heaps of ashes poured on the asphalt paving of the street and that after a day or two there is a hole in the place where the ashes were. He does not have an idea that those who put ashes have the slightest desire to injure the highway and is not sure what does the damage. It is probably some chemical action or reaction, but indicates that both wood and coal ashes, by all means, should be deposited in places elsewhere than the road.

U. D. C. Meet

The Bissett Chapter of the UDC held their regular monthly meeting at the home of Mrs. Frank H. McGuire last Thursday afternoon. After the business session delightful refreshments were served by the hostess and a social hour was enjoyed.

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