

THE GOOD PEOPLE

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THERE is very little drama in our office. It is a large, light, airy room with rows of high, wooden-framed windows along two sides. It seems extraordinarily remote from all the mine dumps and headgears and haulages, the dust and noise and clamour upon which our existence depends. We are snug and secure and nothing ever happens in our tight little world. We work our slow way to our pensions, and when one day we are required to die, we hope it will be quietly, in our beds.

At any rate, that's how it seems if you immerse yourself in routine and don't show much curiosity. Actually, it is strange how you can work cheek by jowl with people for months and years, talk and argue and joke with them, and never know what goes on in their backgrounds, or how old they are, or whether they are married and the number of their children.

There were three people including myself working in my office. There was Arthur, a hefty young Afrikaner of about 20 with tremendous shoulders and a tongue that never stopped wagging. He knew everything about everything, did young Arthur. There was not a thing in the wide world left for him to learn.

Then there was myself. I am slightly on the dismal side of 40, a bit thin on top, but fit as a fiddle and I aim to see the turn of the century. I'm a statistician, if that is of any interest to you.

And, thirdly, there was Robert, the African messenger. I could tell you his surname, but you wouldn't be able to pronounce it and it would make no difference to this story anyway. In fact, it was of the essence of Robert's personality that even to us who worked with him he was largely anonymous. He was simply Robert and to us he had no kith or kin—a being whose only context was the office.

It was—and is—most unusual to find an African occupying an office together with Europeans. They are usually out of sight when not wanted, but we had made an exception in this case because Robert was inclined to keep rather too well out of sight. Whenever we wanted him we would have to hunt for him all over the building, so eventually we cleared a small corner for him behind the filing cabinet and there he sat all day where we could watch him. Our office was large. He did not intrude too much on our susceptibilities.

He was a small African, not above 5 ft. 4 in. in height, with bloodshot eyes and a general air of vagueness induced by dagga smoking. His co-ordination was slack, but his duties were not arduous and he managed to perform them with adequate competence.

Arthur ragged him a bit. There were occasional spasms of horse-play between the two. I think Arthur enjoyed his physical superiority—it titillated his white vanity; it made him feel good. He regarded Robert as a rather superior domestic animal.

But on the whole Robert ignored us as much as we ignored him. He spent most of his time reading to himself and writing in a cheap exercise book. Africans are great students; of all people I have ever met, they are the most avid for learning and knowledge in any form, and even Robert in his foggy way tried to memorize long lists of words and wrote them down in a slow, copy-book hand. His time was mostly his own. I suppose there might be half-a-dozen occasions in the course of an average day when he would be called to attend the requirements of a member of our department.

Occasionally one heard stories about Robert. The caretaker always referred to him as "that no-good boy". He would pop his head into the doorway and call, "Hey, Tsotsi!" and then turn to me and ask whether he could borrow "your boy" for a few minutes. Well, a tsotsi is a very bad character who uses a knife and robs workers in bus queues on Friday nights. But though Robert was a drug addict and was, so they said, an inveterate gambler, I am certain that there was no real harm in him.

Like all petty gamblers, of course, Robert was chronically short of money. He was always borrowing shillings and half-crowns and paying them back on Friday when he got his pay packet.

So when, one afternoon about six months ago, he came and stood at my desk without saying a word, I knew what it was he was after. That was his manner, to stand silently at your elbow until you were ready to take note of his presence.

"Well, and what do you want now?" I said presently.

"Please baas," he said, sniffing, "can the baas lend for me 9/- till Friday, please?"

"Oh, 9/-," I said, looking him over. "That's more than you usually ask for, isn't it?"

He laughed automatically. "Yes please, I know, my baas."

“What the hell do you want it for this time?” I asked.

“I must pay it by the shop,” he explained, his red eyes regarding me dolefully.

“Well, can’t it wait till Friday?”

“No baas, the boy in the shop say if I haven’t got it tonight he kill me.”

“Oh, he kill you, eh! Well, no doubt you deserve it.” I felt in my pocket but had no change. All the money I had on me was a £5 note, and I couldn’t give him that even if I wanted to, which I didn’t. A fiver was beyond Robert’s ability to repay. “There you are, my boy,” I said. “You can see for yourself, you’re out of luck.”

Arthur was not in that afternoon, and in any case our bright young man was usually at the borrowing end himself.

Robert said, “Hê, sorry baas!” and shook his head and shuffled off to his corner. I suppose if I had really put myself out, I could have found some change somewhere or borrowed a few shillings on his behalf from someone else. But, well, what did it matter? The shopkeeper would kick up a row and refuse him credit in future and that was all there would be to it.

“You lose too much money gambling with the Chinaman,” I said, wagging my finger at him.

He laughed and said, “Hai, Ikona baas, I don’t do like that!”

And that was the last I ever saw of him because that same night he was murdered. We didn’t know this until a few days later. All we knew at the time was that he did not turn up to work the next day or the next. Arthur fussed and fretted about it. He wanted a meat pie for his tea and now he would have to go out and buy it himself. “These bloody coons,” he swore petulantly, “you can never trust the blighters.”

But on the third morning our caretaker, a big man with a booming bass voice, came and told us the news. He was murdered, he explained to us, in a particularly revolting way. He was stabbed not with a clean, sharp instrument, but with a sort of cleaver. The cleaver was thrust into his ribs and pulled out again with a sizeable lump of flesh.

The boss came into the office and heard the news. He had a sheaf of papers in his hand and he held them up in the air as though he were a still from a movie.

“How did you hear about it,” we asked. We all stood together in a bunch, wondering.

"His wife came in. She's still in my office—what shall I tell her to do?"

"Has she got a family?"

"Three kids, I think—I'm not sure."

So, because the Africans in our firm haven't got a pension scheme, the boss put his hand in his pocket and drew out a pound and we had a general whip round. I went round to a couple of other offices where Robert's services had been used and presently we had collected just over £12.

"Just a moment," the boss said, "I'll 'phone Bob Henderson and see what the Company is prepared to do." Bob was the Secretary. Old Bob wasn't a bad type; too near retirement to care much about anything, still. . . .

"Bob says the Company will probably be prepared to make it up to £20—tell you what, I'll put in the balance and get it back afterwards. Better get her down here," he said to the caretaker, and we waited till he returned with her.

"Yes," said the boss with a sigh, "that's how it is." He laid his papers down on the desk and put his hands in his pockets.

Unlike her husband, the wife was far from placid or vague. She scowled, and there was an aggressive droop to her underlip. She was an angry woman.

"How did it happen?" the boss asked her.

She shook her head. "I don't know, master, because I didn't see it."

"Did nobody else see it?"

She shook her head and almost smiled. "No, no. They did see it but they did not see it, because sometime if you see a thing like that, then next time you are also dead."

"I see. Have you any idea why?" The boss spoke kindly. He was not unsympathetic.

The wife shrugged her shoulders. From her ears hung a pair of rather sophisticated, tartish drop ear-rings, while about her body she clutched a Basuto blanket.

"I don't know, baas. Perhaps it was the money."

"Money?"

"Yes, baas. Another boy was telling him he must bring the money or there will be big trouble."

"How much money?"

"I don't know, baas, perhaps £1, £2—he never tell me."

A thought struck me—had the money Robert had tried to borrow from me anything to do with it? That odd amount—9/-

—oh no, surely, not even a gangster committed murder for a pound or two? There could be lots of other explanations.

She shrugged. "I don't know, baas," she repeated, "but that same time I am in the house and he is outside and I hear someone say 'Robert, I will kill you!' "

"Did you recognise the voice?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't know the voice, but I think I have a sample of him."

"Sample?"

"I think she means that she has her suspicions," I suggested, and she nodded her head in agreement.

"And then?"

"Then the next night," she continued, "We are in the house. It is eight o'clock or half-past eight. One time Robert is getting up, going outside." She paused. "Master, two, three minutes later the other girl she is calling 'come here, come here quick!' I go out and there is Robert on the ground—he is cold, so quick master!"

"And you heard nothing this time?"

"Nothing, baas."

"Have you reported it to the police?"

"Yes, master, they have tell the police."

"And have the police done anything about it?"

She looked away and sighed as though she found the questioning tedious. "They look here and they look there, master."

"And what do they say?"

She did not answer. It was apparent they had not said much.

The interview ended there. She accepted the envelope of money in her cupped hands and made a small curtsy. She tightened her blanket across her shoulders, looked around once at us and left, the caretaker following her out.

And when she left there remained behind in the office a strong atmosphere of her sorrow and resentment. And hatred. There was a very strong sense of her hatred indeed, but what exactly it was that she hated I couldn't really tell. The tsotsi and gangsters? The white people? Just everything?.

I had a strong impulse to follow after and tell her something. But what? If I could only think what? Instead I went and sat down at my desk and fingered the small change in my pocket.

The following week we got another messenger. He said he was Robert's brother and that his father had sent him from his home in the country to work for us because we were good people to work for.