

pc 11/17

## THE ELEPHANT SHOOTER

I had been some years at the reformatory when young Richard Coetzee came looking for a job. He had been born and brought up in the hot bush of Komati Poort, and had a great knowledge of all kinds of wild animals. In fact that had been his real education, for he had idled his time away at school. Then he became an elephant shooter for the Portuguese East Government. He was gay, serious, humble and cocksure by turns; his manners were those of a boy, but he must have been about twenty-five.

"Why did you give up elephant shooting?" I asked.

"I got sick of it, meneer," he said. "I got sick of shooting such huge beasts."

"Why?" I asked.

"There's too much life in them," he said. "I can kill a small animal, that doesn't seem so bad. But in the end I couldn't stand bringing such big life to an end."

"It's only a temporary job here," I said. "I've a man on six months' leave, and when he comes back you'd have to go."

I told him how much money it was worth.

"I'll take it," he said.

"Why do you want to come here?" I asked.

"I heard about your work, meneer. I thought it was a good job, more useful than shooting elephants."

So of course I engaged him. He took to the work of the reformatory as a duck takes to water. The boys liked him and worked

well for him. When it was half-time, he would tell them stories of the wilds, and they would have listened to him for hours, and sometimes they did I think, when they were working on some remote part of the farm. Because he was only a temporary man, he had no fixed work of his own, but took out the spans of men who were sick, or on leave. Such rapid changes can be risky, as some boys will be quick to take advantage, but he seemed to understand them all, and nothing went wrong.

Yet for all that, he had the reputation of irresponsibility. He borrowed things like shirts and tennis-rackets without leave, and more than one angry staff-member complained to me. But when they were not angry, they thought he was a joke, and called him the Wild Man of Komati. He caught snakes and put them into his pocket, and then he would ask some boy to take out his handkerchief for him. He was always up to some kind of mischief.

He would come to see me often in the office, which he was not supposed to do, having his own immediate superior officer, Mr. Robertson. But when he came he was so engaging that I hadn't the heart to reprove him. People told him he was currying favour, but he went on unabashed. He would consult me about this boy and that, and ask my advice, and then say to me with regret, "if only I had a permanent job, I could do much better."

"I told you I haven't one," I said.

He would look at me sorrowfully, as though I did not fully realise my influence with the authorities, and go away shaking his

head in deep dejection. One couldn't help liking him, but his reputation for irresponsibility grew. One day he took the meat from the Mess and gave it to the dogs, saying it was unfit for human consumption. He was very hurt when I made him pay for it, a large sum out of a small salary.

Then Nesor left us to go to the Mines, and it occurred to me of course that here was a permanent job for Coetzee. But his immediate superiors wouldn't hear of it. He had borrowed Robertson's car, and brought it back with the gears jammed, and had refused to pay for the repairs, saying that everyone knew it had happened before.

At that time we had arranged for each staff-house to have domestic servants from the reformatory. It was an ideal opportunity for some kind of training. But the choices were made so badly, and the exceptional freedom offered so many temptations, that this group, about forty in number, produced more absconders and offenders than any similar group in the reformatory. I was reluctant to give up the experiment, and was trying to think of some way to improve the situation. It was then that young Coetzee came to see me.

"I see the Principal is worried," he said solicitously.

"Worried?" I said.

"About these domestic servants. Meneer, I have an idea."

"Sit down," I said. "Let's have it."

"The whole system is bad," he said.

"Is that so?" I said.

"It's really so," he said.

He was very diplomatic, and did not say, the Principal does and that. He said, they do this and that., and invited me with a courteous but superior smile to join him in condemning them.

"They choose the wrong boys," he said. "They like a boy, and think he would make a fine servant. But they are wrong. We mustn't choose boys we like. We must try another method altogether."

"Is that really so?" I said.

He knew I was playing with him, but he ignored it. He was after a big elephant, and would not let a trifle turn him aside. And he knew I was listening.

"I have an idea," he said.

"Let's hear it then."

He looked at me calculatingly. He did not want to say outright that good ideas can't be thrown about carelessly, he just wanted me to see it for myself. He smiled at me secretly, half shy to be withholding the idea from me, half cunning.

"It's a good idea," he said.

"I'll tell you if it's good," I said, "but I can't without hearing it."

He fenced with me a bit longer, but he was growing uncomfortable. He felt I was using my authority unfairly, and he looked at me reproachfully.

"What are you here for?" I asked. "To give me an idea, or to ask for a permanent job?"

He screwed up his face at the difficulty of the question.

"Have you taken this idea to Mr. Robertson?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I kept it for the Principal."

"Have you fixed up Mr. Robertson's car?"

"I'm fixing it," he said eagerly. "He's too impatient."

"Have you got any snakes in your pocket?" I said.

He had the grace to blush.

"It was a harmless snake, meneer."

"A good thing too," I said. "Otherwise you wouldn't be here to tell me your idea."

But he wouldn't tell me the idea. He just sat there stubbornly.

"Have you been taking fruit from the orchard?" I asked.

He was stung.

"That's a lie," he said. "Excuse my language, meneer, but whoever told the Principal that was telling a lie."

"No one told me that," I said. "I just asked."

He smiled half-heartedly.

"A joke," he said. "I didn't understand."

"Now," I said severely, "we come back to the idea."

Then I saw that he felt compelled to tell the idea, but the joy had gone out of it. And he had such a great gift for putting joy into his conversation that I relented.

"I won't ask about Mr. Fichardt's shirt," I said, "nor about the hole you made in the Mess roof to get the honey, so that the rain comes down into the bedrooms. I'll just ask for ~~the~~ idea, and I'll just tell you that I don't take a good idea without paying

for it."

He brightened up at once.

"It's a good idea," he said.

"You've told me that before."

"Meneer," he said, "they just choose any boy they like..."

"You've told me that too. Just tell me the idea."

"Whenever a new boy comes to the reformatory," he said, "he goes to the new boys' span."

"Agreed."

"Then let the officer pick out those who are docile and obedient, and are likely to make good servants. Make a special span for them, and train them for their jobs, so that when the time comes for them to be made free, they will be ready for it."

I listened judicially.

"Go on," I said.

"That 's the idea," he said, disappointed that I hadn't known it.

"Umph," I said.

"What does the Principal think of the idea?" he asked.

I saw that he looked a bit disconcerted, and as though he had shot his elephant, and in the right spot too, but the beast wouldn't fall. He watched me anxiously, waiting for the collapse.

"It's not a bad idea," I said.

"Will the Principal try it ?" he asked.

I looked very doubtful.

"I suppose I could try it," I said.

He drew his chair a couple of inches nearer, as though he wished to talk confidentially, but in reality to look me over, to see where he would plant his second shot.

"You'll need the right man for it," he said knowingly, "someone who understands the idea."

"That's just what I'm think<sup>ing</sup>," I said.

His coolness deserted him, and he teetered about on the edge of his chair, wanting to shout out his name at me, hardly believing that a clever man like a Principal could be so dumb.

"Who is this Wild Man of Komati?" I said

He didn't answer that, but looked very hurt.

"When will Mr. Robertson's car be finished?" I asked.

"This afternoon," he said. "This very afternoon."

"Then you get the job," I said. "Stop dancing about. And don't you say a word to a soul. I'm going to have a hard time with Mr. Robertson."

"I won't say a word, meneer."

"You can go," I said. I added menacingly, "if I hear another word about...."

"I won't do it again, meneer."

When he went out, I rang Robertson and asked him to come and see me. I was a bit aloof with him.

"About young Coetzee," I said.

I could see Mr. Robertson growing <sup>cold</sup>~~cool~~ under my eyes.

"Young Coetzee?" he said. "Sir, excuse me one moment."

He was out of the office and back in a minute, and he poured out on to the table a box of chessmen.

"Look at these, Sir," he said.

I knew the chessmen, for Robertson and I had played with them more than once. They looked in pretty poor shape, and two of the knights had no heads.

"Count them, sir," he said.

But I drew the line at that.

"What's missing?" I asked.

"Two pawns," he said.

"Mr. Robertson," I said grandly, "you and I are the pawns. Coetzee has got the job."