

The Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency

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The Case of the Missing Husband

The wives of missing men are all the same, thought Mma Ramotswe. At first they feel anxiety, and are convinced that something dreadful has happened. Then doubt begins to creep in, and they wonder whether he's gone off with another woman (which he usually has), and then finally they become angry. At the anger stage, most of them don't want him back any more, even if he's found. They just want to have a good chance to shout at him.

Mma Malatsi was in the second stage, she thought. She has begun to suspect that he is off somewhere having a good time, while she's left at home, and of course it's beginning to rankle. Perhaps there are debts to be paid, even if she looks as if she's got a fair bit of money.

'Maybe you should tell me a little bit more about your husband,' she said, as Mma Malatsi began to drink the cup of strong bush tea which Mma Makutsi had brewed for her.

'His name is Peter Malatsi,' Mma Malatsi said. 'He's forty and he has – had – has.... a business selling furniture. It's a good business and he did well. So he hasn't run away from any creditors.'

Mma Ramotswe nodded. 'There must be another reason,' she began, and then, cautiously: 'You know what men are like, Mma. What about another woman? Do you think...'

Mma Malatsi shook her head vigorously.

'I don't think so,' she said. 'Maybe a year ago that would have been possible, but then he became a Christian and took up with some Church that was always singing and marching around the place in white uniforms.'

Mma Ramotswe noted this down. Church. Singing. Got religion badly? Lady preacher lured him away?

'Who were these people?' she said, 'Maybe they know something about him?'

Mma Malatsi shrugged. 'I'm not sure,' she said, slightly irritably. 'In fact, I don't know. He asked me to come with him once or twice, but I refused. So he just used to go off by himself on Sundays. In fact, he disappeared on a Sunday. I thought he'd gone off to his Church.'

Mma Ramotswe looked at the ceiling. This was not going to be as hard as some of these cases. Peter Malatsi had gone off with one of the Christians; that was pretty clear. All she had to do now was find which group it was and she would be on his trail. It was the old predictable story; it would be a younger Christian, she was sure of that.

By the end of the following day, Mma Ramotswe had compiled a list of five Christian groups which could fit the description. Over the next two days she tracked down the leaders of three of them, and was satisfied that nothing was known of Peter Malatsi. Two of the three tried to convert her; the third merely asked her for money and received a five-pula note.

When she located the leader of the fourth group, the Reverend Shadreck Mapeli, she knew that the search was over. When she mentioned the Malatsi name, the Reverend gave a shudder and glanced over his shoulder surreptitiously.

'Are you from the police?' he asked. 'Are you a policeman?'

'Policewoman,' she said.

'Ah!' he said mournfully. 'Aee!'

'I mean, I'm not a policewoman,' she said quickly. 'I'm a private detective.'

The Reverend appeared to calm down slightly.

'Who sent you?'

'Mma Malatsi.'

'Ooh,' said the Reverend. 'He told us that he had no wife.'

'Well, he did,' said Mma Ramotswe. 'And she's been wondering where he is.'

'He's dead,' said the Reverend. 'He's gone to the Lord.' Mma Ramotswe sensed that he was

telling the truth, and that the enquiry was effectively at an end. Now all that remained to be done was to find out how he had died.

‘You must tell me,’ she said. ‘I won’t reveal your name to anybody if you don’t want me to. Just tell me how it happened.’

They drove to the river in Mma Ramotswe’s small white van. It was the rainy season, and there had been several storms, which made the track almost impassable. But at last they reached the river’s edge and parked the van under a tree.

‘This is where we have our baptisms,’ said the Reverend, pointing to a pool in the swollen waters of the river. ‘This is where I stood, here, and this is where the sinners entered the water.’

‘How many sinners did you have?’ asked Mma Ramotswe.

‘Six sinners altogether, including Peter. They all went in together, while I prepared to follow them with my staff’

‘Yes?’ said Mma Raniotswe. ‘Then what happened?’

‘The sinners were standing in the water up to about here.’

The Reverend indicated his upper chest. ‘I turned round to tell the flock to start singing, and then when I turned back I noticed that there was something wrong. There were only five sinners in the water.’

‘One had disappeared?’

‘Yes,’ said the Reverend, shaking slightly as he spoke. ‘God had taken one of them to His bosom.’ Mma Ramotswe looked at the water. A non-swimmer could easily be swept away, she reflected, and yet, if somebody were to be swept away the body would surely be found downstream. The police would have been called. There would have been something in the newspaper about an unidentified body being found in the Notwane River.

She thought for a moment. There was another explanation, and it made her shiver. But before she went into that, she had to find out why the Reverend had kept so quiet about it all.

‘You didn’t tell the police,’ she said, trying not to sound too accusing. ‘Why not?’

The Reverend looked down at the ground, which, in her experience, was where people usually looked if they felt truly sorry. The shamelessly unrepentant, she found, always looked up at the sky.

‘I know I should have told them. God will punish me for it. But I was worried that I would be blamed for poor Peter’s accident and I thought they would take me to court. They might make me pay damages for it, and that would drive the Church into bankruptcy and put a stop to God’s work.’

He paused. ‘Do you understand why I kept quiet, and told all the flock not to say anything?’

Mina Ramotswe nodded, and reached out to touch the Reverend gently on the arm.

‘I do not think that what you did was bad,’ she said. ‘I’m sure that God wanted you to continue and he will not be angry. It was not your fault.’

The Reverend raised his eyes and smiled.

‘Those are kind words, my sister. Thank you.’

That afternoon, Mma Ramotswe asked her neighbour if she could borrow one of his dogs.

‘I need a dog to help me on one of my cases,’ she explained. ‘I’ll bring him back safe and sound.’

The neighbour was flattered to have been asked.

‘I’ll give you this dog here,’ he said. ‘It’s the senior dog, and he has a very good nose. He will make a good detective dog.’

Mma Ramotswe took the dog warily. It was a large yellow creature, with a curious, offensive smell. That night, just after sunset, she put it in the back of her van, tying its neck to a handle with a piece of string. Then she set off down the track that led to the river, her headlights picking out the shapes of the thorn trees and the anthills in the darkness. In a strange way, she felt glad of the company of the dog, unpleasant though it was.

Now, beside the pool in the river, she took a thick stake from the van and drove it into the soft ground near the water’s edge. Then she fetched the dog, led it down to the pool, and tied its string firmly to the stake. From a bag she had with her, she took out a large bone and put it in front of the yellow dog’s nose. The animal gave a grunt of pleasure and immediately settled down to gnaw the

bone.

Mma Ramotswe waited just a few yards away, a blanket tucked round her legs to keep off the mosquitoes and her old rifle over her knees. She knew it could be a long wait, and she hoped that she would not go to sleep. If she did, though, she was sure that the dog would wake her up when the time came.

Two hours passed. The mosquitoes were bad, and her skin itched, but this was work, and she never complained when she was working. Then, suddenly, there came a growling noise from the dog. Mma Ramotswe strained her eyes in the darkness. She could just make out the shape of the dog, and she could see that it was standing now, looking towards the water. The dog growled again, and gave a bark; then it was silent once more. Mma Rainotswe tossed the blanket off her knees and picked up the powerful torch at her side. Just a little bit longer, she thought.

There was a noise from the water's edge, and Mma Ramotswe knew now that it was time to switch on her torch. As the beam came on, she saw, just at the edge of the water, its head turned towards the cowering dog, a large crocodile.

The crocodile was totally unconcerned by the light, which it probably took for the moon. Its eyes were fixed on the dog, and it was edging slowly towards its quarry. Mma Ramotswe raised the rifle to her shoulder and saw the side of the crocodile's head framed perfectly in her sights. She pulled the trigger.

When the bullet struck the crocodile, it gave a great leap, a somersault in fact, and landed on its back, half in the water, half out. For a moment or two it twitched and then was still. It had been a perfectly placed shot.

Mma Ramotswe noticed that she was trembling as she put the rifle down. Her Daddy had taught her to shoot, and he had done it well, but she did not like to shoot animals, especially crocodiles. They were bad luck, these creatures, but duty had to be done. And what was it doing there anyway? These creatures were not meant to be in the Notwane River; it must have wandered for miles overland, or swum up in the flood waters from the Limpopo itself. Poor crocodile - this was the end of its adventure.

She took a knife and slit through the creature's belly. The leather was soft, and the stomach was soon exposed and its contents revealed. Inside there were pebbles, which the crocodile used for digesting its food, and several pieces of foul-smelling fish. But it was not this that interested her; she was more interested in the undigested bangles and rings and wristwatch she found. These were corroded, and one or two of them were encrusted, but they stood out amongst the stomach contents, each of them the evidence of the crocodile's sinister appetites.

'Is this your husband's property?' she asked Mma Malatsi, handing her the wristwatch she had claimed from the crocodile's stomach.

Mma Malatsi took the watch and looked at it. Mma Ramotswe grimaced; she hated moments like this, when she had no choice but to be the bearer of bad news.

But Mma Malatsi was extraordinarily calm. 'Well at least I know that he's with the Lord,' she said. 'And that's much better than knowing that he's in the arms of some other woman, isn't it?'

Mma Ramotswe nodded. 'I think it is,' she said.

'Were you married, Mma?' asked Mma Malatsi. 'Do you know what it is like to be married to a man?'

Mma Ramotswe looked out of the window. There was a thorn tree outside her window, but beyond that she could see the boulder-strewn hill.

'I had a husband,' she said. 'Once I had a husband. He played the trumpet. He made me unhappy and now I am glad that I no longer have a husband.' She paused. 'I'm sorry. I did not mean to be rude. You've lost your husband and you must be very sorry.'

'A bit,' said Mma Malatsi. 'But I have lots to do.'

What an extraordinary, unfeeling thing for somebody to say when she had just lost her husband. Did she not value him more than that? Perhaps she wanted him dead, and then her prayer was answered by the crocodile. Would that make you a murdered in God's eyes if something then

happened? God would know, you see, that you had wanted somebody dead because there are no secrets from God.

Mma Ramotswe stopped. She began to wonder whether this was the right job for her after all. It was time to take the pumpkin out of the pot and eat it. You could think and think and get nowhere, but you still had to eat your pumpkin. That brought you down to earth. That gave you a reason for going on. Pumpkin.