This extract is taken from an uncorrected proof

Blue Shoes and Happiness

Alexander McCall Smith

chapter one

Aunty Emang, Solver of Problems

When you are just the right age, as Mma Ramotswe was, and when you have seen a bit of life, as Mma Ramotswe certainly had, then there are some things that you just know. And one of the things that was well known to Mma Ramotswe, only begetter of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency (Botswana's only ladies' detective agency), was that there were two sorts of problem in this life. Firstly, there were those problems – and they were major ones – about which one could do very little, other than to hope, of course. These were the problems of the land, of fields that were too rocky, of soil that blew away in the wind, or of places where crops would just not thrive for some sickness that lurked in the very earth. But looming greater than anything else there was the problem of drought. It was a familiar feeling in Botswana, this waiting for rain, which often simply did not come, or came too late to save the crops. And then the land, scarred and exhausted, would dry and crack under the relentless sun, and it would seem that nothing short of a miracle would ever bring it to life. But that miracle would eventually arrive, as it always had, and the landscape would turn from brown to green within hours under the kiss of the rain. And there were other colours that would follow the green; yellows, blues, reds would appear in patches across the veld as if great cakes of dye had been crumbled and scattered by an unseen hand. These were the colours of the wild flowers that had been lurking there, throughout the dry season, waiting for the first drops of moisture to awaken them. So at least that sort of problem had its solution, although one often had to wait long, dry months for that solution to arrive.

The other sorts of problems were those which people made for themselves. These were very common, and Mma Ramotswe had seen many of them in the course of her work. Ever since she had set up this agency, armed only with a copy of Clovis Andersen's The Principles of Private Detection – and a great deal of common sense – scarcely a day had gone by without her encountering some problem which people had brought upon themselves. Unlike the first sort of problem – drought and the like – these were difficulties that could have been avoided. If people were only more

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careful, or behaved themselves as they should, then they would not find themselves faced with problems of this sort. But of course people never behaved themselves as they should. “We are all human beings,” Mma Ramotswe had once observed to Mma Makutsi, “and human beings can’t really help themselves. Have you noticed that, Mma? We can’t really help ourselves from doing things that land us in all sorts of trouble.”

Mma Makutsi pondered this for a few moments. In general, she thought that Mma Ramotswe was right about matters of this sort, but she felt that this particular proposition needed a little bit more thought. She knew that there were some people who were unable to make of their lives what they wanted them to be, but then there were many others who were quite capable of keeping themselves under control. In her own case, she thought that she was able to resist temptation quite effectively. She did not consider herself to be particularly strong, but at the same time she did not seem to be markedly weak. She did not drink, nor did she over-indulge in food, or chocolate or anything of that sort. No, Mma Ramotswe’s observation was just a little bit too sweeping and she would have to disagree. But then the thought struck her: could she resist a fine new pair of shoes, even if she knew that she had plenty of shoes already (which was not the case).

“I think you’re right, Mma,” she said. “Everybody has a weakness and most of us are not strong enough to resist it.”

Mma Ramotswe looked at her assistant. She had an idea what Mma Makutsi’s weakness might be, and indeed there might even be more than one.

“Take Mr J.L.B. Matekoni, for example,” said Mma Ramotswe.

“All men are weak,” said Mma Makutsi. “That is well known.” She paused. Now that Mma Ramotswe and Mr J.L.B. Matekoni were married it was possible that Mma Ramotswe had discovered new weaknesses in him. The mechanic was a quiet man, but it was often the mildest-looking people who did the most colourful things, in secret of course. What could Mr J.L.B. Matekoni get up to? It would be very interesting to hear.

“Cake,” said Mma Ramotswe quickly. “That is Mr J.L.B. Matekoni’s great weakness. He cannot help himself when it comes to cake. He can be manipulated very easily if he has a plate of cake in his hand.”

Mma Makutsi laughed. “Mma Potokwani knows that, doesn’t she?” she said. “I have seen her getting Mr J.L.B. Matekoni to do all sorts of things for her just by offering him pieces of that fruit cake of hers.”

Mma Ramotswe rolled her eyes up towards the ceiling. Mma Potokwani, the matron of the orphan farm, was her friend, and when all was said and done she was a good woman, but she was quite ruthless when it came to getting things for the children in her care. She it was who had cajoled Mr J.L.B. Matekoni into fostering the two children who now lived in their house; that had been a good thing, of course, and the children were dearly loved, but Mr J.L.B. Matekoni had not thought the thing

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through and had failed even to consult Mma Ramotswe about the whole matter. And then there were the numerous occasions on which she had prevailed upon him to spend hours of his time fixing that unreliable old water pump at the orphan farm – a pump which dated back to the days of the Protectorate and which should have been retired and put into a museum long ago. And Mma Potokwani achieved all of this because she had a profound understanding of how men worked and what their weaknesses were; that was the secret of so many successful women – they knew about the weaknesses of men.

That conversation with Mma Makutsi had taken place some days before. Now Mma Ramotswe was sitting on the verandah of her house on Zebra Drive, late on a Saturday afternoon, reading the paper. She was the only person in the house at the time, which was unusual for a Saturday. The children were both out: Motholeli had gone to spendthe weekend with a friend whose family lived out at Mogiditishane. This friend's mother had picked her up in her small truck and had stored the wheelchair in the back with some large balls of string that had aroused Mma Ramotswe's interest but which she had not felt it her place to ask about. What could anybody want with such a quantity of string? she wondered. Most people needed very little string, if any, in their lives, but this woman, who was a beautician, seemed to need a great deal. Did beauticians have a special use for string that the rest of us knew nothing about? Mma Ramotswe asked herself. People spoke about face-lifts; did string come into face-lifts?

Puso, the boy, who had caused them such concern over his unpredictable behaviour but who had recently become much more settled, had gone off with Mr J.L.B. Matekoni to see an important football match at the stadium. Mma Ramotswe did not consider it important in the least – she had no interest in football and she could not see how it could possibly matter in the slightest who succeeded in kicking the ball into the goal the most times – but Mr J.L.B. Matekoni clearly thought differently. He was a close follower and supporter of the Zebras, and tried to get to the stadium whenever they were playing. Fortunately the Zebras were doing well at the moment, and this, thought Mma Ramotswe, was a good thing: it was quite possible, she felt, that Mr J.L.B. Matekoni's depression, from which he had made a good recovery, could recur if he, or the Zebras, were to suffer any serious set-back.

So now she was alone in the house, and it seemed very quiet to her. She had made a cup of bush tea and had drunk that thoughtfully, gazing out over the rim of her cup onto the garden to the front of the house. The sausage fruit tree, the moporoto, to which she had never paid much attention, had taken it upon itself to produce abundant fruit this year, and four heavy sausage-shaped pods had appeared at the end of a branch, bending that limb of the tree under their weight. She would have to do something about that, she thought. People knew that it was dangerous to sit under such trees, as the heavy fruit could crack open a skull if it chose to fall when a person was below. That had happened to a friend of her father's many years ago, and the blow that he had received had cracked his skull and damaged his brain, making it difficult for him to speak. She remembered him when she was a child, struggling to make himself understood, and her father had explained that he had sat under a sausage tree and had gone to sleep, and this was the result.

She made a mental note to warn the children and to get Mr J.L.B. Matekoni to knock the fruit down with a pole before anybody was hurt. And then she turned back to her cup of tea and to her perusal of the copy of The Daily News which she had unfolded on her lap. She had read the first four pages of the paper, and gone through the small advertisements with her usual care. There was much to be learned from the small advertisements, with their offers of irrigation pipes for farmers, used vans, jobs of various sorts, plots of land with house construction permission, and bargain furniture. Not only could one keep up to date with what things cost, but there was also a great deal of social detail to be garnered from this source. That day, for instance, there was a statement by a Mr Herbert Motimedi that he would not be responsible for any debts incurred by Mrs Boipelo Motimedi, which effectively informed the public that Herbert and Boipelo were no longer on close terms – which did not surprise Mma Ramotswe, as it happened, because she had always felt that that particular marriage was not a good idea, in view of the fact that Boipelo Motimedi had gone through three husbands before she found Herbert, and two of these previous husbands had been declared bankrupt. She smiled at that and skimmed over the remaining advertisements before turning the page and getting to the column that interested her more than anything else in the newspaper.

Some months earlier, the newspaper had announced to its readers that it would be starting a new feature. “If you have any problems,” the paper said, “then you should write to our new exclusive columnist, Aunty Emang, who will give you advice on what to do. Not only is Aunty Emang a BA from the University of Botswana, but she also has the wisdom of one who has lived fifty-eight years and knows all about life.” This advance notice brought in a flood of letters, and the paper had expanded the amount of space available for Aunty Emang’s sound advice. Soon she had become so popular that she was viewed as something of a national institution and was even named in Parliament when an opposition member brought the house down with the suggestion that the policy proposed by some hapless minister would never have been approved of by Aunty Emang.

Mma Ramotswe had chuckled over that, as she now chuckled over the plight of a young student who had written a passionate love letter to a girl and had delivered it, by mistake, to her sister. “I am not sure what to do,” he had written to Aunty Emang. “I think that the sister is very pleased with what I wrote to her as she is smiling at me all the time. Her sister, the girl I really like, does not know that I like her and maybe her own sister has told her about the letter which she has received from me. So she thinks now that I am in love with her sister, and does not know that I am in love with her. How can I get out of this difficult situation?” And Aunty Emang, with her typical robustness, had written: “Dear Anxious in Molepolole; the simple answer to your question is that you cannot get out of this. If you tell one of the girls that she has received a letter intended for her sister, then she will become very sad. Her sister (the one you really wanted to write to in the first place) will then think that you have been unkind to her sister and made her upset. She will not like you for this. The answer is that you must give up seeing both of these girls and you should spend your time working harder on your examinations. When you have a good job and are earning some money, then you can find another girl to fall in love with. But make sure that you address any letter to that girl very carefully.”

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There were two other letters. One was from a boy of fourteen who had been moved to write to Aunty Emang about being picked upon by his teacher. “I am a hard-working boy,” he wrote. “I do all my schoolwork very carefully and neatly. I never shout in the class or push people about (like most other boys). When my teacher talks, I always pay attention and smile at him. I do not trouble the girls (like most other boys). I am a very good boy in every sense. Yet my teacher always blames me for anything that goes wrong and gives me low marks in my work. I am very unhappy. The more I try to please this teacher, the more he dislikes me. What am I doing wrong?”

Everything, thought Mma Ramotswe. That’s what you are doing wrong: everything. But how could one explain to a fourteen-year-old boy that one should not try too hard; which was what he was doing and which irritated his teacher. It was better, she thought, to be a little bit bad in this life, and not too perfect. If you were too perfect, then you invited exactly this sort of reaction, even if teachers should be above that sort of thing. But what, she wondered, would Aunty Emang say?

“Dear Boy,” wrote Aunty Emang. “Teachers do not like boys like you. You should not say you are not like other boys, or people will think that you are like a girl.” And that is all that Aunty Emang seemed prepared to say on the subject – which was a bit dismissive, thought Mma Ramotswe, and now that poor, over-anxious boy would think that not only did his teacher not like him, but neither did Aunty Emang. But perhaps there was not enough space in the newspaper to go into the matter in any great depth because there was the final letter to be printed, which was not a short one.

“Dear Aunty Emang,” the letter ran. “Four years ago my wife gave birth to our first born. We had been trying for this baby for a long time and we were very happy when he arrived. When it came to choosing a name for this child, my wife suggested that we should call him after my brother, who lives in Mahalapye but who comes to see us every month. She said that this would be a good thing, as my brother does not have a wife himself and it would be good to have a name from a member of the family. I was happy with this and agreed.

“As my son has been growing up, my brother has been very kind to him. He has given him many presents and packets of sweets when he comes to see him. The boy likes his uncle very much and always listens very carefully to the stories that he tells him. My wife thinks that this is a good thing – that a boy should love his kind uncle like this.

“Then somebody said to me: Your son looks very like his uncle. It is almost as if he is his own son. And that made me think for the first time: is my brother the father of my son? I looked at the two of them when they were sitting together and I thought that too. They are very alike.

“I am very fond of my brother. He is my twin, and we have done everything together all our lives. But I do not like the thought that he is the father of my son. I would like to talk to him about this, but I do not want to say anything that may cause trouble in the family. You are a wise lady, Aunty: what do you think I should do?”

Mma Ramotswe finished reading the letter and thought: surely a twin should know how funny this sounds – after all, they are twins. If Aunty Emang had laughed on reading this letter, then it was not apparent in her answer.

"I am very sorry that you are worrying about this," she wrote. "Look at yourself in the mirror. Do you look like your brother?" And once again that was all she had to say on the subject.

Mma Ramotswe reflected on what she had read. It seemed to her that she and Aunty Emang had at least something in common. Both of them dealt with the problems of others and both were expected by those others to provide some solution to their difficulties. But there the similarity ended. Aunty Emang had the easier role: she merely had to give a pithy response to the facts presented to her. In Mma Ramotswe's case, important facts were often unknown and required to be coaxed out of obscurity. And once she had done that, then she had to do rather more than make a clever or dismissive suggestion. She had to see matters through to their conclusion, and these conclusions were not always as simple as somebody like Aunty Emang might imagine.

It would be tempting, she thought, to write to Aunty Emang when next she had a particularly intractable problem to deal with. She would write and ask her what she would do in the circumstances. Here, Aunty Emang, just you solve this one! Yes, it would be interesting to do that, she thought, but completely unprofessional. If you were a private detective, as Mma Ramotswe was, you could not reveal your client's problem to the world; indeed, Clovis Andersen had something to say on this subject. "Keep your mouth shut," he had written in The Principles of Private Detection. "Keep your mouth shut at all times, but at the same time encourage others to do precisely the opposite."

Mma Ramotswe had remembered this advice, and had to agree that even if it sounded like hypocrisy (if it was indeed hypocrisy to do one thing and encourage others to do the opposite), it was at the heart of good detection to get other people to talk. People loved to talk, especially in Botswana, and if you only gave them the chance they would tell you everything that you needed to know. Mma Ramotswe had found this to be true in so many of her cases. If you want the answer to something, then ask somebody. It always worked.

She put the paper aside and marshalled her thoughts. It was all very well sitting there on her verandah thinking about the problems of others, but it was getting late in the afternoon and there were things to do. In the kitchen at the back of the house there was a packet of green beans that needed to be washed and chopped. There was a pumpkin that was not going to cook itself. There were onions to be put in a pan of boiling water and cooked until soft. That was part of being a woman, she thought; one never reached the end. Even if one could sit down and drink a cup of bush tea, or even two cups, one always knew that at the end of the tea somebody was waiting for something. Children or men were waiting to be fed; a dirty floor cried out to be washed; a crumpled skirt called for the iron. And so it would continue. Tea was just a temporary solution to the cares of the world, although it certainly helped. Perhaps she should write and tell Aunty Emang that. Most problems could be diminished by the drinking of tea and the thinking through of things that could be done while tea

was being drunk. And even if that did not solve problems, at least it could put them off for a little while, which we sometimes needed to do, we really did.

chapter two

Correct and Incorrect Ways of Dealing with a Snake

The following Monday morning, the performance of the Zebras in the game against Zambia on Saturday afternoon was the first topic of discussion, at least among the men.

"I knew that we would win," said Charlie, the elder apprentice. "I knew it all the time. And we did. We won."

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni smiled. He was not given to triumphalism, unlike his two apprentices, who always revelled in the defeat of any opposing team. He realised that if you looked at the overall results, the occasional victory tended to be overshadowed by a line of defeats. It was difficult, being a small country – at least in terms of numbers of people – to compete with more populous lands. If the Kenyans wanted to select a football team, then they had many millions of people to choose from, and the same was true, and even more so, of the South Africans. But Botswana, even if it was a land as wide as the sky and even if it was blessed by those great sunburned spaces, had fewer than two million people from whom to select a football team. That made it difficult to stand up to the big countries, no matter how hard they tried. That applied only to sport, of course. When it came to everything else, then he knew, and was made proud by the knowledge, that Botswana could hold its own – and more. It owed no money; it broke no rules. But of course it was not perfect; every country has done some things of which its people might feel shame. But at least people knew what these things were and could talk about them openly, which made a difference.

But football was special.

"Yes," said Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. "The Zebras played very well. I felt very proud."

"Ow!" exclaimed the younger apprentice, reaching for the lever that would expose the engine of a car that had been brought in for service. "Ow! Did you see those people from Lusaka crying outside the stadium?"

"Anybody can lose," cautioned Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. "You need to remember that every time you win." He thought of adding, and anybody can cry, even a man, but knew that this would be wasted on the apprentices.

"But we didn't lose, Boss," said Charlie. "We won."

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni sighed. He had been tempted to abandon the task of teaching these apprentices anything about life, but persisted nonetheless. He took the view

that an apprentice-master should do more than show his apprentice how to change an oil filter and repair brakes. He should show them, preferably by example, how to behave as an honourable mechanic. Anybody can be taught to fix a car – did the Japanese not have machines which could build cars without anybody being there to operate them? – but not everybody could meet the standards of an honourable mechanic. Such a person could give advice to the owner of a car; such a person would tell the truth about what was wrong with a car; such a person would think about the best interests of the owner and act accordingly. That was something which had to be passed on from generation to generation of mechanics, and it was not always easy to do that.

He looked at the apprentices. They were due to go off for another spell of training at the Automotive Trades College, but he wondered if it did them any good. He received reports from the college as to how they performed in the academic parts of their training. These reports did not make good reading; although they passed the examinations – just – their lack of seriousness, and their sloppiness, was always commented upon. What have I done to deserve apprentices like this? Mr J.L.B. Matekoni asked himself. He had friends who also took on apprentices, and they often commented on how lucky they were to get young men who very quickly developed sufficient skill to earn their pay, and more. Indeed one of these friends, who had taken on a young man from Lobatse, had freely admitted that this young man now knew more than he did about cars and was also very good with the customers. It struck Mr J.L.B. Matekoni as very bad luck that he should get two incompetent apprentices at the same time. To get one would have been understandable bad luck; to get two seemed to be a singular misfortune.

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni looked at his watch. There was no point in wasting time thinking about how things might be if the world were otherwise. There was work to be done that day and he had an errand which would take him away for much of the morning. Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi had gone off to the post office and the bank and would not be back for a while. It was the end of the month and the banks were always far too busy at such times. It would be better, he thought, if people's pay days were staggered. Some could be paid at the end of the month, as was traditional, but others could get their wages at other times. He had even thought of writing to the Chamber of Commerce about this, but had decided that there was very little point; there were some things that seemed to be so set in stone that nothing would ever change them. Pay day, he thought, was one of those.

He glanced at his watch again. He would have to go off shortly for a meeting with a man who was thinking of selling his inspection ramp. Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors already had one of these, but Mr J.L.B. Matekoni thought that it would be useful to have a second one, particularly if he could get it at a good price. But if he went off on this errand, then the apprentices would be left in sole charge of the garage until Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi arrived. That might be all right, but it might not, and Mr J.L.B. Matekoni was worried about it.

He looked at the car which was being slowly raised on the ramp. It was a large white car which belonged to Trevor Mwamba, who had just been appointed Anglican Bishop of Botswana. Mr J.L.B. Matekoni knew the new bishop well – it was he who had married Mma Ramotswe and him under that tree at the orphan farm, with the

choir singing and the sky so high and empty – and would not normally have let the apprentices loose on his car, but it seemed that there was very little choice now. The bishop wanted his car back that afternoon if at all possible, as he had a meeting to attend in Molepolole. There was nothing seriously wrong with the car, which had been brought in for a routine service, but he always liked to check the brakes of any vehicle before he returned it, and there might be some work to be done there. Brakes were the most important part of a car, in Mr J.L.B. Matekoni's view. If an engine did not work at all, then admittedly that was annoying, but it was not actually dangerous. You could hardly hurt yourself if you were stationary, but you could certainly hurt yourself if you were going at fifty miles an hour and were unable to stop. And the Molepolole road, as everybody knew, had a problem with cattle straying onto it. The cattle were meant to stay on the other side of the fence – that was the rule – but cattle were a law unto themselves and always seemed to think that there was better grass to be had on the other side of the road.

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni decided that he would have to leave the bishop's car to the mercies of the apprentices but that he would check up on their work when he came back just before lunchtime. He called the older apprentice over and gave him instructions.

"Be very careful now," he said. "That is Bishop Mwamba's car. I do not want slapdash work done on it. I want everything done very carefully."

Charlie stared down at the ground. "I am always careful, Boss," he muttered resentfully. "When did you ever see me being careless?"

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni opened his mouth to speak, but then thought better of it. It was no use engaging with these boys, he decided. Whatever he said would be no use; they simply would not take it in. He turned away and tore off a piece of paper towel on which to wipe his hands.

"Mma Ramotswe will be here soon," he said. "She and Mma Makutsi are off on some business or other. But until they come in, you are in charge. Is that all right? You look after everything."

Charlie smiled. "A1, Boss," he said. "Trust me."

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni raised an eyebrow. "Mmm," he began, but said no more. Running a business involved anxieties – that was inevitable. It was bad enough worrying about two feckless young employees; how much more difficult it must be to run a very large company with hundreds of people working for you. Or running a country – that must be a terribly demanding job, and Mr J.L.B. Matekoni wondered how it was possible for people such as prime ministers and presidents to sleep at night with all the problems of the world weighing down upon them. It could not be an easy job being President of Botswana, and if Mr J.L.B. Matekoni had a choice between living in State House or being the proprietor of Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, he was in no doubt about which one of these options he would choose. That is not to say that it would be uncomfortable occupying State House, with its cool rooms and its shaded gardens. That would be a very pleasant existence, but how

difficult it must be for the President when everybody who came to see you, or almost everybody, wanted something: please do this, sir; please do that; please allow this, that or the next thing. Mind you, his own existence was not all that different; just about everybody he saw wanted him to fix their car, preferably that very day. Mma Potokwani was an example of that, with her constant requests to attend to bits and pieces of malfunctioning machinery out at the orphan farm. Mr J.L.B. Matekoni thought that if he could not resist Mma Potokwani and her demands, then he would not be a very good candidate for the presidency of Botswana. Of course, the President had probably not met Mma Potokwani and even he might find it a bit difficult to stand up to that most forceful of ladies, with her fruit cake and her way of wheedling things out of people.

The apprentices did not have long to themselves that morning. Shortly after Mr J.L.B. Matekoni had left, they had found themselves comfortable seats on two old upturned oil drums from which they were able to observe the passers-by on the road outside. Young women who walked past, aware of the eyes upon them, might look away or affect a lack of interest, but would hear the young men's appreciative comments nonetheless. This was fine sport for the apprentices, and they were disappointed by the sudden appearance of Mma Ramotswe's tiny white van only ten minutes or so after the departure of Mr J.L.B. Matekoni.

"What were you doing sitting about like that?" shouted out Mma Makutsi, as she climbed out of the passenger seat. "Don't think we didn't see you."

Charlie looked at her with an expression of injured innocence. "We are as entitled to a tea break as much as anybody else," he replied. "You don't work all the time, do you? You drink tea too. I've seen you."

"It's a little bit early for your tea break," suggested Mma Ramotswe mildly, looking at her wrist-watch. "But no matter. I'm sure that you have lots of work to do now."

"They're so lazy," muttered Mma Makutsi, under her breath. "The moment Mr J.L.B. Matekoni goes anywhere, they down tools."

Mma Ramotswe smiled. "They're still very young," she said. "They still need supervision. All young men are like that."

"Especially useless ones like these," said Mma Makutsi, as they entered the office. "And to think that when they finish their apprenticeships – whenever that will be – they will be let loose on the public. Imagine that, Mma. Imagine Charlie with his own business. Imagine driving into a garage and finding Charlie in control!"

Mma Ramotswe said nothing. She had tried to persuade Mma Makutsi to be a bit more tolerant of the two young men, but it seemed that her assistant had something of a blind spot. As far as she was concerned, the apprentices could do no right, and nothing could be said to convince her otherwise.

The two went into the office. Mma Ramotswe walked over to the window behind her desk and opened it wide. It was a warm day, and already the heat had built up in the

small room; the window at least allowed the movement of air, even if the air itself was the hot breath of the Kalahari. While Mma Ramotswe stood before the window, gazing up into the cloudless sky, Mma Makutsi filled the kettle for the first cup of tea of the morning. She then turned round and began to pull her chair out from where she had tucked it under her desk. And that was the point at which she screamed – a scream that cut through the air and sent a small white gecko scuttling for its life across the ceiling boards.

Mma Ramotswe spun round, to see the other woman standing quite still, her face frozen in fear.

"Sn . . ." she stuttered, and then, "Snake, Mma Ramotswe! Snake!"

For a moment Mma Ramotswe did nothing. All those years ago in Mochudi, she had been taught by her father that with snakes the important thing to do was not to make sudden movements. A sudden movement, only too natural of course, could frighten a snake into striking, which most snakes, he said, were reluctant to do.

"They do not want to waste their venom," he had told her. "And remember that they are as frightened of us as we are of them – possibly even more so."

But no snake could have been as terrified as was Mma Makutsi when she saw the hood of the cobra at her feet sway slowly from side to side. She knew that she should avert her eyes, as such snakes can spit their venom into the eyes of their target with uncanny accuracy; she knew that, but she still found her gaze fixed to the small black eyes of the snake, so tiny and so filled with menace.

"A cobra," she whispered to Mma Ramotswe. "Under my desk. A cobra."

Mma Ramotswe moved slowly away from the window. As she did so, she picked up the telephone directory that had been lying on her desk. It was the closest thing to hand and she could, if necessary, throw it at the snake to distract it from Mma Makutsi. This was not to prove necessary. Sensing the vibration made by the footfall, the snake suddenly lowered its hood and slid away from Mma Makutsi's desk, heading for a large waste-paper bin which stood at the far side of the room. This was the signal for Mma Makutsi to recover her power of movement, and she threw herself towards the door. Mma Ramotswe followed, and soon the two women were safely outside the office door, which they slammed behind them.

The two apprentices looked up from their work on Bishop Mwamba's car.

"There's a snake in there," screamed Mma Makutsi. "A very big snake."

The two young men ran across from the car to join the shaken women.

"What sort of snake?" asked Charlie, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. "A mamba?"

"No," said Mma Makutsi. "A cobra. With a big hood – this big. Right at my feet. Ready to strike."

"You are very lucky, Mma," said the younger apprentice. "If that snake had struck, then you might be late by now. The late Mma Makutsi."

Mma Makutsi looked at him scornfully. "I know that," she said. "But I did not panic, you see. I stood quite still."

"That was the right thing to do, Mma," said Charlie. "But now we can go in there and kill this snake. In a couple of minutes your office will be safe again."

He turned to the other apprentice, who had picked up a couple of large spanners and who was now reaching out to hand one to him. Armed with these tools, they slowly approached the door and edged it open.

"Be careful," shouted Mma Makutsi. "It was a very big snake."

"Look near the waste-paper basket," added Mma Ramotswe. "It's over there somewhere."

Charlie peered into the office. He was standing at the half-open door and could not see the whole room, but he could see the basket and the floor about it and, yes, he could make out something curved around its base, something that moved slightly even as his eye fell upon it.

"There," he whispered to the other apprentice. "Over there."

The young man craned his neck forward and saw the shape upon the floor. Letting out a curious half-yell, he hurled the spanner across the room, missing the target, but hitting the wall immediately behind the basket. As the spanner fell to the ground, the snake reared up, its hood again extended, facing the source of the danger. Charlie now threw his spanner, which also struck the wall but in this case fell in such a way that it hit the end of the snake's tail. The tail whipped round as the snake struggled to find its balance. Again the head swayed menacingly, the tongue darting in and out as the reptile sought to make sense of the noise and danger of its surroundings.

Mma Ramotswe clutched Mma Makutsi's arm. "I'm not sure if these boys . . ."

She did not finish the sentence. In their excitement they had not noticed a vehicle draw up and a sunburned young man with fair hair step out.

"Well, Mma Ramotswe," said the man. "What's going on here?"

Mma Ramotswe turned to face their visitor. "Oh Mr Whitson," she said. "You have come just in time. There is a snake in there. The apprentices are trying to kill it."

Neil Whitson shook his head. "There's no need to kill snakes," he said. "Let me take a look."

He walked up to the door of the office and nodded to the apprentices to stand aside.

"Don't frighten it," he said. "It just makes it worse if you frighten it."

"It is a very large snake," said Charlie resentfully. "We have to kill it, Rra."

Neil looked in through the door and saw the cobra curled at the foot of the waste-paper basket. He turned to Charlie.

"Do you have a stick here?" he said. "Any stick will do. Just a stick."

The younger apprentice went off, while Charlie and Neil continued to watch the snake.

"We will have to kill it," Charlie said. "We cannot have a snake here. What if it bites those ladies over there? What if it bites Mma Ramotswe?"

"It'll only bite Mma Ramotswe if it feels threatened," said Neil. "And snakes only feel threatened if people tread on them or . . ." he paused, before adding, "or throw things at them."

The younger apprentice now returned with a longish stick from the jacaranda tree which grew at the edge of the garage plot. Neil took this from him and edged his way slowly into the office. The snake watched him, part of its body raised, the hood half up. With a sudden movement, Neil flipped the stick over the snake's back and pressed the neck of the snake down against the floor. Then, leaning forward, he gripped the writhing cobra behind the head and picked it up. The lashing tail, searching for purchase, was soon firmly held in his other hand.

"There," he said. "Now, Charlie, a sack is what we need. You must have a sack somewhere."

When Mr J.L.B. Matekoni returned an hour later, he was in a good mood. The inspection ramp which he had viewed was in good condition and the owner was not asking very much for it. It was, in fact, a bargain, and Mr J.L.B. Matekoni had already paid a deposit on the purchase. His pleasure in his transaction was evident from his smile but this was hardly noticed by the apprentices as they greeted him in the workshop.

"We've had big excitement here, Boss," said Charlie. "A snake got into Mma Ramotswe's office. A very large snake, with a head like this. Yes, this big."

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni gave a start. "Mma Ramotswe's office," he stuttered. "Is she all right?"

"Oh she's all right," said Charlie. "She was lucky that we were around. If we hadn't been here, then I don't know . . ."

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni looked at the younger apprentice, as if for confirmation.

"Yes, Rra," said the young man. "It is a good thing that we were here. We were able to deal with the snake."

"And where is it?" asked Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. "Where have you thrown it? You must know that if you leave one of these snakes lying around, its mate will come to seek it out. Then we will have trouble."

The younger apprentice glanced at Charlie. "We have had it taken away," said Charlie. "That man from Mokolodi, the one you trade engine parts with. He has taken it away."

"Mr Whitson?" asked Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. "He has taken it?"

Charlie nodded. "You don't need to kill snakes," he said. "It is best just to let them loose. You know that, don't you, Boss?"

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni did not reply. Striding across to the office door, he knocked and entered. Inside, seated at their desks, Mma Ramotswe and Mma Makutsi looked up at him expectantly.

"You have heard about it?" asked Mma Ramotswe. "You heard about the snake?"

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni nodded. "I have heard all about it," he said. "I am only happy that you have not been hurt, Mma Ramotswe. That is all that I am interested in."

"And me?" asked Mma Makutsi from her desk. "What about me, Rra?"

"Oh, I am pleased that you were not bitten, Mma," said Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. "I am very pleased about that. I would not want either of you to be bitten by a snake."

Mma Ramotswe shook her head. "It was a very close thing for Mma Makutsi," she said. "And we were very lucky that your friend happened to come by. He is a man who knows all about snakes. You should have seen him pick it up, Mr J.L.B. Matekoni. He picked it up just as if it were a tshongololo or something like that."

Mr J.L.B. Matekoni looked confused. "But I thought that the boys dealt with it," he said. "Charlie told me that . . ."

Mma Makutsi let out a peal of laughter. "Them? Oh, Rra, you should have seen them. They threw spanners at it and made it all angry. They were no use at all. No use."

Mma Ramotswe smiled at her husband. "They did their best, of course, but . . ." She broke off. Nobody was perfect, she thought, and she herself had not handled the situation very well. None of us knows how we will cope with snakes until the moment arises, and then most of us find out that we do not do it very well. Snakes were one of the tests which life sent for us, and there was no telling how we might respond until the moment arrived. Snakes and men. These were the things sent to try women, and the outcome was not always what we might want it to be.

Published by Polygon / Birlinn Ltd