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Precious and Grace

Written by Alexander McCall Smith

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Precious and Grace

ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH



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Chapter One

A Good Friend Is Like a Hill

Driving to the office in her battered white van, down the Tlokweng Road, past the stand of whispering gum trees, Mma Ramotswe, founder and owner of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, allowed her mind to wander. It was easy for your thoughts to drift when you were doing something you did every day – such as driving down the Tlokweng Road, or spooning tea into the teapot while you waited for the kettle to boil, or standing in your garden looking up at the wide sky of Botswana. These were all activities that did not require total and undivided concentration, although her husband, that great *garagiste*, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, stressed that driving demanded your whole attention. Mma Ramotswe, though, felt it was perfectly possible to drive carefully and yet at the same time let the mind wander. There was not a driver in the country, she

imagined, who did not think of other things while driving – unless of course there were, somewhere or other, people who had nothing at all to think about.

That morning she thought of what she would cook for dinner. She thought of letters she might receive and of the replies she should write. She thought of how she knew this road so well that she could drive it blindfold if necessary, and still get to her destination unscathed, or largely unscathed. She thought of how month by month, year by year, the traffic had got worse, as traffic always seemed to do. Was there nowhere on this earth where traffic got better; where the lines of cars thinned; where one could park virtually anywhere, as one could in the old days? And she thought of the people in her life, the people she would see that day, and the people she would not.

The people in her life . . . These, she felt, were of two sorts. Whatever further classifications might suggest themselves, at the outset people could be divided into those who were late and those who were still with us. The ranks of the late were legion, but each of us had a small number of late people who meant something special to us and whom we would always remember. She had never known her mother, who had died when she was still an infant, but her father, Obed Ramotswe, she had known well and still missed as much as ever. Every day she thought of him, of his kindness and his wisdom, of his ability to judge cattle – and men – with such a perceptive eye; of the love he had borne for her and of how his passing had been like the putting out of the sun itself.

There were other late people, of course: there was Seretse Khama, first President of Botswana and patriot; there was Mma Makutsi's brother, Richard, who had been called to higher things – as Mma Makutsi put it – from his bed of sickness; there was her favourite aunt, whose cheerful and irreverent remarks

had been a source of such joy; there was that unfortunate man in Mochudi who had stepped on a cobra; there were so many others.

That was the group of late people. Then there was the other group, made up of those who were not late; who were, in some cases, only too obviously present, who touched her life in some way or other. These were her family, her friends, her colleagues, and finally those who were neither friends nor colleagues.

She considered herself blessed with her family. Some people had family members who were always burdensome, who wanted things, who found fault, who complained about this, that and the next thing. Or they had family members who were an embarrassment – who prompted the making of comments such as, 'Well, he's not all that close a relative – very distant, in fact,' or even, 'We have the same name, yes, but I don't think we're related.'

She had no need to say any of that. She had a fine husband, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. She had various aunts in villages outside Gaborone, she had several cousins whom she always enjoyed seeing; and of course she had the two children, Motholeli and Puso, who, although technically foster children, were considered by everybody, including Mma Ramotswe and Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, to be her own. She had lost a baby – but that had been a long time ago and in so far as one could ever get over such a thing, she had done so. She could now think of that baby without being overwhelmed by sorrow; she could think of the brief moment during which she had held her child, that tiny scrap of humanity, and of the inexpressible, overwhelming love she had felt. She could think of that now without her heart becoming a cold stone within her.

To start with friends: prominent amongst these was Mma Sylvia Potokwani, matron and stout defender – in every

sense – of the orphans entrusted to her care. Mma Ramotswe had known Mma Potokwani for many years and their friendship had been firm throughout, although she could not recall when, and in what circumstances, they had first met.

'But you must remember where you met her first,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'She is not one of those people one could easily forget.'

That was, of course, true: Mma Potokwani was certainly not easily forgotten, but still Mma Ramotswe could not remember any occasion when somebody had said, 'Mma Ramotswe, this is Mma Potokwani.'

'I really do not remember, Rra,' she said. 'I just feel that we have known one another forever. She has always been there – like Kgali Hill or the Limpopo River. Do you remember the first time you saw Kgali Hill?'

'But that's quite different, Mma,' he had said. 'You can't compare Mma Potokwani to Kgali Hill.'

Mma Ramotswe considered this, and the more she thought about it the more she felt that one *could* compare the redoubtable matron to Kgali Hill. Both were solid; both were unchanging; both would not be budged from where they stood.

Of course there were other friends – Mma Ramotswe was well known in Gaborone and could rarely make a trip to the shops without bumping into somebody she knew, and most of these would be friends of one sort or another. There were old friends whom she had known all her life – people with whom she had grown up in Mochudi – and there were newer friends, those whom she had met during her years in Gaborone: neighbours, friends of friends, fellow attenders at the Anglican Cathedral, members of the Botswana Ladies' Winter Blanket Committee. This last group met in the months immediately preceding winter and planned fundraising events for their annual blanket appeal.

People forgot that Botswana had a winter and that there would be people, poor people, who felt the cold. Just because a country was drenched in sunlight did not mean that the temperature could not drop when the sun went down, especially on the fringes of the Kalahari. On a winter night, with the sky clear and filled with white fields of stars, the cold might penetrate to your very bones, as a dry cold can so easily do. And that was when you needed blankets to wrap yourself in, to make a cocoon of warmth to see you through to the morning.

So there were the ladies of the Blanket Committee, and they were all her good friends, as were the ladies who attended to her at the supermarket bakery and who always kept the freshest bread for Mma Ramotswe even though she protested that she did not want any special treatment and would take her chances like anybody else. Then there was the man in the Vehicle Licensing Department who invariably clapped his hands with delight when Mma Ramotswe came in to attend to business on behalf of Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, and who would shout out, 'My favourite lady has just come into the office! Oh, this is a very happy day for the Vehicle Licensing Department!' That had embarrassed her at first, but she had become accustomed to it and took it in her stride, laughing along with her admirer's colleagues. She realised that if you worked in the Vehicle Licensing Department then you might need your moments of levity, and if she could provide those just by stepping in through the door, then she was happy to do so.

Friends were different from colleagues, of course, although colleagues could also be friends. Being self-employed, Mma Ramotswe did not have a large number of colleagues; in fact, she only had one full-time, permanent colleague, so to speak, although she had a part-time colleague in the shape of Mr Polopetsi and another, if one took a liberal view of the

definition, in the shape of Charlie. Fanwell, the former apprentice and now assistant mechanic, was not really a colleague in the strict sense, as he worked in the adjacent garage owned by Mma Ramotswe's husband and was really Mr J. L. B. Matekoni's colleague rather than hers.

The full-time colleague was, as everybody knew, Mma Makutsi – Grace Makutsi, former secretary, graduate *magna cum laude* of the Botswana Secretarial College, where she achieved the mark of ninety-seven per cent in the final examinations; born in the remote and unexceptional town of Bobonong; survivor . . . Yes, Mma Makutsi had every right to be called a survivor. She had survived poverty; she had survived the battle for an education; she had lived with a slightly difficult skin and with the necessity of large spectacles; she had struggled for everything she possessed, and at last her ship had come home, unambiguously and magnificently, when she had met and married Mr Phuti Radiphuti, a kind man, and a wealthy one too, being the proprietor of the Double Comfort Furniture Store. And together they had had a baby, Itumelang Clovis Radiphuti, a fine young son, and the only purring baby in Botswana.

That was Mma Makutsi, and Mma Ramotswe, thinking of her now, could only smile at her ways, which were well known, and perfectly tolerable once you became used to them. Mr Polopetsi, her part-time colleague, was in awe of Mma Makutsi. He was a very mild man, a chemist with a chequered career, who worked in the agency on a voluntary basis because he needed something to do. He had now found a job as a part-time chemistry teacher at Gaborone Secondary School, a job that brought in very little money as it rarely required more than a few hours of his time each week. But the pay did not matter: his wife, a senior civil servant, was the main breadwinner. She preferred her husband to be occupied, and so was happy for him to spend his time on

his poorly paid teaching job and his unpaid detective work in the agency.

And it suited the agency too. 'Mr Polopetsi may not be a great detective,' observed Mma Makutsi. 'But he does understand the scientific method and the need for evidence. That is important, Mma Ramotswe.'

Charlie, by contrast, understood very little – at least in Mma Makutsi's view. He had been an apprentice in the garage, but had lost his job when Mr J. L. B. Matekoni had been obliged to cut staff. That had been done only when all other avenues had been explored; money was tight, and many cars were now being taken to the larger garages where their complicated needs could be addressed by specialist equipment.

'They are not making cars for people any longer,' said Mr J. L. B. Matekoni. 'They are making them for computers. If something goes wrong, they just take out the part and throw it away. Nobody can fix anything these days.'

Charlie had his faults. He was impetuous, being given to making inflammatory remarks in the presence of Mma Makutsi, and his thoughts seemed to dwell almost exclusively on girls. In spite of all this, though, Mma Ramotswe had been unwilling to see him cast adrift and had employed him in the agency as what Mma Makutsi insisted on calling a Junior Probationary Apprentice Detective. Her insistence on this humiliating title rankled with Charlie, but he was grateful for such scraps of status as the job gave him and even Mma Makutsi had to admit that he was making an effort. There was a long way to go, though, and she was watching him.

Those, then, were the categories of friends and colleagues. That left those who were neither friends nor colleagues, a group that in turn was divided into those who were simply unknown – people who clearly existed but who had yet to be met – and those

who were known. It was this last set that was most delicate and troublesome, as it embraced those whom some might assume were enemies. That was not a word that Mma Ramotswe liked. She did not think of others in this way, as from an early age she had been imbued with the message that one should love one's enemies, and if one loved one's enemies then surely they ceased to be enemies. That message of love had been taught at Sunday School in Mochudi, when, along with thirty other children, the young Precious Ramotswe had been taught to recite the precepts of the good life. You respected your father and mother, along with a large number of others including teachers, elderly people, government officials and policemen. You were not greedy, envious, or impatient, although you might feel all of these with some regularity. You never cast the first stone nor did you notice the mote in your neighbour's eye when you so clearly had a plank in your own. And of course you forgave your enemies.

Mma Ramotswe had tried to live according to these rules, and had, for the most part, succeeded. But if asked whether there was anybody who might be unfriendly towards her, she had to admit that yes, there was somebody to whom that description might be applied, although she had not asked for her enmity and had never sought to perpetuate it. This person, Violet Sephotho, was regrettably an opponent, but only because she – not Mma Ramotswe – had decided to adopt that position, and were peace to be offered Mma Ramotswe would willingly accede. And there was another thing: although this person was hostile to Mma Ramotswe, her real target was Mma Makutsi, who had no compunction at all in declaring that between her and Violet Sephotho there existed a state of hostility that was to all intents and purposes undeclared war.

Violet Sephotho had been at the Botswana Secretarial College at the same time as Mma Makutsi. Their respective attitudes

towards the college could not have been more different: for Mma Makutsi the college represented the Parnassus to which she had long aspired – the institution that would deliver her from her life of poverty and struggle and equip her for a career in an office. For that she was profoundly and unconditionally grateful. She was completely committed to her studies the day they began; she never missed a lecture, and always occupied a seat in the front row; she completed every exercise and assignment on time and absorbed every piece of advice given by her tutors. At lectures she listened in respectful silence, writing everything down in the blue-bound notebooks that cost more than she could really afford – the purchase of a new notebook meant no lunch for a week; buying a textbook meant the forgoing of transport for at least a month. And when she graduated, on that unforgettable day, amidst the ululations of the proud aunts, she swore to herself that she would never forget the debt of gratitude she owed to the college and its staff.

Violet Sephotho felt none of this loyalty. She had taken up her place at the college because nothing else had turned up. Her examination results at school were indifferent, and had she applied to the University of Botswana she would have been summarily rejected. She might have secured a place on a vocational course, perhaps being able to train as a nursing auxiliary in a clinic or as a hospitality assistant in the hotel trades school, but both of these involved commitment and willingness to work, which she simply did not have. For Violet, the Botswana Secretarial College was distinctly beneath her dignity – it was a place more suited to dim provincial nobodies like Grace Makutsi than to the likes of her. The college lecturers were, in her view, a sad bunch – people who had obviously not found real jobs in commerce or industry and who were content to spend their time drumming useless information into the heads of young women

who would never be more than the second-rate occupants of dead-end jobs.

Mma Makutsi had been scandalised by Violet's behaviour. She found it hard to believe that anybody could so blatantly paint her nails during accountancy lectures, blowing ostentatiously on her handiwork to dry it more rapidly even while the lecturer was explaining the principles of double-entry bookkeeping. Nor could she believe that anybody would keep up a running conversation with like-minded companions, discussing the merits of various men, while no less a person than the vice-principal of the college tried to demonstrate how a properly devised system of filing could save a lot of trouble and anxiety in the future.

Violet eventually graduated on the same day as Mma Makutsi, but while the latter covered herself in glory and was singled out by the principal herself in her address, Violet scraped past with a bare fifty per cent, the lowest pass mark possible, and only awarded, everybody suspected, because the college authorities could not face the prospect of Violet repeating the course and being on their books for another six months.

In the years that followed, Violet Sephotho lost no opportunity to put down or decry Mma Makutsi. And when Mma Makutsi was taken on by the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, she transferred her venom to Mma Ramotswe and the agency in general.

'The so-called No. 1 so-called Ladies' so-called Detective Agency,' Violet publicly sneered. 'No. 1 Disaster, more likely, with that Grace – I call her Graceless! – Makutsi from somewhere up in the sticks. Bobonong, I believe – what a place! And that stupid fat lady who calls herself Precious but is really just a big waste of space, thinking she can solve people's problems! Far better go to a decent witch doctor and get him to sell you some powder than take your issues to that dump! Boring! Big time!'

Mma Ramotswe was aware of all this, and bore it with patience. She had always believed that people who were nasty or unkind to others were only like that because there was something wrong in their lives, and that people who had something wrong in their lives were not to be despised or hated, but were to be pitied. So although Violet Sephotho was in one sense an enemy, this was not of Mma Ramotswe's making and she would gladly have had it otherwise. Mma Makutsi was not of this view. She thought that Violet Sephotho was the way she was because that was how she was ordained to be.

'You cannot make a jackal into a hyena,' said Mma Makutsi. 'We are what we are. That is just the way it is.'

'But sometimes we can change,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'That is well known.'

'I do not think so, Mma,' said Mma Makutsi. 'And by the way, Mma Ramotswe, when you say that something is well known, I think that you are just saying what you think. Then you say that it is well known so that people will not argue with you.'

'That's not true,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'But let us not argue, Mma, because I believe it's time for tea and the more time you spend arguing, the less tea you can drink.'

Mma Makutsi smiled. 'Now *that*, Mma, I think, is certainly well known.'

Chapter Two

The Dog Was Almost Late

Thoughts about friends and colleagues could – and did – occupy the entire journey from Zebra Drive to the offices of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. But now, as she parked her white van behind the building they shared with Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors, Mma Ramotswe stopped thinking about the people in her life and began to contemplate the tasks of the day ahead. There were several complicated invoices to draw up, and that, she thought, would take the entire morning. Some weeks ago at Mma Makutsi's instigation the agency had introduced a new system of calculating fees. In the past they had simply charged what they thought a reasonable sum – often, Mma Makutsi observed, on the low side. This was based on the complexity of the enquiry and a rough – indeed, very rough – idea of how much time the matter had taken. Few clients had

complained about this but Mma Makutsi had decided that such a system was no longer acceptable in an age of transparency, when people wanted to know exactly what they were being charged for.

'The days of just thinking of a figure are over,' she pronounced. 'These days, people charge by the hour – by the minute, in many cases. That is the way the world is going. Itemised billing is what they call it, Mma.'

Mma Ramotswe had not been enthusiastic. 'I do not like those detailed bills. "For answering the telephone, 50 pula", and so on. That is not the way things were done in the old Botswana.'

'But the old Botswana is no more, Mma,' retorted Mma Makutsi. 'This is the new Botswana now. You cannot live in the past.'

Mma Ramotswe wanted to challenge her on that. Why, she wanted to ask, could one not live in the past? If enough people were determined to live in the past, then surely that would keep the past alive. You could go to an old-fashioned hairdresser who braided hair in the way in which they used to braid hair in the past; you could go to a doctor who dressed and behaved as doctors did in your childhood, wearing a white coat and carrying a stethoscope, as doctors used to do; you could patronise a butcher who sold old-fashioned cuts of meat and then wrapped them up in brown paper parcels and tied these parcels neatly up with white string, as all butchers used to be taught to do; you could go to a bank where there was an old-fashioned bank manager who actually knew your name, as bank managers once did . . .

But she kept these thoughts to herself. Had she expressed them, she was sure that Mma Makutsi would have made much of it and gone on at great length about modern practices and the need to be competitive. On that point – the need for