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The Cleverness of Ladies

Written by Alexander McCall Smith

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The Cleverness of Ladies

Alexander McCall Smith



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The Cleverness of Ladies

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It was a slack time at the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency, the only detective agency in Botswana. It would be wrong to say that nothing was going on – Mma Ramotswe, who had founded the agency to deal with the problems of ladies (and others), knew that something was always happening. People were always getting themselves into unfortunate scrapes; they had always done this, and human nature showed no sign of changing. No, the reason why things were quiet was that nobody was bringing anything to the attention of the small detective agency at the back of Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors.

The garage business was owned by Mma Ramotswe's husband, Mr J. L. B. Matekoni, who everyone agreed was the finest mechanic in Botswana. She had been engaged to Mr J. L. B. Matekoni for rather a long time, and eventually he had married her. But some say

this was only as a result of clever plotting by the cunning matron of the Tlokweng Orphan Farm, Mma Potokwani.

Yet such a view was uncharitable. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni was sometimes a bit indecisive, and marriage proved to be only one of the things that he was indecisive about. The important thing was that he did marry Mma Ramotswe eventually, and he had now moved into her house on Zebra Drive, a fine house with a shady veranda and a good vegetable garden to the rear.

They were very fortunate, and not a day went by without Mma Ramotswe reminding herself of this good fortune. When things were slack in the office, as they now were, she reminded herself of her good fortune rather more frequently. It was a very good way of preventing feelings of frustration, especially when there was nothing to do but look at the small white gecko which ran up the office wall and then, defying gravity, across the ceiling boards. But the trouble with thinking about one's good fortune was that, after a while, one began to wish to do something else, and that, of course, depended on the arrival of a client.

'Mma Ramotswe?' The voice which interrupted her was that of her assistant, Mma Makutsi. She

had been busying herself filing papers, and was now looking intently at her employer. 'You look as if you're daydreaming.'

Mma Ramotswe nodded. 'I was, I suppose.'

'There is nothing wrong with that,' said Mma Makutsi. 'When you have nothing better to do.'

'Well,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'I don't.'

'Except now you do,' said Mma Makutsi. 'There is somebody coming, Mma. I can see him out there. He is coming to the door.'

Mma Ramotswe picked up a piece of paper and began to look at it closely. It did no harm for clients to think that one was busy, even when one was not. If the client thought that one had nothing to do, his confidence in the agency might be dented and that, in the long run, would not help. In the giving of advice to other people – which was what being a private detective was usually all about – it was important that the client believe in the detective. So there was nothing wrong, she felt, in picking up a piece of paper and pretending to be very busy reading it. Even if the paper was no more than a letter from one of Mr J. L. B. Matekoni's suppliers, saying that a set of spark plugs which he had ordered for the garage had now been received and was awaiting collection.

Mma Makutsi ushered in the client and pointed to the visitors' chair. 'That is where you must sit, Rra,' she said to the smartly dressed, middle-aged man. He had given her his name, but she had not caught it and did not wish to ask him again. There was something about this man which suggested authority. When he had introduced himself, he had had a look about him which implied that she should know exactly who he was in any case. There was something familiar about him, Mma Makutsi thought. Was he a politician? They often had that air of assurance that comes with the exercise of power, and they usually expected people to know who they were.

Mma Ramotswe looked at her visitor. She, too, was having difficulty placing him. With her detective's eye, always ready to pick up visual clues, she took in the expensive shoes and the gold buckle on his belt. These were not items that one could buy locally; they came from over the border – from Johannesburg, at the least, possibly from somewhere even more exotic such as London or New York. Was he a businessman? There was a number of prosperous businessmen in Gaborone these days, but most of them were reasonably well known because they had their photographs in the papers from

time to time doing things like attending charity concerts or giving prizes. She could not remember seeing this man before in any such photographs, and yet ...

'You are wondering who I am, Mma,' the visitor said. 'You are thinking, who is this man? That is what you are thinking, is it not?'

Mma Ramotswe was momentarily taken aback. She glanced at Mma Makutsi, who was busying herself with the kettle. Mma Makutsi grinned.

'Well, yes, Rra,' Mma Ramotswe said. 'I think that I know you, but I don't, if you see what I mean. You have one of those faces ...'

'Which are very common,' said the man. 'Yes, that is true. I have a very ordinary face.'

'That is not what I was going to say, Rra,' Mma Ramotswe said quickly. 'You are a very elegant man.'

The visitor took the compliment with a nod of his head. 'My name,' he said, 'is Motalhodi Gefeli.' He paused, as if waiting for a reaction. But the name meant nothing to Mma Ramotswe, who smiled at him politely.

'Of the Gaborone Comets,' he continued.

At this, Mma Ramotswe clapped her hands together. 'Of course, Rra! Of course!'

Mr Gefeli smiled. 'I am glad to see that you

are a football fan, Mma,' he said. 'Some women ...' He shrugged, as if to comment on the inability of women to understand a male mystery.

'Oh, I am not a football fan,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'In fact, Rra, I know nothing about football. Nothing at all!'

Mr Gefeli raised an eyebrow. 'But you know about me?'

Mma Makutsi had made a pot of red-bush tea, and now she brought two cups on a tea tray and offered one to Mr Gefeli. 'I know about you, Rra,' she said. 'I have read all about you in the newspapers. You are the man who bought the Comets and have been making them so strong.'

Mr Gefeli accepted the cup of tea. 'You are very kind to say that, Mma,' he said. 'Yes, I am the man who bought the Comets. I am that man.'

Mma Makutsi handed the other cup of tea to Mma Ramotswe. 'Yes, and everybody,' she continued, 'is happy with what you did, because the Comets are doing so well now. You have that very good goalkeeper, don't you?'

Mma Ramotswe glanced at Mma Makutsi. This was strange. Mma Makutsi had never before expressed any interest in football, and

here she was talking about a goalkeeper with none other than Mr Motalhodi Gefeli of the Gaborone Comets. She had once told Mma Makutsi that a good detective should be able to merge with his surroundings, and this involved being able to talk about the things that other people talked about. Surely the opposite effect would be achieved by a woman talking about football? Women simply did not talk about a thing like that, Mma Ramotswe reflected. But then the thought struck her: am I being old-fashioned?

‘I didn’t know that you were interested in football, Mma Makutsi,’ she said suddenly. ‘That is quite a surprise.’

For a moment, Mma Makutsi hesitated; then she smiled, a shy smile, thought Mma Ramotswe. ‘I do not know a great deal about it,’ she said, adding, ‘but then there are some people who know even less about it than I do.’ This last comment was clearly directed at Mma Ramotswe, who took it in good spirit. She knew that it was sometimes hard for Mma Makutsi, being only an assistant detective when she had gained very high marks from the Botswana Secretarial College. Mma Makutsi had achieved the previously unheard-of mark of 97 per cent in the final examinations at the

college, and never hesitated to remind people of this achievement. But she should be allowed – and deserved – her little morsel of pride.

We are all proud of something, thought Mma Ramotswe. Mma Makutsi was proud of her 97 per cent. Mr J. L. B. Matekoni was proud of the fact that he had been chosen to maintain the British High Commissioner's official white vehicle. Mma Potokwani, the matron of the orphan farm, was proud of the fact that so many of the children who passed through the orphanage did well at school, found good jobs and came back to visit her with their own children. As for the two apprentices at the garage, they must be proud of something – although Mma Ramotswe found it a bit difficult to think of exactly what that might be.

Mr Gefeli was looking at Mma Makutsi with appreciation. 'Well, that is very true, Mma,' he said. 'We have that fine goalkeeper. He is called James Pikani and he is very, very good at keeping that goal. He is like a lion!' He paused, as if savouring the image. 'Yes, he is like a lion watching over the entrance to his cave.'

Like a lion, thought Mma Ramotswe. At the back of her mind there was a rather sinister

story that she had heard somewhere – one of those traditional stories that grandmothers used to tell their grandchildren – about a girl who married a lion. What exactly had happened? The girl's brothers had suspected that the man who had married their sister was really a lion, and they had devised a test to see if this was true. They had been right, of course, and they had seen off their false brother-in-law, who had left lion paw marks in the sand as he ran away. Now here was this goalkeeper, James Pikani, who might really be a lion in disguise ...

Mma Ramotswe picked up her teacup and sipped at the hot red liquid. Red-bush tea was not to everybody's liking, but it certainly was to hers, and from the way Mr Gefeli now drank his – in deep, thirsty gulps – it appeared that he approved of it too. Mma Ramotswe signalled to Mma Makutsi to refill their visitor's cup.

'This tea is very good,' said Mr Gefeli. He paused, and dabbed at his mouth with a white handkerchief that he took from the breast pocket of his suit. It was an oddly fussy gesture for a man of his build. Nor was it what one would have expected from the owner of a major football team.

Mma Ramotswe now decided that enough

time had been spent on chit-chat. It was not polite, of course, to rush straight into business, but it was equally rude to keep somebody waiting.

‘Is there something you would like to talk to us about, Rra?’ she asked. ‘Is there something that we can do to help?’

Mr Gefeli tucked his handkerchief back into his pocket. ‘Well, Mma,’ he began, ‘there is something. You see, I have been losing football matches.’

Mma Ramotswe sighed. She was not a sportswoman – her traditional build had always made that somewhat unlikely – but she knew enough about sports to know that somebody won, and somebody lost. There were no sports, as far as she could make out, where everybody won. If this were the case, then why should people complain if they occasionally lost?

‘Somebody has to lose, Rra,’ she said quietly. ‘You can’t have two winners. One side will win and the other will lose.’

Mr Gefeli shook his head impatiently. ‘Yes, yes,’ he said, ‘of course I understand that. But whenever one loses, there is a reason for it. You don’t lose for no reason at all. There will be some player who does not perform as well as

he normally does. You will see this, and you can speak to the player and tell him where he has been going wrong. If he doesn't improve, then you can get rid of him. That is the way it's done.'

Mma Ramotswe thought about this for a moment. 'So, who is this player?' she asked. 'Who is this player who has been making you lose?'

For a moment, Mr Gefeli said nothing. He looked down at his hands, which were folded over his lap. 'James,' he muttered. 'James Pikani, our goalkeeper.'

Mma Ramotswe frowned. 'Then he isn't so good after all,' she said.

Mr Gefeli became animated. 'But he is,' he said. 'It's just that he ...' He stopped and looked at his hands again.

'Yes?' said Mma Ramotswe.

'He lets goals through,' said Mr Gefeli. 'Not all the time. Most of the time he's a brilliant goalkeeper, but then, in certain matches, he goes to pieces. I'm sure he's doing it on purpose.'

Mma Ramotswe drew in her breath sharply. Even with her scant knowledge of sports, she knew that this was the very worst thing a player could do. It was a sort of treason, she

thought; the player was letting down the whole team. Of course, the reason for it was usually money.

‘Somebody must be paying him,’ she said. ‘Don’t you think that is the most likely reason, Rra?’

Mr Gefeli nodded his head. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I assume that somebody is paying him, Mma. But how can I tell? How can I prove it?’

Mma Ramotswe suddenly felt more confident. This was not a matter of sport; this was a matter of simple human greed, and that was something of which she had seen a great deal. Now she was on familiar ground – the ground of the private detective.

‘Would you like me to find out about this, Rra?’ she said. ‘Would you like me to find out whether he’s getting money? I’ve done this sort of thing before, you know. There are ways of finding out.’ Indeed there were – most of them straightforward. People who were bribed with large sums usually gave themselves away by spending those same large sums. Such people were, by nature, spenders rather than savers. Their spending was often very obvious – flashy cars, for instance.

‘Yes,’ said Mr Gefeli. ‘I would like you to find out for me, Mma. Once I have proof, then I can

act. Before that, I can do nothing – he is far too popular.’

Mma Ramotswe nodded. ‘Does he drive a car?’ she asked.

Mr Gefeli seemed surprised by the question. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, he does drive.’

‘What sort of car is that?’ asked Mma Ramotswe.

‘An old one,’ said Mr Gefeli. ‘Nothing special.’

Mma Ramotswe looked disappointed. Perhaps it would not be as simple as she had thought.