

Hilda Wade.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

VII.—THE EPISODE OF THE STONE THAT LOOKED ABOUT IT.

HILDA took me back with her to the embryo farm where she had pitched her tent for the moment: a rough, wild place: it lay close to the main road from Salisbury to Chimoio.

Setting aside the inevitable rawness and newness of all things Rhodesian, however, the situation itself was not wholly unpicturesque. A ramping rock or tor of granite, which I should judge at a rough guess to extend to an acre in size, sprang abruptly from the brown grass of the upland plain. It rose like a huge boulder. Its summit was crowned by the covered grave of some old Kaffir chief—a rude cairn of big stones under a thatched awning. At the foot of this jagged and cleft rock the farmhouse nestled—four square walls of wattle-and-daub, sheltered by its mass from the sweeping winds of the South African plateau. A stream brought water from a spring close by: in front of the house—rare sight in that thirsty land—spread a garden of flowers. It was an oasis in the desert. But the desert itself stretched grimly all round: I could never quite decide how far the oasis was caused by the water from the spring, and how far by Hilda's presence.

"Then you live here?" I cried, gazing round—my voice, I suppose, betraying my latent sense of the unworthiness of the position.

"For the present," Hilda answered, smiling. "You know, Hubert, I have no abiding city anywhere, till my Purpose is fulfilled. I came here because Rhodesia seemed the furthest spot of earth where a white woman just now could safely penetrate—in order to get away from you and Sebastian."

"That is an unkind conjunction!" I exclaimed, reddening.

"But I mean it," she answered, with a wayward little nod. "I wanted breathing-space to form fresh plans. I wanted to get clear away for a time from all who knew me. And this

promised best. . . . But nowadays, really, one is never safe from intrusion anywhere."

"You are cruel, Hilda!"

"Oh, no. You deserve it. I asked you not to come—and you came in spite of me. I have treated you very nicely under the circumstances, I think. I have behaved like an angel. The question is now, what ought I to do next? You have upset my plans so."

"Upset your plans? How?"

"Dear Hubert"—she turned to me with an indulgent smile—"for a clever man, you are really *too* foolish! Can't you see that you have betrayed my whereabouts to Sebastian? I crept away secretly, like a thief in the night, giving no name or place; and, having the world to ransack, he might



"I ASKED YOU NOT TO COME, AND YOU CAME IN SPITE OF ME."

have found it hard to track me; for *he* had not *your* clue of the Basingstoke letter—nor your reason for seeking me. But now that *you* have followed me openly, with your name blazoned forth in the company's passenger-lists, and your traces left plain in hotels and stages across the map of South Africa—why, the spoor is easy. If Sebastian cares to find us, he can follow the scent all through without trouble."

"I never thought of that!" I cried, aghast.

She was forbearance itself. "No, I knew you would never think of it. You are a man, you see. I counted that in. I was afraid from the first you would wreck all by following me."

I was mutely penitent. "And yet, you forgive me, Hilda!"

Her eyes beamed tenderness. "To know all, is to forgive all," she answered. "I have to remind you of that so often! How can I help forgiving, when I know *why* you came—what spur it was that drove you? But it is the future we have to think of now, not the past. And I must wait and reflect. I have *no* plan just at present."

"What are you doing at this farm?" I gazed round at it, dissatisfied.

"I board here," Hilda answered, amused at my crestfallen face. "But, of course, I cannot be idle; so I have found work to do. I ride out on my bicycle to two or three isolated houses about, and give lessons to children in this desolate place, who would otherwise grow up ignorant. It fills my time, and supplies me with something besides myself to think about."

"And what am *I* to do?" I cried, oppressed with a sudden sense of helplessness.

She laughed at me outright. "And is this the first moment that that difficulty has occurred to you?" she asked, gaily. "You have hurried all the way from London to Rhodesia without the slightest idea of what you mean to do now you have got there?"

I laughed at myself in turn. "Upon my word, Hilda," I cried, "I set out to find you. Beyond the desire to find you, I had no plan in my head. That was an end in itself. My thoughts went no further."

She gazed at me half saucily. "Then don't you think, sir, the best thing you can do, now you *have* found me, is—to turn back and go home again?"

"I am a man," I said, promptly, taking a firm stand. "And you are a judge of character. If you really mean to tell me you

think *that* likely—well, I shall have a lower opinion of your insight into men than I have been accustomed to harbour."

Her smile was not wholly without a touch of triumph.

"In that case," she went on, "I suppose the only alternative is for you to remain here."

"That would appear to be logic," I replied. "But what can I do? Set up in practice?"

"I don't see much opening," she answered. "If you ask my advice, I should say there is only one thing to be done in Rhodesia just now—turn farmer."

"It *is* done," I answered, with my usual impetuosity. "Since *you* say the word, I am a farmer already. I feel an interest in oats that is simply absorbing. What steps ought I to take first in my present condition?"

She looked at me, all brown with the dust of my long ride. "I would suggest," she said, slowly, "a good wash, and some dinner."

"Hilda," I cried, surveying my boots, or what was visible of them, "that is *really* clever of you. A wash and some dinner! So practical, so timely! The very thing! I will see to it."

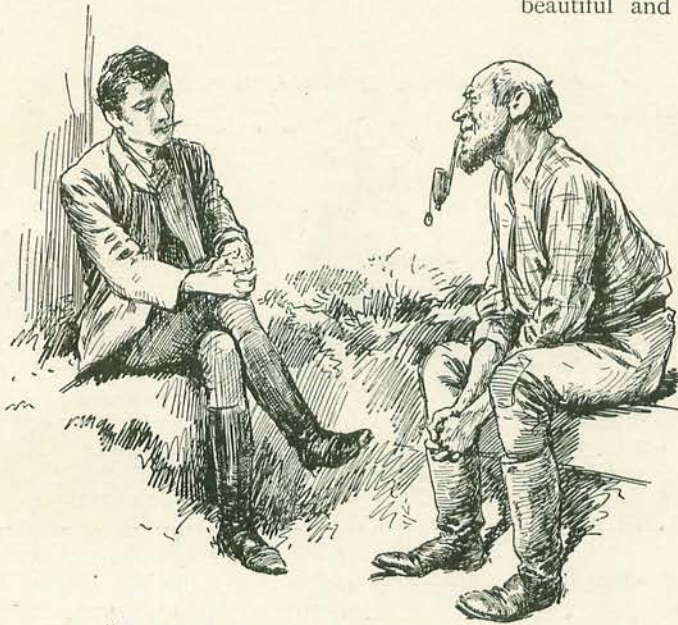
Before night fell I had arranged everything. I was to buy the next farm from the owner of the one where Hilda lodged: I was also to learn the rudiments of South African agriculture from him for a valuable consideration: and I was to lodge in his house while my own was building. He gave me his views on the cultivation of oats. He gave them at some length—more length than perspicuity. I knew nothing about oats, save that they were employed in the manufacture of porridge—which I detest: but I was to be near Hilda once more, and I was prepared to undertake the superintendence of the oat from its birth to its reaping, if only I might be allowed to live so close to Hilda.

The farmer and his wife were Boers, but they spoke English. Mr. Jan Willem Klaas himself was a fine specimen of the breed—tall, erect, broad-shouldered, and genial. Mrs. Klaas, his wife, was mainly suggestive, in mind and person, of suet-pudding. There was one prattling little girl of three years old, by name Sannie, a most engaging child; and also a chubby baby.

"You are betrothed, of course?" Mrs. Klaas said to Hilda before me, with the curious tactlessness of her race, when we made our first arrangement.

Hilda's face flushed. "No; we are nothing to one another," she answered—

which was only true formally. "Dr. Cumberland had a post at the same hospital in London where I was a nurse; and he thought he would like to try Rhodesia. That is all."



"HE GAVE ME HIS VIEWS ON THE CULTIVATION OF OATS."

Mrs. Klaas gazed from one to other of us suspiciously. "You English are strange!" she answered, with a complacent little shrug. "But there—from Europe! Your ways, we know, are different."

Hilda did not attempt to explain. It would have been impossible to make the good soul understand. Her horizon was so simple. She was a harmless housewife, given mostly to dyspepsia and the care of her little ones. Hilda had won her heart by unfeigned admiration for the chubby baby. To a mother that covers a multitude of eccentricities, such as one expects to find in incomprehensible English. Mrs. Klaas put up with me because she liked Hilda.

We spent some months together on Klaas's farm. It was a dreary place, save for Hilda. The bare daub-and-wattle walls; the clumps of misshapen and dusty prickly-pears that girt round the thatched huts of the Kaffir workpeople; the stone-penned sheep-kraals and the corrugated iron roof of the bald stable for the waggon-oxen—all was as crude and ugly as a new country can make things. It seemed to me a desecration that Hilda should live in such an unfinished land—Hilda whom I imagined as moving by

nature through broad English parks, with Elizabethan cottages and immemorial oaks—Hilda whose proper atmosphere seemed to be one of coffee-coloured laces, ivy-clad abbeys, lichen-incrusted walls, all that is beautiful and gracious in time-honoured civilizations.

Nevertheless, we lived on there in a meaningless sort of way—I hardly knew why. To me it was a puzzle. When I asked Hilda, she shook her head with her sibylline air and answered, confidently, "You do not understand Sebastian as well as I do. We have to wait for *him*. The next move is his. Till he plays his piece, I cannot tell how I may have to checkmate him."

So we waited for Sebastian to advance a pawn. Meanwhile, I toyed with South African farming—not very successfully, I must admit. Nature did not design me for growing oats. I am no judge of oxen, and my views on the feeding of Kaffir sheep raised broad smiles on the black faces of my Mashona labourers.

I still lodged at Tant Mettie's, as everybody called Mrs. Klaas: she was courtesy aunt to the community at large, while Oom Jan Willem was its courtesy uncle. They were simple homely folk, who lived up to their religious principles on an unvaried diet of stewed ox-beef and bread: they suffered much from chronic dyspepsia, due in part at least, no doubt, to the monotony of their food, their life, their interests. One could hardly believe one was still in the nineteenth century: these people had the calm, the local seclusion of the prehistoric epoch. For them, Europe did not exist: they knew it merely as a place where settlers came from. What the Czar intended, what the Kaiser designed, never disturbed their rest. A sick ox, a rattling tile on the roof, meant more to their lives than war in Europe. The one break in the sameness of their daily routine was family prayers: the one weekly event, going to church at Salisbury. Still, they had a single enthusiasm. Like everybody else for fifty miles around, they believed profoundly in "the future of Rhodesia." When I gazed

about me at the raw new land—the weary flat of red soil and brown grasses—I felt at least that, with a present like that, it had need of a future.

I am not by disposition a pioneer: I

them to me, please, when Tant Mettie isn't looking." His nod was all mystery.

"You may rely on my discretion," I replied, throwing the time-honoured prejudices of the profession to the winds, and well



"I GAZED ABOUT ME AT THE RAW NEW LAND."

belong instinctively to the old civilizations. In the midst of rudimentary towns and incipient fields, I yearn for grey houses, a Norman church, an English thatched cottage.

However, for Hilda's sake I braved it out, and continued to learn the A B C of agriculture on an unmade farm with great assiduity from Oom Jan Willem.

We had been stopping some months at Klaas's together when business compelled me one day to ride into Salisbury. I had ordered some goods for my farm from England, which had at last arrived. I had now to arrange for their conveyance from the town to my plot of land—a portentous matter. Just as I was on the point of leaving Klaas's, and was tightening the saddle-girth on my sturdy little pony, Oom Jan Willem himself sidled up to me with a mysterious air, his broad face all wrinkled with anticipatory pleasure. He placed a sixpence in my palm, glancing about him on every side as he did so, like a conspirator.

"What am I to buy with it?" I asked, much puzzled, and suspecting tobacco. *Tant Mettie* declared he smoked too much for a church elder.

He put his finger to his lips, nodded, and peered round. "Lollipops for Sannie," he whispered low, at last, with a guilty smile. "But"—he glanced about him again—"give

pleased to aid and abet the simple-minded soul in his nefarious designs against little Sannie's digestive apparatus.

He patted me on the back. "*Peppermint* lollipops, mind!" he went on in the same solemn undertone. "Sannie likes them best peppermint."

I put my foot in the stirrup, and vaulted into my saddle. "They shall not be forgotten," I answered, with a quiet smile at this pretty little evidence of fatherly feeling.

I rode off. It was early morning, before the heat of the day began. Hilda accompanied me part of the way on her bicycle. She was going to the other young farm, some eight miles off, across the red-brown plateau, where she gave lessons daily to the ten-year-old daughter of an English settler. It was a labour of love, for settlers in Rhodesia cannot afford to pay for what are beautifully described as "finishing governesses"; but Hilda was of the sort who cannot eat the bread of idleness. She had to justify herself to her kind by finding some work to do which should vindicate her existence.

I parted from her at a point on the monotonous plain where one rubbly road branched off from another. Then I jogged on in the full morning sun over that scorching plain of loose red sand all the way to Salisbury. Not a green leaf or a fresh flower anywhere. The eye ached at the hot glare

of the reflected sunlight from the sandy level.

My business detained me most of the day in the half-built town, with its flaunting stores and its rough new offices; it was not till towards afternoon that I could get away again on my sorrel, across the blazing plain once more to Klaas's.

I moved on over the plateau at an easy trot, full of thoughts of Hilda. What could be the step she expected Sebastian to take next? She did not know, herself, she had told me: there, her faculty failed her. But *some* step he *would* take: and till he took it, she must rest and be watchful.

I passed the great tree that stands up like an obelisk in the midst of the plain beyond the deserted Matabele village. I passed the low clumps of dry karroo-bushes by the rocky kopje. I passed the turning of the rubbly roads where I had parted from Hilda. At last I reached the long, rolling ridge which looks down upon Klaas's, and could see in the slant sunlight the mud farmhouse and the corrugated iron roof where the oxen were stabled.

The place looked more deserted, more dead-alive than ever. Not a black boy moved in it. Even the cattle and Kaffir sheep were nowhere to be seen. . . . But, then, it was always quiet: and perhaps I noticed the obtrusive air of solitude and sleepiness even more than usual, because I had just returned from Salisbury. All things are comparative. After the lost loneliness of Klaas's farm, even brand-new Salisbury seemed busy and bustling.

I hurried on, ill at ease. But Tant Mettie would, doubtless, have a cup of tea ready for me as soon as I arrived, and Hilda would be waiting at the gate to welcome me.

I reached the stone inclosure and passed up through the flower-garden. To my great surprise, Hilda was not there. As a rule, she came to

meet me with her sunny smile. But perhaps she was tired, or the sun on the road might have given her a headache. I dismounted from my mare, and called one of the Kaffir boys to take her to the stable. Nobody answered. . . . I called again. Still silence. . . . I tied her up to the post, and strode over to the door, astonished at the solitude. I began to feel there was something weird and uncanny about this home-coming. Never before had I known Klaas's so entirely deserted.

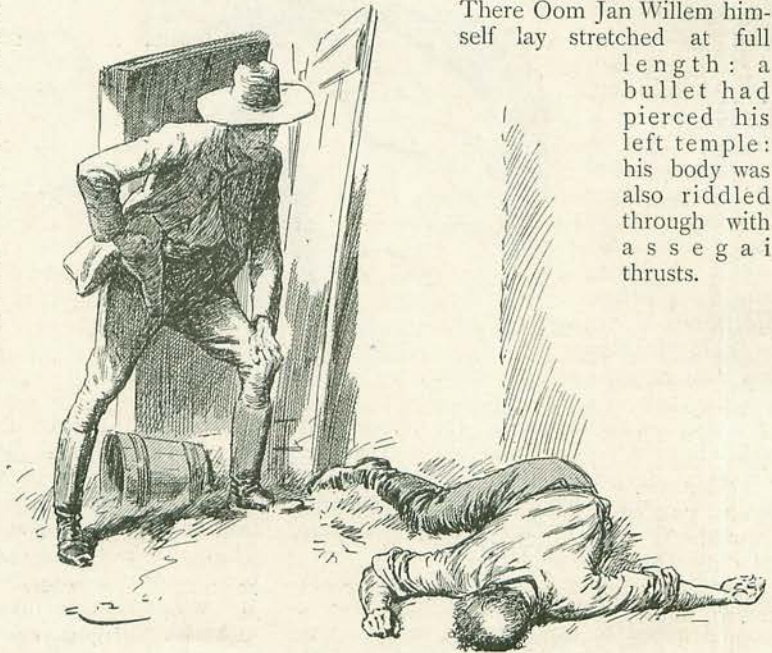
I lifted the latch and opened the door. It gave access at once to the single plain living-room. There, all was huddled. For a moment my eyes hardly took in the truth. There are sights so sickening that the brain at the first shock wholly fails to realize them.

On the stone slab floor of the low living-room Tant Mettie lay dead. Her body was pierced through by innumerable thrusts, which I somehow instinctively recognised as assegai wounds. By her side lay Sannie, the little prattling girl of three, my constant play-mate, whom I had instructed in cat's cradle and taught the tales of Cinderella and Red Riding Hood. My hand grasped the lollipops in my pocket convulsively. She would never need them. Nobody else was about. What had become of Oom Jan Willem—and the baby?

I wandered out into the yard, sick with the sight I had already seen.

There Oom Jan Willem himself lay stretched at full

length: a bullet had pierced his left temple: his body was also riddled through with a s s e g a i thrusts.



"OOM JAN WILLEM LAY STRETCHED AT FULL LENGTH."

I saw at once what this meant. A rising of the Matabele!

I had come back from Salisbury, unknowing it, into the midst of a revolt of blood-thirsty savages.

Yet, even if I had known, I must still have hurried home with all speed to Klaas's—to protect Hilda.

Hilda? Where was Hilda? A breathless sinking crept over me.

I staggered out into the open. It was impossible to say what horror might not have happened. The Matabele might even now be lurking about the kraal—for the bodies were hardly cold. But Hilda? Hilda? Whatever came, I must find Hilda.

Fortunately, I had my loaded revolver in my belt. Though we had not in the least anticipated this sudden revolt—it broke like a thunder-clap from a clear sky—the unsettled state of the country made even women go armed about their daily avocations.

I strode on, half maddened. Beside the great block of granite which sheltered the farm there rose one of those rocky little hillocks of loose boulders which are locally known in South Africa by the Dutch name of *kopjes*. I looked out upon it drearly. Its round brown ironstones lay piled irregularly together, almost as if placed there in some earlier age by the mighty hands of prehistoric giants. My gaze on it was blank. I was thinking, not of it but of Hilda, Hilda.

I called the name aloud: "Hilda! Hilda! Hilda!"

As I called, to my immense surprise, one of the smooth round boulders on the hillside

seemed slowly to uncurl, and to peer about it cautiously. Then it raised itself in the slant sunlight, put a hand to its eyes, and gazed out upon me with a human face for a moment. After that it descended, step by step, among the other stones, with a white object in its arms. As the boulder uncurled and came to life, I was aware, by degrees . . . yes, yes, it was Hilda, with Tant

Mettie's baby!

In the fierce joy of that discovery I rushed forward to her, trembling, and clasped her in my arms. I could find no words but "Hilda! Hilda!"

"Are they gone?" she asked, staring about her with a terrified air, though still strangely preserving her wonted composure of manner.

"Who gone? The Matabele?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Did you see them, Hilda?"

"For a moment—with black shields and assegais, all shouting madly. You have been to the house, Hubert? You know what has happened?"

"Yes, yes, I know—a rising. They have massacred the Klaases."

She nodded.

"I came back on my bicycle,

and, when I opened the door, found Tantie and little Sannie dead. Poor, sweet little Sannie! Oom Jan was lying shot in the yard outside. I saw the cradle overturned, and looked under it for the baby. They did not kill her—perhaps did not notice her. I caught her up in my arms, and rushed out to my machine, thinking to make for Salisbury and give the alarm to the men there. One must try to save others—



"IT WAS HILDA, WITH TANT METTIE'S BABY!"

and *you* were coming, Hubert! Then I heard horses' hoofs—the Matabele returning. They dashed back, mounted—stolen horses from other farms—they have taken poor Oom Jan's—and they have gone on, shouting, to murder elsewhere! I flung down my machine among the bushes as they came—I hope they have not seen it: and I crouched here between the boulders, with the baby in my arms, trusting for protection to the colour of my dress, which is just like the ironstone."

"It is a perfect deception," I answered, admiring her instinctive cleverness even then. "I never so much as noticed *you*."

"No, nor the Matabele either, for all their sharp eyes. They passed by without stopping. I clasped the baby hard, and tried to keep it from crying—if it had cried, all would have been lost: but they passed just below, and swept on towards Rozenboom's. I lay still for a while, not daring to look out: then I raised myself warily and tried to listen. Just at that moment, I heard a horse's hoofs ring out once more. I couldn't tell, of course, whether it was *you* returning, or one of the Matabele, left behind by the others. So I crouched again. . . . Thank God, *you* are safe, Hubert!"

All this took a moment to say, or was less said than hinted. "Now, what must we do?" I cried. "Bolt back again to Salisbury?"

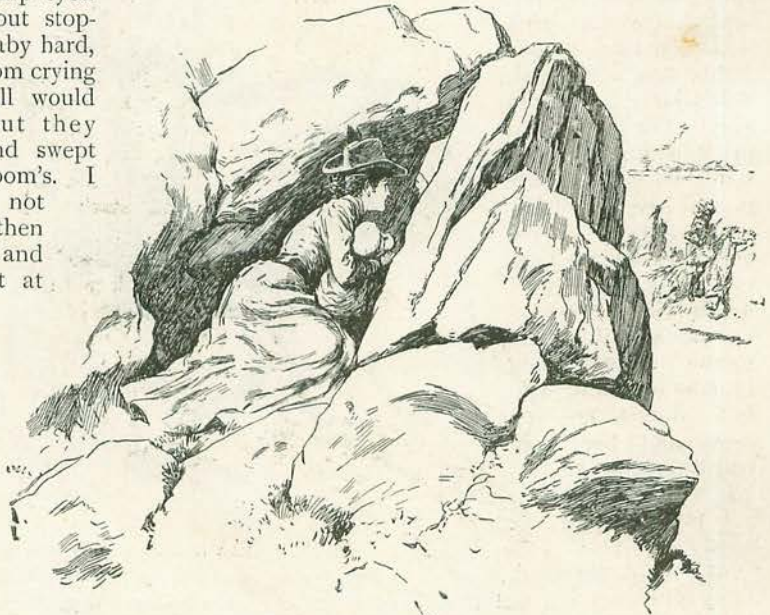
"It is the only thing possible—if my machine is unhurt. They may have taken it . . . or ridden over and broken it."

We went down to the spot, and picked it up where it lay, half-concealed among the brittle, dry scrub of milk-bushes. I examined the bearings carefully; though there were hoof-marks close by, it had received no hurt. I blew up the tyre, which was somewhat flabby, and went on to untie my sturdy pony. The moment I looked at her, I saw the poor little brute was wearied out with her two long rides in the sweltering sun. Her flanks quivered. "It is no use," I cried, patting her, as she turned to me with appealing eyes

that asked for water. "She *can't* go back as far as Salisbury, at least till she has had a feed of corn and a drink. Even then, it will be rough on her."

"Give her bread!" Hilda suggested. "That will hearten her more than corn. There is plenty in the house: Tant Mettie baked this morning."

I crept in reluctantly to fetch it. I also brought out from the dresser a few raw eggs, to break into a tumbler and swallow whole: for Hilda and I needed food almost as sorely as the poor beast herself. There was something gruesome in thus rummaging about for bread and meat in the dead woman's cup-



"THEY PASSED JUST BELOW."

board, while she herself lay there on the floor: but one never realizes how one will act in these great emergencies until they come upon one. Hilda, still calm with unearthly calmness, took a couple of loaves from my hand and began feeding the pony with them. "Go and draw water for her," she said, simply, "while I give her the bread: that will save time: every minute is precious."

I did as I was bid, not knowing each moment but that the insurgents would return. When I came back from the spring with the bucket, the mare had demolished the whole two loaves, and was going on upon some grass which Hilda had plucked for her.

"She hasn't had enough, poor dear," Hilda said, patting her neck. "A couple of loaves are penny buns to her appetite. Let her drink the water, while I go in and fetch out the rest of the baking."

I hesitated. "You *can't* go in there again, Hilda!" I cried. "Wait and let me do it."

Her white face was resolute. "Yes, I *can*," she answered. "It is a work of necessity: and in works of necessity a woman, I think, should flinch at nothing. Have I not seen already every varied aspect of death at Nathaniel's?" And in she went, undaunted, to that chamber of horrors, still clasping the baby.

The pony made short work of the remaining loaves, which she devoured with great zest. As Hilda had predicted, they seemed to hearten her. The food and drink, with a bucket of water dashed on her hoofs, gave her new vigour like wine. We gulped down our eggs in silence. Then I held Hilda's bicycle. She vaulted lightly on to the seat, white and tired as she was, with the baby in her left arm, and her right hand on the handlebar.

"I must take the baby," I said.

She shook her head.

"Oh, no. I will not trust her to you."

"Hilda, I insist."

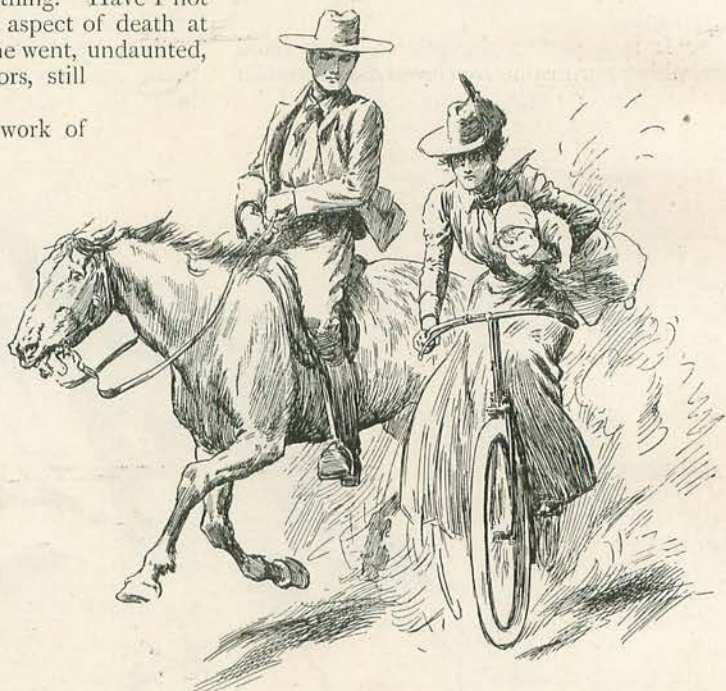
"And I insist too. It is my place to take her."

"But can you ride so?" I asked, anxiously.

She began to pedal. "Oh, dear, yes. It is quite, quite easy. I shall get there all right—if the Matabele don't burst upon us."

Tired as I was with my long day's work, I jumped into my saddle. I saw I should only lose time if I disputed about the baby. My little horse seemed to understand that something grave had occurred, for, weary as she must have been, she set out with a will once more over that great red level. Hilda pedalled bravely by my side. The road was bumpy, but she was well accustomed to it. I could have ridden faster than she went, for the baby weighted her. Still, we rode for dear life. It was a grim experience.

All round, by this time, the horizon was dim with clouds of black smoke which went up from burning farms and plundered homesteads. The smoke did not rise high: it hung sullenly over the hot plain in long smouldering masses, like the smoke of steamers on foggy days in England. The sun was nearing the horizon: his slant red rays lighted up the red plain, the red sand,



"HILDA PEDALLED BRAVELY BY MY SIDE."

the brown-red grasses, with a murky, spectral glow of crimson. After those red pools of blood, this universal burst of redness appalled one. It seemed as though all nature had conspired in one unholy league with the Matabele. We rode on without a word. The red sky grew redder.

"They may have sacked Salisbury!" I exclaimed at last, looking out towards the brand-new town.

"I doubt it," Hilda answered. Her very doubt reassured me.

We began to mount a long slope. Hilda pedalled with difficulty. Not a sound was heard save the light fall of my pony's feet on the soft new road, and the shrill cry of the cicalas. Then, suddenly, we started. What was that noise in our rear? Once, twice, it rang out. The loud *ping* of a rifle!

Looking behind us, we saw eight or ten

mounted Matabele! Stalwart warriors they were—half naked, and riding stolen horses. They were coming our way! They had seen us! They were pursuing us!

“Put on all speed!” I cried, in my agony. “Hilda, can you manage it?”

She pedalled with a will. But as we mounted the slope, I saw they were gaining upon us. A few hundred yards were all our start. They had the descent of the opposite hill as yet in their favour.

One man, astride on a better horse than the rest, galloped on in front and came within range of us. He had a rifle in his hand. He pointed it twice, and covered us. But he did not shoot. Hilda gave a cry of relief. “Don’t you see?” she exclaimed. “It is Oom Jan Willem’s rifle! That was their last cartridge. They have no more ammunition.”

I saw she was probably right: for Klaas was out of cartridges, and was waiting for my new stock to arrive from England. If that were correct, they must get near enough to attack us with assegais. They are more dangerous so. I remembered what an old Boer had said to me at Bulawayo: “The Zulu with his assegai is an enemy to be feared: with a gun, he is a bungler.”

We pounded on up the hill. It was deadly work with those brutes at our heels. The child on Hilda’s arm was visibly wearying her. It kept on whining. “Hilda,” I cried, “that baby will lose your life! You *cannot* go on carrying it.”

She turned to me with a flash of her eyes. “What! you are a man,” she broke out, “and you ask a woman to save her life by abandoning a baby! Hubert, you shame me!”

I felt she was right. If she had been capable of giving it up, she would not have been Hilda. There was but one other way left.

“Then *you* must take the pony,” I called out, “and let me have the bicycle!”

“You couldn’t ride it,” she called back. “It is a woman’s machine, remember.”

“Yes, I could,” I replied, without slowing. “It is not much too short: and I can bend my knees a bit. Quick, quick! No words! Do as I tell you!”

She hesitated a second. The child’s weight distressed her. “We should lose time in changing,” she answered at last, doubtful but still pedalling, though my hand was on the rein, ready to pull up the pony.

“Not if we manage it right. Obey orders! The moment I say ‘Halt,’ I shall slacken my mare’s pace. When you see me leave the

saddle, jump off instantly, you, and mount her! I will catch the machine before it falls. Are you ready? Halt, then!”

She obeyed the word without one second’s delay. I slipped off, held the bridle, caught the bicycle, and led it instantaneously. Then I ran beside the pony—bridle in one hand, machine in the other—till Hilda had sprung with a light bound into the stirrup. At that, a little leap, and I mounted the bicycle. It was all done nimbly in less time than the telling takes, for we are both of us naturally quick in our movements. Hilda rode like a man, astride—her short bicycling skirt, unobtrusively divided in front and at the back, made this easily possible. Looking behind me with a hasty glance, I could see that the savages, taken aback, had reined in to deliberate at our unwonted evolution. I feel sure that the novelty of the iron horse, with a woman riding it, played not a little on their superstitious fears; they suspected, no doubt, this was some ingenious new engine of war devised against them by the unaccountable white man: it might go off unexpectedly in their faces at any moment. Most of them, I observed as they halted, carried on their backs black ox-hide shields, interlaced with white thongs; they were armed with two or three assegais apiece and a knobkerry.

Instead of losing time by the change, as it turned out, we had actually gained it. Hilda was able to put on my sorrel to her full pace, which I had not dared to do, for fear of outrunning my companion; the wise little beast, for her part, seemed to rise to the occasion, and to understand that we were pursued, for she stepped out bravely. On the other hand, in spite of the low seat and the short crank of a woman’s machine, I could pedal up the slope with more force than Hilda, for I am a practised hill-climber: so that in both ways we gained, besides having momentarily disconcerted and checked the enemy. Their ponies were tired, and they rode them full tilt with savage recklessness, making them canter up-hill, and so needlessly fatiguing them. The Matabele, indeed, are unused to horses, and manage them but ill. It is as foot soldiers, creeping stealthily through bush or long grass, that they are really formidable. Only one of their mounts was tolerably fresh: the one which had once already almost overtaken us. As we neared the top of the slope, Hilda, glancing behind her, exclaimed, with a sudden thrill, “He is spurring again, Hubert!”

I drew my revolver and held it in my right

hand, using my left for steering. I did not look back: time was far too precious. I set my teeth hard. "Tell me when he draws near enough for a shot," I said, quietly.

Hilda only nodded. Being mounted on the mare, she could see behind her more steadily now than I could from the machine;

spurred by necessity, I somehow did it. I fired three shots in quick succession. My first bullet missed: my second knocked the man over: my third grazed the horse. With a ringing shriek, the Matabele fell in the road, a black writhing mass; his horse, terrified, dashed back with maddened snorts into the



"WITH A RINGING SHRIEK, THE MATABELE FELL IN THE ROAD."

and her eye was trustworthy. As for the baby, rocked by the heave and fall of the pony's withers, it had fallen asleep placidly in the very midst of this terror!

After a second I asked once more, with bated breath, "Is he gaining?"

She looked back. "Yes: gaining."

A pause. "And now?"

"Still gaining. He is poising an assegai."

Ten seconds more passed in breathless suspense. The thud of their horses' hoofs alone told me their nearness. My finger was on the trigger. I awaited the word. "Fire!" she said at last, in a calm, unflinching voice. "He is well within distance."

I turned half round and levelled as true as I could at the advancing black man. He rode nearly naked, showing all his teeth and brandishing his assegai; the long white feathers stuck upright in his hair gave him a wild and terrifying barbaric aspect. It was difficult to preserve one's balance, keep the way on, and shoot, all at the same time; but

midst of the others. Its plunging disconcerted the whole party for a minute.

We did not wait to see the rest. Taking advantage of this momentary diversion in our favour, we rode on at full speed to the top of the slope—I never knew before how hard I could pedal—and began to descend at a dash into the opposite hollow.

The sun had set by this time. There is no twilight in those latitudes. It grew dark at once. We could see now in the plain all round, where black clouds of smoke had rolled before, one lurid red glare of burning houses, mixed with a sullen haze of tawny light from the columns of prairie fire kindled by the insurgents.

We made our way still onward across the open plain without one word towards Salisbury. The mare was giving out. She strode with a will: but her flanks were white with froth: her breath came short: foam flew from her nostrils.

As we mounted the next ridge, still dis

tancing our pursuers, I saw suddenly, on its crest, defined against the livid red sky like a silhouette, two more mounted black men!

"It's all up, Hilda!" I cried, losing heart at last. "They are on both sides of us now! The mare is spent: we are surrounded!"

She drew rein and gazed at them. For a moment suspense spoke in all her attitude. Then she burst into a sudden deep sigh of relief. "No, no," she cried; "these are friendlies!"

"How do you know?" I gasped. But I believed her.

"They are looking out this way, with hands shading their eyes against the red glare. They are looking away from Salisbury, in the direction of the attack. They are expecting the enemy. They *must* be friendlies!—See, see! they have caught sight of us!"

As she spoke, one of the men lifted his rifle and half pointed it. "Don't shoot! don't shoot!" I shrieked aloud. "We are English! English!"

The men let their rifles drop and rode down towards us. "Who are you?" I cried.

They saluted us, military fashion. "Matabele police, sah," the leader answered, recognising me. "You are flying from Klaas's?"

"Yes," I answered. "They have murdered Klaas, with his wife and child. Some of them are now following us."

The spokesman was a well-educated Cape Town negro. "All right, sah," he answered. "I have forty men here right behind de kopje. Let dem come! We can give a good account of dem. Ride on straight wit de lady to Salisbury!"

"The Salisbury people know of this rising, then?" I asked.

"Yes, sah. Dem know since five o'clock. Kaffir boys from Klaas's brought in de news: and a white man escaped from Rozenboom's confirm it. We have pickets all round. You is safe now: you can ride on into Salisbury witout fear of de Matabele."

I rode on, relieved. Mechanically, my feet worked to and fro on the pedals. It was a gentle down-gradient now towards the town; I had no further need for special exertion.

Suddenly, Hilda's voice came wafted to me as through a mist. "What are you doing, Hubert? You'll be off in a minute!"

I started, and recovered my balance with difficulty. Then I was aware at once that one second before I had all but dropped asleep, dog tired, on the bicycle. Worn out with my long day and with the nervous

strain, I began to doze off, with my feet still moving round and round automatically, the moment the anxiety of the chase was relieved, and an easy down-grade gave me a little respite.

I kept myself awake even then with difficulty. Riding on through the lurid gloom, we reached Salisbury at last, and found the town already crowded with refugees from the plateau. However, we succeeded in securing two rooms at a house in the long street, and were soon sitting down to a much-needed supper.

As we rested an hour or two later, in the ill-furnished back-room, discussing this sudden turn of affairs with our host and some neighbours—for, of course, all Salisbury was eager for news from the scene of the massacres—I happened to raise my head, and saw, to my great surprise . . . a haggard white face peering in at us through the window.

It peered round a corner, stealthily. It was an ascetic face, very sharp and clear-cut. It had a stately profile. The long and wiry grizzled moustache, the deep-set, hawk-like eyes, the acute, intense, intellectual features, all were very familiar. So was the outer setting of long, white hair, straight and silvery as it fell, and just curled in one wave-like inward sweep where it turned and rested on the stooping shoulders. But the expression on the face was even stranger than the sudden apparition. It was an expression of keen and poignant disappointment—as of a man whom fate has balked of some well-planned end, his due by right, which mere chance has evaded.

"They say there's a white man at the bottom of all this trouble," our host had been remarking, one second earlier. "The niggers know too much: and where did they get their rifles? People at Rozenboom's believe some black-livered traitor has been stirring up the Matabele for weeks and weeks. An enemy of Rhodes's, of course: jealous of our advance: a French agent, perhaps: but more likely one of these confounded Transvaal Dutchmen. Depend upon it, it's Kruger's doing."

As the words fell from his lips, I saw the face. I gave a quick little start, then recovered my composure.

But Hilda noted it. She looked up at me hastily. She was sitting with her back to the window, and therefore, of course, could not see the face itself, which indeed was withdrawn with a hurried movement, yet with a certain strange dignity, almost before I could



"I SAW THE FACE."

feel sure of having seen it. Still, she caught my startled expression and the gleam of surprise and recognition in my eye. She laid one hand upon my arm. "You have seen him?" she asked quietly, almost below her breath.

"Seen whom?"

"Sebastian."

It was useless denying it to *her*. "Yes, I have seen him," I answered, in a confidential aside.

"Just now—this moment—at the back of the house—looking in at the window upon us?"

"You are right—as always."

She drew a deep breath. "He has played his game," she said low to me, in an awed undertone. "I felt sure it was he. I expected him to play; though what piece, I knew not; and when I saw those poor dead souls, I was certain he had done it—indirectly done it. The Matabele are his pawns. He wanted to aim a blow at *me*; and *this* was the way he chose to aim it."

"Do you think he is capable of that?" I cried. For in spite of all, I had still a sort

of lingering respect for Sebastian. "It seems so reckless—like the worst of anarchists—when he strikes at one head, to involve so many irrelevant lives in one common destruction."

Hilda's face was like a drowned man's.

"To Sebastian," she answered, shuddering, "the End is all: the Means are unessential. Who wills the End, wills the Means: that is the sum and substance of his philosophy of life.

From first to last, Did I not tell you once he was a snow-clad volcano?"

"Still, I am loth to believe——" I cried.

She interrupted me calmly. "I knew it," she said. "I expected it. Beneath that cold exterior, the fires of his life burn fiercely still. I told you we must wait for Sebastian's next move; though I confess, even from *him*, I hardly dreamt of this one. But from the moment when I opened the door on poor Tant Mettie's body, lying there in its red horror, I felt it must be he. And when you started just now, I said to myself in a flash of intuition—'Sebastian has come! He has come to see how his devil's work has prospered.' He sees it has gone wrong. So now he will try to devise some other."

I thought of the malign expression on that cruel white face as it stared in at the window from the outer gloom, and I felt convinced she was right. She had read her man once more. For it was the desperate contorted face of one appalled to discover that a great crime attempted and successfully carried out has failed, by mere accident, of its central intention.