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# **The Rhodesian**

Gertrude Page

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# THE RHODESIAN.

By GERTRUDE PAGE

*Author of "The Edge o' Beyond," "The Silent Rancher," etc.*

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**I THE POLICE STATION**

**II THE MISSION STATION**

**III TWO HEIRESSES**

**IV THE RHODESIAN PROJECT**

**V WILLIAM VAN HERT**

**VI THE JOURNEY**

**VII CAREW IS DISTURBED**

**VIII TWO UNEXPECTED MEETINGS**

**IX THE BEAR**

**X A MINING CAMP**

**XI AN EVENING RIDE**

**XII THE MISSION STATION**

**XIII A DECISION THAT FAILED**

**XIV THE ANCIENT RUINS**

**XV CAREW RIDES AWAY**

**XVI "THE SHIP OF FOOLS"**

**XVII AN EVENING CONVERSATION**

**XVIII THE CHARTER FLATS**

**XIX THE CONVENTIONALITIES ONCE MORE**

**XX FAREWELL**

**XXI A "HOARDING HUSTLING"**

**XXII MERYL'S DECISION**

**XXIII CAREW'S STORY**

**XXIV A RAIN-WASHED MORNING AND A DISCUSSION**

**XXV AILSA LEARNS CAREW'S SECRET**

**XXVI "HOW CAN I GO TO HER!..."**

**XXVII DIANA BEGINS TO GROW PERPLEXED**

**XXVIII DIANA'S PERPLEXITIES INCREASE**

**XXIX A USEFUL BLUNDER**

**XXX DIANA IS RESTLESS**

**XXXI THE SOLUTION IS SEALED**

**XXXII A CHAPTER OF SURPRISES**

**FINIS**

**TO**

**THE PATHFINDERS**

"Fate lies hid,

But not the deeds that true men dared and did."

# THE RHODESIAN.

## I

### THE POLICE CAMP

The velvety darkness of a southern night, with its sense of rich, luscious, breathing intensity, lay over that romantic spot in Southern Rhodesia where the grey walls of the Zimbabwe ruins, with a sublime, imperturbable indifference, continue to baffle the ingenuity and ravish the curiosity of all who would read their story. Scientists, archaeologists, tourists come and go, but the stern old walls, guarded by the sentinel hills, give back no answer to eager questioning, eager delving, eager surmise.

But in the meantime the Valley of Ruins no longer lies alone and unheeded in the sunlight; and no longer do the hills look down upon rich plains left solely to the idle pleasure of a careless black people. The forerunners of to-day's great civilising army have marched into the valley, and beside the ancient walls there is now a police camp of the British South Africa Police, presided over by two robust young troopers.

In the velvety darkness on the night in question there is a single bright light pouring through the open doorway of a dwelling-hut. Through the enfolding silence breaks the bizarre music of an indifferent gramophone, recklessly mocking the sublime grandeur of the age-old antiquities. Laughter and gay music and devil-may-care colonists awaking echoes that have been more or less silent to civilisation for how many thousand years?

But on this particular evening it is as though some shadow had fallen upon the little camp. Nothing tangible—nothing that changed the general habits or surroundings—but a vague regret and introspective sadness upon the faces of two young men, usually full of careless content. Cecil Stanley, the more refined, a gentleman by birth and education, lounged low in his chair, with his hands behind his head and his feet on the table, and ever and anon his eyes looked with pained regret into the surrounding depths of night. Patrick Moore, with a grave face, cleaned his gun in a deeper silence

than usual, proceeding with an occupation that was his joy on many evenings, whether the gun needed cleaning or not, rather as if it eased his mind to have his hands busy.

"I wonder if the Major will come through to-night?" he remarked, as if the silence were growing over-oppressive.

"Sure to," laconically. "The moon will be up directly, and he can't be very far away."

"I suppose he won't have heard?"

"Not likely to have done. Gad! I feel as if I'd give anything to have had a chance to stand three hours in that queue. It will hit him hard. If it's bad for us, who have at least known all along, it will be worse for him, hearing it suddenly at this late hour. Those newspapers to-day have made me feel like a kid on his first day at boarding-school. I'd like to cry if I weren't ashamed to."

"I liked that professor," said Moore, changing the subject. "Decent old Johnny, wasn't he? Jolly nice of him to bring all those papers in case he came across anyone glad of them."

"Quite a good old bird. That's a rum theory of his about the corpses in the temple being buried deeper than anyone has yet dug, and hung with valuable ornaments. Wouldn't it be a jolly lark to dig down for one and have a look at it!..."

He gave a low, half-hearted chuckle over his gruesome suggestion, and lazily getting to his feet, selected another tune for his gramophone.

Moore, busy still with his gun, gave a corresponding chuckle, and remarked:

"Begorra, lad!... if we could get a few out one at a time on moonlight nights, and fill up the blooming holes again, we shouldn't want any blasted machinery for our gold mine, except a pickaxe and a shovel."

"We'd want a bit of pluck, though. The ghosts of the corpses might come dancing round to have their say in the matter."

"We'd chance the ghosties. Shure! if they've been hanging round for three or four thousand years, they'd maybe like a new sensation by this time."

Stanley put on "The Stars and Stripes," wound up the gramophone, and slid into his lounge chair again.

Moore glanced up as the music started.

"What!... that thing again!... I'm beginning to feel like those old ghosts about it. The same moth-eaten tune for three or four thousand years. I'd like a new sensation."

"It can't be much staler than cleaning that old gun."

"Shure, she's a daisy." The Irishman looked tenderly at his treasure. "An' she just loves me to be fondlin' her like."

"If it weren't for the Major I don't know what is to prevent us proving the old man's theory," said Stanley, evidently harping again on his corpses.

"Him, and the bloomin' Company! The old gentlemen sittin' on the Board in London suddenly find that the Yankees have been snaffling a lot of valuable trinkets and things from the ruins while they took forty winks, and then they up and says no one's to look for anything more at all; not even a *boney fidey* Rhodesian, sweating in the police camp outside the walls."

"Still, it would be a rare lark to find a corpse with gold ornaments on it, and say nothing at all."

"And what should you be doing with the old corpse when you've taken the gold?"

"Oh! put him in the soup!" And Stanley slid lower in his chair, with another chuckle.

The gramophone ran down with a horrible grind, but its owner only looked at it dully and took no notice.

"Shall I wind up again?" Moore asked.

"No, let it rip. It sounds all wrong to-night. Everything is all wrong. The whole world gone awry. It's like being on another planet to be out here in this wilderness at such a time. I don't believe I've

ever felt exiled before, but, begad! I do to-night. Let's turn in. Probably he won't come now."

Moore carried his gun into one of the huts and stood it carefully beside his little stretcher-bed. Stanley took the gramophone into another hut, and planked it down somewhat roughly on a table, evidently made by an amateur. Without going outside again, he shouted "Good night," and after that no sound broke the silence, except sundry mutterings from the Irishman, who had discovered an enormous frog under his bed, and his beloved pointer pup inside the blankets serenely sleeping.

All the next morning Stanley hung about the camp as one who waited, but it was not until three o'clock that Major Carew rode slowly up to the huts. As he dismounted, briefly acknowledging Stanley's salute, there was a characteristic absence of all superfluous words. The latter waited until the soldier-servant had led away the mule and another boy relieved the officer of his water-bottle, which he always carried himself, and then he looked hard at the thin, brown, resolute face, with an expression in his eyes that made Carew ask shortly:

"Any news?"

"Bad news from England. I suppose you haven't heard?"

"I haven't heard anything."

For one pulsing second the two men stood and looked at each other; and to a looker-on it might have appeared that, however laconic and indifferent their attitude, their relationship was not solely that of officer and subordinate. The elder man, in his gruff way, was the friend of the man under him. The younger had acquired a respect that held something deeper than casual liking, and his face showed it now as he hesitated before breaking his news. Then he said, very simply:

"The King is dead."

A quick, incredulous expression filled Carew's eyes.

"The King?..." he repeated. "Not ... surely not ..." He paused, leaving his sentence unfinished.

"Yes. King Edward. After a few days' illness."

The man's mouth grew rigid. He stood like a figure of bronze, staring with unseeing eyes to the far horizon. Stanley drew in his breath a little sharply. Yes, he had been right, the news had hit Carew very hard.

"When?..." came at last, abruptly.

"A fortnight ago. Just after you left. The funeral took place yesterday."

Carew made no comment. Evidently it was true. Little else mattered. Nearly all through this trek of his round those distant kraals his King had been lying dead, and he had not known it. Such a man as he is not stunned by tidings; but he recedes still further into his shell, if possible. There is no comment, no discussion, just a grim silence sealing a deep pain that cannot express itself.

He stayed a moment longer, while Stanley told him a few details, and then he went away into his hut and shut his door to the sunlight—one of those exiles for whom the news had, as it were, an added sorrow, because during the first shock he had remained in ignorance, and had thus been prevented joining in the loyal homage of grief that had been offered by his countrymen from the four corners of the earth.

It was thus with many of the far-off Empire-builders. They heard so late, so unpreparedly, so suddenly; and in the first shock, an exile which had been a calmly accepted condition, became almost a menace, seemed swiftly to develop a force. The men in the far places *felt* their aloofness; knew that their souls were beating vainly against prison bars, for the longing to annihilate space and stand beside the beloved dead. That quiet band of men whom we sometimes call "The Pathfinders," and who go away across the world to bring the wilderness into line; to smooth the rough, link the severed, subdue the untamed, and carry prosperity to the waste places. The men who cope with strange, deadly diseases; who fight fever swamps, and compel them to carry a railroad across their reluctant bosoms, though the swamps in turn exact a heavy toll of human life; who make the paths that the women and children will presently pass over, though no such soul-stirring cry urges their exhausting efforts.

But it is not usual to laud these men, who win their colours at the dull, prosaic work of path-finding, as it is to laud those who encounter shot and shell in the lurid atmosphere of battle, and one feels they do not ask it. Yet now and then they must surely be glad to know that thoughtful women and thoughtful men follow their work and bless them in silence, sending across the world to them a homage of praise that is, perhaps, richer than the plaudits of the crowd. And not to them only, but also to the mothers who bid them go, accepting their hard part of lonely, anxious waiting without complaint.

And if they fall by the wayside, unrecognised, unknown, but having carried the path forward, maybe a mile, maybe a yard, maybe an inch, how great a thing is that compared to the small happenings that of necessity make up most men's lives!

In the sultry midday heat Carew sat alone in his hut, and certain memories, that for fifteen years he had tried to crush out of his mind, crowded back upon him with overwhelming force in the grip of his sudden sorrow. For that sad event which had plunged a great nation into grief had been to him a personal loss. In the silence and shadow he mourned deeply, not only the idol of his youth and dear object of his heart's best loyalty, but the memory of a friend.

For long ago, or so it seemed, there had been a moment when a royal hand had clasped his, and a royal voice—the royalty all lost in the friend—had said, "Perhaps you are right. It is best to begin again. But do not imagine your life is over and its aims purposeless. Out there you will find renewing. Some day come back and tell me about it."

That was fifteen years ago, but he had never gone back. Never sought the second hand-clasp that would have been his. Never unfolded to those interested ears his personal experiences with the pioneer column that led the way to do the path-finding in Rhodesia. In the hush of the afternoon, with his head bowed on his arms, the years between seemed to pass out of mind, and that which once had been to stand alone, awaking within him an infinite regret.

He saw again certain lovely park-lands—the woods and hills and dales—of a rich inheritance that should have been his. He saw himself, the gay guardsman. He saw the dear face of the woman for

whom he had chosen to cross that arbitrary will which would brook no disobedience, and sought to intimidate him with disinheritance. Through his mind passed in slurred detail the sordid story which had given him a brother's hate in return for a quixotic championing of the weak—a hate which proved to have power enough behind it to draw a devastating hand across the promise of his future.

Lastly—and here in the silence it was as though his head sank deeper in its pain—he saw that woman's dear face, as he had last seen it, lying white upon the heather—*dead*.

Ah, the memories were terribly alive to-day; not even fifteen years in a new life, with new interests, had done anything but draw a thin curtain of silence over the unforgettable pain. Would anything ever ease it in reality? Had he for a moment believed that it would? Or had he always known, that just as surely as his hand had held the gun which killed her, so to his last breath the tragedy would cast a shadow over the whole of his life?

He might look out upon the world with quiet eyes and firm lips and fearless mien, but the gnawing ache would surely go with him to his grave.

And because of it he knew that he had grown somewhat churlish; that men who did not understand his unsociable ways and extreme reticence looked at him askance. But what of it? How little such things mattered! The tragedy was his and the silence was his, and he had never asked anyone to share either.

Only to-day, for just this one afternoon, fifteen years was as yesterday, and he seemed to realise thoroughly for the first time all that royal hand-clasp had meant, before he went to his voluntary exile in a far wilderness.

But after a time, when it grew cool enough to walk, he came out into the sunshine and started off towards the steep rock pathway that leads to the summit of the Acropolis Hill, following an impulse to seek comfort in the fresh hopefulness of a height, and to lessen the pain in his heart by looking out across a world still living and loving and striving. So he climbed on up the winding pathway, enfolded with mystery and romance concerning the feet that trod it in the far-off centuries, and made his way between the mighty natu-

ral boulders out on to the high platform, where eyes, all those long centuries ago, must have looked out even as his, across the lovely land.

Was it as lovely then?... Could it have been less so?...

How the quiet beauty soothed and caressed him! Surely there were moments when the wilderness, tamed at last, like a lovely, wayward mistress become entrancingly docile, fondles the hand, and ravishes the senses of the strong man who conquered it.

Is this one of the rich rewards Life holds in the palm of her hand for the path-finders?... This glorious sense of ownership. This winsome soothing of shy gratitude when the fierce first resistance to conquest is overpast. A man may call England his country because he was born there, and his father before him; but, perhaps, after all, that is a small thing compared to standing upon a high eminence, and looking across a quiet world which is your country because of all you yourself have given to it of hope and faith and steadfast purpose.

In some such spirit soothing came to the quiet man on the top of the Acropolis Hill, whispering to him that, after all, this was *his* country, and if the beloved dead did indeed seem so far away in fact, in spirit he was perhaps nearer to his Empire-builders than he had ever been before.

He turned his head at last, and his eyes rested upon the circular wall, four hundred feet below, that enclosed the temple ruins. Then for a moment a wave of depression swept over him, blotting out the landscape loveliness. Was it all, then, vanity, this building and striving?... The making of walls and fortifications for another race, centuries afterwards, to look upon with cold wonder and curiosity? Three thousand years ago perhaps another man had stood even there and mourned his king that was dead. And so soon ... so soon ... he also died, and the massive walls became ruins, and the dynasty, or empire, or era, passed away into oblivion. How soon might a similar fate overtake his own great Empire!... and the beloved King, Edward the Peacemaker, be perhaps but a legend to some strange new race.

And then it was as though the land to which he had given so much rose up to give in her turn the might of hope and renewing. His eyes wandered again to the distant mountains and over the fertile plain lying between, and all the outspread richness called to him that at least there was no ruin here, no hopelessness, no decay.

Progress spoke to him from the rolling plains and from the mysterious kopjes, and his blood warmed to that glad sense of possession—if not in fact, at least in the fancy born of what he had given. For it is when we give, and not when we take, we become the truest possessors, rich owners of so much that neither wealth, nor birth, nor striving can buy.

In the quiet evening hour the stars were just beginning to light their brilliant lamps, and a glow like a rose-flush in the west marked the passage of the departed sun. Carew prepared to make the steep descent. And as he looked out across this country, that seemed so intensely his country, he felt himself heir of all the ages, the strong product of long eons of careful development, too rich in those vague splendours of the human and the divine not to realise the weak futility of musing sadly upon dead dynasties and bygone races.

On the northernmost point, ere the path drops suddenly on its way to the valley, he stood still once more and gazed steadily to the north where England lay.

Then, thinking deep thoughts of love and loyalty of the King who had been his friend, and the friend who had been his King, he gravely gave the salute.

## II

### THE MISSION STATION

Although only stationed for a short time at the Zimbabwe camp, Carew had chosen always to conduct his own *mess*, and take his meals in solitary state apart from Stanley and Moore. This was in every case typical of the man, who rarely sought company, and was often quiet to taciturnity when he had it. He had not come to the wilderness for adventure, or for the companionship of the men he might find there; he had come because he wanted to forget. Not

even to seek renewing and fresh hopes, but only to crowd out of his life the memory of that upheaval and tragedy that, it seemed, had placed a stern hand upon mere joy for evermore. And he believed he would achieve this best with the vigorous, interesting occupation of helping a young country struggle through to fulfilment.

It was not until after the dinner-hour that he again showed himself, and then he came outside his hut, filling his pipe, and stood for a moment beside Stanley and Moore without saying anything.

"Did you have a successful trip, sir?" Stanley asked.

"Quite," dryly.

The young trooper watched him a moment, and then added:

"Did you have trouble with M'Basch?"

"He tried to make trouble. He is a dangerous native."

"And you gave him a lesson?"

"I burnt his kraal."

"Whew!..." and Stanley gave a low whistle. The man was courageous indeed who dare resort to such a step, now that it was necessary to pamper the natives if one wanted no trouble at headquarters.

Carew took no notice of the significant rejoinder, but his firm mouth, if anything, grew a little firmer.

"I gave him due warning, but he thought I dare not carry out my threat. He was mistaken. Never make a threat that you can't carry out. It matters more than anything with natives. He will not give trouble again at present."

"But they may say a good deal at headquarters if he carries his story there!"

"I had to risk that. But he is so entirely in the wrong, and so clearly aware of it, I don't think he will venture to say anything. I have three cases of diabolical cruelty against him, besides stealing and law-breaking generally."

Stanley watched him with eyes of admiration. To him the man's strength was ever a source of delight, now that his unsociable ways were no longer a puzzle.

"We had a scientific man here yesterday to view the ruins," he continued, as Carew still lingered while he lit his pipe. "He has a remarkable theory for divining corpses by the gold ornaments buried on them. He thinks there are probably several in the temple, deeper than anyone has yet dug."

Carew did not look very interested. His eyes had still the retrospective, pained expression that had come into them instantly, when he grasped the import of Stanley's sad tidings.

"Where did he come from?" he asked, half turning away.

"I don't know. He was only here for a few hours. We gave him some tea, and he left us some interesting papers, if you would care to have them. He seemed rather interested in you!..." and Stanley looked keenly into his face.

"In what way?" Carew pulled hard at his beloved pipe and spoke with studied carelessness.

"Your name cropped up about something, and he wanted to know if you were a Fourtenay-Carew."

The officer started very slightly, but made no comment, and Stanley added, "He particularly wanted to know if you were a Devonshire man. I said you were."

"I *was* a Devonshire man," Carew corrected; "I *am* a Rhodesian."

Then he turned and with a short good night went back into his hut.

The next morning, directly his official work was finished, he started to ride over to the mission station, where some far-off connections of his, William and Ailsa Grenville, found by chance in the wilderness, lived the simple life with a contentment that surprised all who beheld them.

It was the first visit he had been able to pay for some weeks, and almost before he dismounted a woman stepped out from the large

rustic building, with its thatched roof, and came towards him with eagerness and sorrow strangely blended in her eyes.

"Ah, how long you have been coming! I have watched for you ever since we heard the sad news. Billy and I so wanted someone from *home* to talk to."

"I could not help it. I have been right away into the Ingigi district. How are you?"

He did not give her his hand because the formalities had long been dropped between them, but as he walked beside her to the building his face seemed a shade softer.

"We are both well. We are splendid. But we have felt very cut off these two weeks. England seemed so terribly far away. The evening we heard, Billy and I just sat hand in hand under the stars, dabbing the tears away. Don't smile, it was the only thing to do, and we longed so to be in London." As she talked she passed into the cool shade of the hut and busied herself preparing a lemon squash for him, not needing to ask if it were his choice. "We were miserable for days. I'm sure all of you were too."

"I did not hear until I came back yesterday."

"Ah ... I was afraid so. Of course, that made it worse."

She brought him the lemon squash and stood leaning against the table beside him while he drank it, with the gladness of seeing him still in her eyes, though they were grave now with sympathy. It was evident their friendship had in it a wide understanding.

She was silent a few moments, and then added simply, "I suppose you knew him personally?"

"Yes."

He did not tell her more, and she did not ask him. There was one subject that no deepening of friendship had ever made it possible to approach, and that was the story of his past. She knew only, from her husband, who was extremely vague on the subject, that he had once held a commission in the Blues, and been, not only a well-known society man, but the heir of a rich old uncle. And then suddenly something had happened, and his brother became the heir, and England had known him no more. Even William Grenville