

No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency

Alexander McCall Smith

The Cutting of Fingers and Snakes – Part I

Hector Lepodise's factory grew rapidly, and by the time Mma Ramotswe got to know him, he was employing thirty people and producing bolts that held roofs on to their beams as far north as Malawi. As the business grew, however, the supply of relatives dwindled, and Hector began to employ strangers. It was inevitable that there would be some who would attempt to exploit his kindness, and this is where Mma Ramotswe came in.

'I can't put my finger on it,' said Hector, as he drank coffee with Mma Ramotswe on the verandah of the President Hotel, 'but I've never trusted that man. He only came to me about six months ago, and now this. He was quite good at working the machinery, and I upped his pay by fifty pula a month. Then suddenly he left me, and that was that.'

'Any reason?' asked Mma Ramotswe.

Hector frowned. 'None that I could make out. He collected his pay on a Friday and just did not come back. That was about two months ago. Then the next I heard from him was through an attorney in Mahalapye. He wrote me a letter saying that his client, Mr Solomon Moretsi, was starting a legal action against me for four thousand pula for the loss of a finger owing to an industrial accident in my factory.'

Mma Ramotswe poured another cup of coffee for them both while she digested this development. 'And was there an accident?'

'If anybody gets hurt, they have to enter the details in the book. I looked at the date which the attorney mentioned and I saw that Moretsi had entered that he had hurt a finger on his right hand. He wrote that he had put a bandage on it and it seemed all right and nobody had bothered any more about it.'

'Then he left?'

'Yes,' Hector took a sip of his coffee, 'I don't trust that man. I simply don't believe that he lost a finger in my factory. He may have lost a finger somewhere else, but that has nothing to do with me.'

Mma Ramotswe smiled. 'You want me to find this finger for you? Is that why you asked me to the President Hotel?'

Hector laughed. 'Yes. And I also asked you because I enjoy sitting here with you and I would like to ask you to marry me.'

Mma Ramotswe reached out and patted her friend on the arm.

'Marriage is all very well,' she said. 'But being the No. 1 lady detective in the country is not an easy life.'

You could still be a detective.'

Mma Ramotswe shook her head. 'No,' she said 'I like you as a friend, but I do not want a husband. I am finished with husbands for good.'

Mma Ramotswe examined the papers in the office of Hector's factory.

She picked up the grubby exercise book which he had placed in front of her and paged through it. This was the incident book, and there, sure enough, was the entry detailing Moretsi's injury,

Moretsi cut his finger. No. 2 finger counting from thumb. machine did it. right hand. bandage put on by same. signed: solomon moretsi. Witness: Jesus Christ

She re-read the entry and then looked at the attorney's letter. The dates tallied: 'My client says that the accident occurred on 10th May last. He attended at the Princess Marina Hospital the following day. The wound was dressed, but osteomyelitis set in. The following week surgery was performed

and the damaged finger was amputated (see attached hospital report). My client claims that this accident was due entirely to your negligence and has instructed me to raise an action for damages on his behalf. My client has advised that the sum of four thousand pula will be acceptable to him in lieu of court-awarded damages.'

She looked at the copy of the medical report. It was brief and said exactly what the attorney had paraphrased. The date was right; the headed notepaper looked authentic; and there was the doctor's signature at the bottom. It was a name she knew.

Mma Ramotswe looked up from the papers to see Hector staring at her expectantly.

'It seems straightforward,' she said. 'He cut his finger and it became infected. What do our insurance people say?'

Hector sighed. 'They say I should pay up. They say that they'll cover me for it and it would be cheaper in the long run.

'Shouldn't you do what they say?' asked Mma Ramotswe.

It seemed to her that there was no real point in denying that the accident had happened. Obviously this man had lost a finger and deserved some compensation; why should Hector make such a fuss about this when he did not even have to pay?

Hector guessed what she was thinking. 'I won't,' he said. 'I just refuse. Refuse. If I pay him this time, then he'll go on to somebody else. I'd rather give that four thousand pula to somebody who deserved it. Bah! Bah! He's a crook, that man. I couldn't sack him because I had nothing on him. But I knew he was no good. And some of the others didn't like him either. These people sense these things. I want you to find out what this man is up to. But if you come back to me in a week's time and say that I am wrong, then I will pay without a murmur. Will that do?'

Mma Ramotswe nodded. So she agreed to act, and she drove away in her little white van wondering how she could prove that the missing finger had nothing to do with Hector's factory. As she parked the van outside her office and walked into the cool of her waiting room, she realised that she had absolutely no idea how to proceed.

That night, as she lay in the bedroom of her house in Zebra Drive, Mma Ramotswe found that sleep eluded her. She got up, put on the pink slippers which she always wore since she had been stung by a scorpion while walking through the house at night, and went through to the kitchen to make a pot of bush tea.

She made her tea and settled down to drink it on her most comfortable chair. It was a hot night and the dogs were howling throughout the town, egging one another on in the darkness.

She thought of Hector. What was it he had said: If I pay him this time then he'll go on to somebody else. She thought for a moment, and then put the mug of bush tea down on the table. The idea had come to her suddenly. Perhaps he had made claims elsewhere. Perhaps Hector was not the first!

The Cutting of Fingers and Snakes – Part II

Mma Ramotswe awoke the next morning, breakfasted quickly and then drove directly to the office. There were ten insurance companies doing business in Gaborone. She listed them, noted down their telephone numbers, and made a start.

The Botswana Eagle Company was the first she telephoned. They were willing to help, but could not come up with any information. Nor could the Mutual Life Company of Southern Africa, or the Southern Star Insurance Company. But at the fourth, Kalahari Accident and Indemnity, she found out what she needed to know.

'We've found one claim under the name Moretsi,' said the woman on the other end of the line. 'Two years ago we had a claim from a garage in town. One of their petrol attendants claimed to have injured his finger while replacing the petrol pump dispenser in its holder. He lost a finger and they claimed under their employer's policy.'

Mma Ramotswe's heart gave a leap. 'Four thousand pula?' she asked.

‘Close enough,’ said the clerk. ‘We settled for three thousand eight hundred.’

‘Right hand?’ pressed Mma Ramotswe. ‘Second finger counting from the thumb?’

The clerk shuffled through some papers.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘There’s a medical report. It says something about . . . I’m not sure how to pronounce it...osteomy....’

‘Elitis,’ prompted Mma Ramotswe. ‘Requiring amputation of the finger.’

‘Yes,’ said the clerk. ‘Exactly.’

For a few moments she sat quite still, savouring the satisfaction of having revealed the fraud so quickly. She would like to meet Moretsi, if she could, and she was also looking forward to an interview with his attorney. That, she thought, would be a pleasure that would more or less justify the two-hour drive up that awful Francistown Road.

The attorney proved to be quite willing to see her that afternoon. He assumed that she had been engaged by Hector to settle, and he imagined that it would be quite easy to browbeat her into settling on his terms.

Mma Ramotswe chuckled as she put down the telephone. The attorney would be going to fetch his client out of some bar, she imagined, where he was probably already celebrating prematurely the award of four thousand pula. Well, he was due for an unpleasant surprise.

She left her office in the charge of her secretary and set off to Mahalapye in the tiny white van. The day had heated up, and now, at noon, it was really quite hot. She traveled with her window open and the rushing air cooled the van.

She was half an hour from Mahalapye when the snake shot across the road - a dart of green against the black tar; and then she was upon it, and the snake was beneath the van. She drew in her breath and slowed the car, looking behind her in the mirror as she did so. Where was the snake? She had seen it go under the van and she was sure that she had heard something, a dull thump.

She drew to a halt at the edge of the road, and looked in the mirror again. It was far too big a snake to disappear just like that. No, the snake was in the van somewhere, in the works or under her seat perhaps.

She had heard of people dying at the wheel, as they drove, bitten by snakes that had been caught up in the pipes and rods that ran this way and that under a car.

Mma Ramotswe felt a sudden urge to leave the van. She opened her door, hesitantly at first, but then threw it back and leaped out, to stand, panting, beside the vehicle. There was a snake under the tiny white van, she was now sure of that. It was likely to be a cobra, she thought, because it was large enough and she could think of no other green snake that long.

The road was very quiet, but there was a car or a truck every so often, and now she was aware of a car coming from the Mahalapye direction. The car slowed down as it approached her and then stopped. There was a man in the driver’s seat and a young boy beside him.

‘Are you in trouble, Mma?’ he called out politely ‘Have you broken down?’

Mma Ramotswe explained about the snake, and he turned off his engine and got out, instructing the boy to stay where he was.

‘They get underneath,’ he said. ‘It can be dangerous.’

The man very carefully began to open the bonnet. Then suddenly he froze.

‘Don’t make any sudden movement,’ he said very softly. ‘There it is. Look.’

Mma Ramotswe peered into the engine space. For a few moments she could make out nothing unusual, but then the snake moved slightly and she saw it. She was right; it was a cobra, twined about the engine, its head moving slowly to right and left, as if seeking out something.

The man was quite still. Then he touched Mma Ramotswe on the forearm.

‘Walk very carefully back to the door,’ he said. ‘Get into the cab, and start the engine. Understand?’

Mma Ramotswe nodded. Then, moving as slowly as she could, she eased herself into the driving seat and reached forward to turn the key.

The engine came into life immediately, as it always did.

‘Press the accelerator,’ yelled the man. ‘Race the engine!’

Mma Ramotswe did as she was told, and the engine roared throatily. There was a noise from the front, another thump, and then the man signalled to her to switch off.

‘You can come out,’ he called. ‘That’s the end of the cobra.’

Mma Ramotswe got out of the cab and walked round to the front. Looking into the engine, she saw the cobra in two pieces, quite still.

‘It had twined itself through the blades of the fan,’ said the man, making a face of disgust. ‘Nasty way to go. But it could have crept into the cab and bitten you, you know. So there we are. You are still alive.’

Mma Ramotswe thanked him and drove off, leaving the cobra on the side of the road. It was proving an eventful journey, even if nothing further were to happen during the final half hour. It did not.

The Cutting of Fingers and Snakes – Part III

‘Now,’ said Mr Jameson Mopotswane, the Mahalapye attorney, sitting back. ‘My poor client is going to be a little late, but you and I can discuss details of the settlement before he arrives.’

Mma Ramotswe savoured the moment. She leaned back in her chair and looked about his poorly furnished room.

‘So business is not so good these days,’ she said, adding: ‘Up here.’

Jameson Mopotswane bristled.

‘It’s not bad,’ he said. ‘In fact, I’m very busy. I get in here at seven o’clock, you know, and I’m on the go until six.’

‘You must have a lot to do,’ said Mma Ramotswe.

The attorney smiled, but Mma Ramotswe continued: ‘Yes, a lot to do, sorting out the lies your clients tell you from the occasional - occasional - truth.’

Jameson Mopotswane put his pen down on his desk and glared at her. Who was this pushy woman?

‘My clients do not lie,’ he said slowly. ‘And you have no business, if I may say so, to suggest that they are liars.’

Mma Ramotswe raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh no?’ she challenged. ‘Well, let’s just take your Mr Moretsi, for example. How many fingers has he got?’

Jameson Mopotswane looked at her disdainfully.

‘It’s cheap to make fun of the afflicted,’ he sneered. ‘You know very well that he’s got nine, or nine and a half if you want to split hairs.’

‘Very interesting,’ said Mma Ramotswe. ‘And if that’s the case, then how can he possibly have made a successful claim to Kalahari Accident and Indemnity, about three years ago, for the loss of a finger in an accident in a petrol station? Could you explain that?’

The attorney sat quite still.

‘Three years ago?’ he said faintly. ‘A finger?’

‘Yes,’ said Mma Ramotswe. ‘He asked for four thousand - a bit of a coincidence - and settled for three thousand eight hundred. The company has given me the claim number, if you want to check up. They’re always very helpful, I find, when there’s any question of insurance fraud being uncovered. Remarkably helpful.’

Jameson Mopotswane said nothing, and suddenly Mma Ramotswe felt sorry for him. She did not like lawyers, but he was trying to earn a living, like everybody else, and perhaps she was being too hard on him.

‘Show me the medical report,’ she said, almost kindly. ‘I’d be interested to see it.’

The attorney reached for a file on his desk and took out a report.

‘Here,’ he said. ‘It all seemed quite genuine.’

Mma Ramotswe looked at the piece of headed paper and then nodded.

‘There we are,’ she said. ‘It’s just as I thought. Look at the date there. It’s been whited out and a new date typed in. Our friend did have a finger removed once, and it may even have been as a result of an accident. But then all that he’s done is to get a bottle of correction fluid, change the date, and create a new accident, just like that.’

The attorney took the sheet of paper and held it up to the light. He need not even have done that; the correction fluid could be seen clearly enough at first glance.

‘I’m surprised that you did not notice that,’ said Mma Ramotswe. ‘It doesn’t exactly need a forensic laboratory to see what he’s done.’

It was at this point in the shaming of the attorney that Moretsi arrived. He walked into the office and reached out to shake hands with Mma Ramotswe. She looked at the hand and saw the stub of the finger. She rejected the proffered hand.

‘Sit down,’ said Jameson Mopotswane coldly.

Moretsi looked surprised, but did as he was told.

‘So you’re the lady who’s come to pay.’

The attorney cut him short.

‘She has not come to pay anything,’ he said. ‘This lady has come all the way from Gaborone to ask you why you keep claiming for lost fingers.’

Mma Ramotswe watched Moretsi’s expression as the attorney spoke, his crestfallen look would have convinced her.

‘Keep claiming . . .?’ he said limply.

‘Yes,’ said Mma Ramotswe. ‘You claim, I believe, to have lost three fingers. And yet if I look at your hand today I see that two have miraculously grown back! This is wonderful! Perhaps you have discovered some new drug that enables fingers to grow back once they have been chopped off?’

‘Three?’ said the attorney, puzzled.

Mma Ramotswe looked at Moretsi.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘There was Kalahari Accident. Then there was . . . Could you refresh my memory? I’ve got it written down somewhere.’

Moretsi looked to his attorney for support, but saw only anger.

‘Star Insurance,’ he said quietly.

‘Ah!’ said Mma Ramotswe. ‘Thank you for that.’

The attorney picked up the medical report and waved it at his client.

‘And you expected to be able to fool me with this crude alteration? You expected to get away with that?’

Moretsi said nothing.

‘Anyway,’ said Jameson Mopotswane, ‘that’s the end of your tricks. You’ll be facing fraud charges, you know, and you’ll have to get somebody else to defend you. You won’t get me, my friend.’

Moretsi looked at Mma Ramotswe,

‘Why did you do it?’ she asked. ‘Just tell me why you thought you could get away with it?’

Moretsi took a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose.

‘I am looking after my parents,’ he said. ‘And I have a sister who is sick with a disease that is killing everybody these days. You know what I’m talking about. She has children. I have to support them.’

Mma Ramotswe looked into his eyes. She had always been able to rely on her ability to tell whether a person was telling the truth or not, and she knew that Moretsi was not lying. She thought quickly. There was no point in sending this man to prison. It would merely add to the suffering of others - of the parents and of the poor sister. She knew what he was talking about and she understood what it meant.

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘I will not tell the police about any of this. And my client will not either. But in return, you will promise that there will be no more lost fingers. Do you understand?’

Moretsi nodded rapidly.

‘You are a good Christian lady,’ he said. ‘God is going to make it very easy for you in heaven.’

‘I hope so,’ said Mma Ramotswe. ‘But I am also a very nasty lady sometimes. And if you try any more of this nonsense with insurance people, then you will find that I will become very unpleasant.’

‘I understand,’ said Moretsi. ‘I understand.’

‘You see,’ said Mma Ramotswe, casting a glance at the attentive attorney, ‘there are some people in this country, some men, who think that women are soft and can be twisted this way and that.’

Well I’m not. I can tell you, if you are interested, that I killed a cobra, a big one, on my way here this afternoon.’

‘Oh?’ said Jamieson Mopotswane. ‘What did you do?’

‘I cut it in two,’ said Mma Ramotswe. ‘Two pieces.’