HOSTILE VALLEY

By Ben Ames Williams

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THE STORY

PROLOGUE.—At a gathering of cronies in the village of Liberty, Maine, Jim Saladine 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

THE pot which boiled over that day in Hostile Valley had been years brewing; two years, or twenty, according to the point of view. Huldy Ferrin may have been its chief ingredient; but Jenny Pierce had also a major part in what ensued.

Jenny had never lived for long in any other world than this deep glen. It was almost twenty years since her father died; and her mother sold their farm in Liberty and came, with Jenny in her arms, to lodge here with old Marm Pierce, who was Jenny's grandmother.

Marm Pierce, before their coming, dwelt alone in one half of what had been a farmhouse of some size, on the old Haven place. The house itself was built by her father long ago. When he died, her brother Win, who had a wandering foot, and who had never spent more time here in the Valley than he must, wished to sell; but Marm Pierce would not.

"I was born in this house and I'm a mind to die here," she told him stoutly. "Half of it's mine, and half's yours. You go on and sell your half if you want; but I aim to go on living in mine."

But obviously it was impossible to sell half a house; and Win Haven raged at her obstinacy. She remained unshaken and the result was one of those quarrels which become more bitter with years, which grow and thrive on their own acrid juice. The house and the farm they divided half and half, by a straight line drawn through the very middle of the house itself; and since then, Marm Pierce kept rigidly to her half—and her brother maliciously allowed his side of the house to molder and decay. He made no repairs, gave the rotting boards no preserving touch of paint; and he refused to permit his sister to remedy his own neglect. She boarded off her side of the house; walled off her half of the cellar; nailed up the connecting doors.

Jenny, as she grew older, for a while used to imagine dreadful things lurking in the other side—Marm Pierce called it the Win-side—of this strange house divided; and when windows fell out and doors sagged on their hinges, she sometimes crept secretly into the empty rooms to peer into shadowed corners, and start and run at the squeak of a mouse. Till one morning, thus venturing, she found Win Haven himself in a drunken sleep on the floor, and fled in stark dismay, weeping with fright, to her grandmother.

"Good enough for you," Marm Pierce told her sharply. "You keep out of the Win-side of the house after this. Let him lay there and rot in his own dirt if he's a mind."

Thereafter, Jenny obeyed this injunction, though she eventually lost any particular fear of Win Haven. He was a restless man, appearing and disappearing at long intervals, gone sometimes for months, sometimes for years. But always the day came when Jenny and her grandmother heard some stir of movement in the empty rooms so close to those in which their own lives were lived; and old Marm Pierce would say tartly:

"Well, that Win's back again!"

Jenny sometimes encountered him. He was already an old man, who grew older; yet there was youth in him too, and a vigorous spirit and a wise old eye. Blurred sometimes, by the life he led; leering sometimes with an appreciative glint as he watched Jenny's young beauty passing by. But wise and keen for all of that. A man with mirth and malice in him. Sometimes, in his room in the house, he sang far into the night drunken, ribald songs, for the sake of annoying Marm Pierce with whom so long ago he had quarreled.

But as the Win-side of the house began to crumble, and the roof to leak, and the windows to sag, he came less often. There was no decent shelter in the rotting rooms. Jenny and Marm Pierce might forget him for months on end.

The farm was remote, approached by a byway which led off the road that run up and down the Valley; but even the Valley road itself was little traveled. As long ago as Jenny's childhood, the Valley was already a solitary place, with only scattered families here and there. The farm was hidden within a belt of woodland, halfway between the Valley road and the brook. Some meadow land Marm Pierce tended year by year, lifting neighbors to cut back the encroaching underbrush, and to harvest the hay; and she and Jenny made a garden sufficient for their needs. The meadows that were part of Win's half of the farm were long since gone back to birch and popple and young hackmatack; a youthful wilderness.

In this remote spot Jenny grew from a baby into childhood. She never vividly remembered her mother, who died soon after they came to Granny Pierce's farm to live. Thereafter the old woman and the little girl dwelt here alone; and Jenny grew older.

Marm Pierce was not a solitary, however; she had some skill with roots and herbs, and a certain healing power in her hand; and since there was no doctor nearer than Liberty village, folk hereabout were apt to turn to her to tend their lesser ills. So visitors came not infrequently to seek Marm Pierce's ministrations, or to cut and mow her hay, or plow her garden, or merely for the sake of passing by. The old woman's sharp tongue was kindly, too; her wit pleased more than it hurt. And either from friendliness, or from a desire to keep her good opinion, neighbors did her a favor when they could. If a man were going to Liberty village for supplies, he was apt to stop by to ask whether there were any errand he might do. If a man had more apples than he could well market, he brought her a barrel. The bins in her cellar were well filled with potatoes and other roots every fall; and when her cow calved, there were helpers ready if the need arose.

Jenny, as she grew older, wore none of the shyness natural to farm children. She saw a surprising number of people, and met them in friendly fashion, so that even when a stranger came into her life, she could greet the newcomer unafraid. Also, as she grew older, she took to herself the liberty of the fields, and the deep woods; and she knew every foot of the brawling stream that from Carey's bridge came in swirls and cascades through a narrowing gorge, to relax in wide sluggish pools as it entered the cedar bog a little below.

Sometimes Marm Pierce went with her; or rather, sometimes when the old woman went searching here and there for the herbs she required, she took the child along, and taught Jenny to recognize all those plants which comprised her simple pharmacopoeia. Later, as she found it not so easy to get about, she sent Jenny herb-gathering alone.

The girl learned from her grandmother some of that infinite lore which the older woman had through the years acquired. Before Jenny was fifteen, she knew that if you wanted pullets, you must choose blunt-pointed eggs for the hatching; that a piece of red flannel wet twice a day with strong camphor will cure bumblefoot; that ground tobacco stems will keep lice out of the hens' nests; that castile soap and tobacco ashes make the best dentifrice; that borax, or the yolk of an egg mixed with soda, will cure dandruff; that a fence of heavy paper will keep cut worms away from young plants; that wood ashes mixed with salt will seal the cracks in a stove; that sulphur is good for mange; that a laudanum drench will relieve colic.

One day in the spring of the year when she was sixteen years old, she saw Will Ferrin for the first time; and that day she ceased to be a child and was thereafter in her heart, without herself wholly understanding the change, a woman. Will was at the time just past twenty-one years old; and he had lived all his life on his father's farm, sprawled up the slope of the ridge above the brook, on the east side of the Valley. The farm was a good one, even though its tilled acres were contracted since the old days when Enoch, great-grandfather of young Will, and his three sons worked it well.

Will, when he could be spared from the farm work, sometimes came down to fish the stream; and he had thus come on this day when Jenny first saw him. Jenny and Will, though they had lived for a dozen years within a mile or so of one another, had never met at all. Will came to fish a few of the deep holes in the gorge; and Jenny wandered through the woods to the streamside, seeking here and there the springing herbs which Marm Pierce liked to gather in the flood tide of June.

Jenny by old habit moved through the forest silently, finding pleasure in surprising the birds at their pleasant occupations, in catching quick, fleeting glimpses of small creatures unaware. She was no more a disturbing element in the forest than the creatures which lived there, and Will, his ears filled with the rushing song of the water as he fished, heard nothing of her coming.

He had crossed to the west side of the stream for his fishing, so that his back was toward her when she first discovered him. She saw a tall, strong figure in blue overalls and blue shirt and a battered old hat, the overalls tucked into rubber boots that ended just below his knee. She saw him, and she paused, a little way off, standing utterly still, leaning with one hand against a tree, motionless and yet not rigid, beautifully at her ease.

She watched him for a moment; and he lifted a fine trout out of the stream. It fell flopping by his side,

She Watched Him for a Moment.

and he dropped the rod to pin it with his hands. So doing, he turned sidewise to her, so that she saw his face, and the shock of straw-colored hair under the hat, and his delighted grin.

But as he pinned the fish, he uttered an exclamation of pain, and snatched one hand away and looked at it; and Jenny, with the quick sympathy which all women have, came toward him. She was six paces off when he heard or felt her presence there, and turned and looked up at her; and his eyes widened in quick surprise, and then he said something, laughing. And he got up, the trout in one hand, his rod in the other, and held the fish for her to admire.

"Handsome, ain't he?"

She asked: "Did he stick the hook into you?"

Will was puzzled. "No!"

"I could see you hurt your hand, when you grabbed him."

"Oh," he remembered; and he extended the hand which held the fish, tilted it so that she could see an inflamed and swollen finger joint. "Got a felon," he said. "It's sore as time!"

She took his hand in her two hands, gently, looking at the felon. "Granny can cure that," she said. "If you'd come on home with me."

"So?" he ejaculated, in pleased surprise. "Can she now? I've heard tell that Marm Pierce is a mighty hand at curing ills; but I thought a felon you just had to take and stand it."

She frowned in thought, with an amusing affectation of maturity. "I've just forgot what it is you do," she confessed. "But Granny, she'll know." And she urged: "It ain't only a little ways though the woods to our place."

Will said heartily: "Why, let's go along, then. Like trout, does she? I've a couple here. You'll have to show me the way."

She nodded; and he fetched his fish from a moss bed where he had laid them under ferns; and the two young people went together through the woods back toward Marm Pierce's farm. There was no path; but there would be, by and by. It needs only a little tracing and retracing of the same way in wild land where no foot has trod, to leave a thread of trail along the ground. And—Jenny would come often by this way, in the years that were to follow; would come thus to the brook and wait here on the chance that Will might find time for the fishing; would even cross the brook and climb the steep path beyond, and so go up through the orchard to the Ferrin farm for a glimpse of him.

But now the way was trackless, and Will followed on her heels. He said: "Guess you're Jenny Pierce. I never see you before."

"Yes, I be," she assented; and she added, with a glance over her shoulder: "Nor I never see you."

"I'm Will Ferrin," he explained.

She stopped as though in surprise; she turned, and looked at him, and her eyes were wide with wonder.

"Will Ferrin? You live right up there?" She pointed.

"Certain." He was puzzled by her surprise.

But she made no explanation, only nodded; yet it seemed to her incredible that he could here, after all her life, so near without her knowing. There was already in her heart such certainty, and poignant bliss at being near him now.

When they emerged into the back pasture behind Marm Pierce's barn, he came to walk beside her. Jenny, for no reason, smiled. Her head was high and proud; she brought him home to old Marm Pierce like a trophy, like a prize.

They found the old woman in the kitchen. "Granny," said the girl. "This here is Will Ferrin, and he's got a felon on his finger. I told him you could cure it for him."

Marm Pierce, brisk, black-eyed, white-haired, with a quick thrusting tongue, said sharply: "Take it in time and I could. Howdy, Will. Let's see it. If you'd had any sense, you'd have come before now."

Jenny cried softly: "You already knowed him? You never told me, Granny!"

Marm Pierce looked at the girl with swift probing eyes. "Told you?" she echoed. "Why should . . ." She checked the question unasked, reading her answer in the girl's warm color and soft tones; and she spoke briskly to Will again. "It's a bad one," she said. "I dunno as I can do it a mite of good, but you set down and we'll see."

Will obeyed her, and the old woman, with another wise glance at Jenny, turned to the cupboard above the sink where many of her stores were kept, and rummaged there.

Jenny said: "I couldn't remember what it is you do, Granny."

"Take a piece of wild turnip," Marm Pierce explained. "There's some here somewheres." She found it. "I'll grate it up, and mix it with turpentine, and put it on that finger of yours, Will. It'll kill the pain right away; and if it works the way it's apposed to, it'll eat the felon out, too. Be a hole there tomorrow morning, clear in to the bone."

She was busy with the grater at the sink, her shoulders moving as she worked energetically.

"I'll give you some salve to put on it tomorrow," she said. "That'll

"I'll Give You Some Salve to Put on It Tomorrow."

heal it right up, like as not. If it don't, you let me know . . ."

What followed, Jenny watched without speaking; or rather she watched Will, and his eyes that were so deeply blue, and his straw-colored hair rough and unkempt across his brow, and the youthful lines of his mouth and chin. Marm Pierce gave the girl a sidelong scrutiny, while she affected to be busy with her ministrations; till presently the thing was done, and Will offered them the trout he was of payment, and departed, and Jenny—though even then her feet wished to follow him, to follow him anywhere, forever, wherever he should go—stayed in the door to watch him disappear through the barn.

She turned then to her grandmother with shining eyes. "He looked back and waved, Granny," she cried.

"She'd think he would," Marm Pierce assented crisply. "Ungrateful young imp if he didn't. You get the yarbs I sent you for, Jenny?"

Jenny colored in distress. "I forgot," she said.

The old woman made a sound like mirth. "No matter," she decided. "Time enough for them, another day."

She did not then ask any question, or offer any least instruction, finding a deep pleasure in watching this unfolding of the girl into the woman; in watching the birth in Jenny of that teeming ardor, frank and tender and unashamed, which a girl learns by and by to conceal and to control, but which may be at first as apparent as the blush on a rose.

And during the next two years, while Jenny came to maturity, as a stream rushes to the sea, Marm Pierce still held silent; but she was not blind. She knew that the girl slipped away on every occasion on the chance of seeing Will. Jenny gave the young man that deep and boundless affection of which only a child is capable; and Marm Pierce watched her tenderly, ready with the sympathy and comfort which, she began to perceive, would be needed by and by.

For Will was a man, and flushed with the pride of first manhood; and in his eyes Jenny was still no more than a child. An adoring child, who came to watch him fish, and lay prone on her stomach behind him so as not to affright the trout, while he crept near to drop his line into the pool; or she might appear behind him in the hayfield while he worked, or in the garden where he was busy digging the roots on some crisp day in fall; or she came to help him pick apples in the orchard below the house. It mattered not what the occasion, she drew near him when she could, asking nothing, demanding nothing, content to be near him, and to watch him, and to hear his tones when he spoke to her.

She worshiped him, and Will, not blind, was pleased and at the same time amused by her adoration. And Marm Pierce, watching them, hoped one thing and feared another. There was in Jenny no coquetry at all; she had no instinctive knowledge of the arts and graces which might have persuaded Will to see that she was not the child he thought her. Her hair as often as not hung in a heavy braid between her shoulders, her sun-bonnet was worn without artifice, her dresses were rough and old and fit for hard usage. When she traversed the shadowed forests, she went easily and smoothly as a wild thing; but otherwise her movements had still the awkwardness of strength not yet controlled, of bone and muscle not yet in full co-ordination. Her very steadiness and serenity must make her in Will's eyes, the old woman considered, sexless, like a boy; Jenny had none of the shynesses, the withdrawals, the reluctances of a girl.

Marm Pierce came to be troubled by the matter by and by, and she made an occasion to see old Enoch, Will's father, and speak of it with him. These two were of the same generation, Marm Pierce only a little the older; for Enoch, as is apt to be the case hereabouts, had married late, and Will was his only child.

But Enoch was older than his years and Marm Pierce younger than hers. Vigorous enough to do any work that needed doing around the farm, he was apt between those physical activities to sit with vacant eyes, staring at nothing, in the patient apathy of age.

Marm Pierce laid her concern before him, spoke to him of Jenny and of Will. "I dunno what to, think," she confessed. "Seems like if either one of 'em had any git up and git, they'd have found out what was the matter with them by now. But Jenny, she's the first boy she ever knowed; and Will don't act like he'd had much to do with girls."

"Will's a good, steady boy," Enoch assented. "He stays close to home."

Marm Pierce thought with some impatience that Enoch had probably not even heard what she said.

"Jenny don't know the meaning of it," she told him stoutly. "Don't know what's the matter with her. She's hungry for him, but just seeing him and being with him is enough to keep her satisfied. She don't know what it is she's hungry for. Like as not she won't ever find out, only if the time comes when she can't see him, then she'll be plain starved . . ."

And she urged, honestly troubled: "Can't you have a notion of some thing to do about it? Will's as dumb as she is. He acts like she was a boy; and I doubt if it ever struck her that he's a man."

But to confess her perplexities to Enoch proved of no use or avail. Her doubts and fears rebounded from his passive silence. He appeared to listen without hearing; had nothing useful to say.

This was in midsummer; and in November of that year, Will went away to Augusta. Enoch had a woman to keep house, and the old man could manage what chores needed to be done around the farm in winter time. Will had cut and fitted a plentiful supply of wood to last till spring; the roots were in the cellar, salt pork in the jars. A man came through the neighborhood seeking good stout fellows for a construction job, offering good pay; he stopped at Enoch's house at noon one day—and after breakfast the next morning, Will, with a high sense of adventure, departed into the outer world.

It was two or three days before Jenny knew that he had gone. Then Bart Carey stopped at the house one morning, and told them the news.

"The fellow wanted me to go along, too," he said. "Good pay and all that. But I got to stay here and look out for the place. I couldn't go and leave Amy by herself."

"But Will, he went the next morning. 'Lowed to be back in April, or maybe May."

Marm Pierce, seeing Jenny's white lips and rigid face and tortured eyes, got Bart out of the house as quickly as possible; and once the door was closed upon him, she turned to catch Jenny in her arms and hold her close and tenderly.

"Cry it out, Jenny," she urged briskly. "That'll make you feel better, child. You go on and cry!"

Jenny whimpered, bewildered, half-terrified as though by something she could not clearly see: "But Granny, I feel sick! I'm all aching and hot and empty! Granny, what's the matter with me?"

"The same that's been the matter with every woman that ever loved a man," said old Marm Pierce, strangely gentle.

"Love him?" Jenny whispered, her eyes wide. "Do I love Will?"

"He's a dumb idiot to go away," Marm Pierce exclaimed, in rising anger. "But men are a dumb lot, Jenny. He's no worse than the rest, likely."

She chuckled, fondly. "Yes, that's it, Jenny," she said. "Only you've come to it younger than most. Cry, child. That will ease you. And—he'll be back in May."

(To Be Continued Next Week)

More than 100 kinds of automatic machines are being used in British government offices.

MUSIC

By CAROLINE REILLY

We had a perfect lesson in concentration when we dropped in on an Opera Under the Stars rehearsal at the Cass Theater last week. Confusion, din and general tumult rent the air as two chorus rehearsals carried on, each in complete oblivion of the other. Presently our ears and mind untangled the maze to an approximation of at least pseudo concentration in one group at a time.

Caroline Reilly

From the gloom in the auditorium we picked two figures in the front row, ballet master and assistant, and at the piano in the pit the busy boy who carries dance rhythms over the ivories to the girls on stage. In a kaliedescopic melange of assorted costumes swayed, stepped and pirouetted the prettiest girls with the most ravishing figures we have seen for a decade. As the song goes, they are "lovely to look at," but what is equally important, they are perfectly equipped technically for the demands of their director.

Palmer Brandeaux, ballet master, is a man whose gigantic frame suggests anything but the profession of the dance. The athletic world lost a great asset when Mr. Brandeaux turned terpischorean. One is amazed to see this great creature take a flying leap from his seat in the pit and in nash in center stage be executing some intricate step or indicate an arm motion with the deft grace of the finished master of his art. The effect is astonishing to the uninitiated intruder, but brings to mind the dynamic grace of the Russian dancers, those virile masters of the craft we Americans are in the habit of associating with only the gentler sex.

Instant response to his expert, lucid direction brings the girls into formation, the piano grinds out the rhythm again and the line of delectable houris in bathing suits, slacks and sweaters, blouses and shorts—anything, in fact, but impeding skirts—leaps into exquisite rhythmic action. Rehearsal is resumed.

We grope our way back to the foyer where, at the foot of the stairway the singing chorus is proceeding at a terrific pace. At the piano, in shirtsleeves, Musical Director Baumboscheck is leading the boys and girls through the songs of "Bitter Sweet." His concentrated attention on the intricacies of Noel Coward's charming lyrics carries over to his singers the expertness of his work that has made him so valuable at the Metropolitan Opera in past seasons. Sensitive, efficient and always good natured, he keeps everyone in a happy mood.

But who wouldn't be good natured if she looked as beautiful as those girls? Where do they come from? With the utmost good humor the director urges them to "shout de lak' not." Smiling, always smiling, they repeat the line and "shout de lak' not" with astonishing vigor. There it is, that extra something, that final effect that tells. It's all in knowing how, after all.

Reluctantly we leave the fascinating business, determined to see "Bitter Sweet" under whatever skies present themselves on Saturday. "Bitter Sweet" is practically our favorite light opera anyway. In this work we feel Noel Coward has done his very best. To us, nothing before nor since by this same man has equalled "Bitter Sweet." The sweep of melody, the richness of orchestration and the wealth of warm sentiment mark it as outstanding among its fellows. We shall surely see it again.

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