

CASHBACK

by

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### 1. BITTER HARVEST

The two men sat on the veranda, sipping their root beer, as they often did after a hard day in the fields. Both were secretly wondering how many more of these evenings they would have together. Not that either of them did much labouring these days, but they had a huge area of land to plant and harvest and supervise between them, and a workforce of several hundred to organise.

The welfare of these people was crucial to the success of the farm, but the gang bosses looked after all that on a day-to-day basis. They arranged the allocation of work, and the transport of the workers between the village and the fields. They recruited extra labour when there was extra work, at harvest time, or when the new crops were being planted, and made sure they were all paid on time at the end of the week, and had enough food and water during the long days in the fields.

But there were always problems of some sort to be dealt with, and those came to the two men on the veranda to resolve. And now there were more problems than ever before: problems which threatened the very future of the farm, the people who worked there, the village - everything.

It was still hot, even though the sun was waning. The two men gently swatted at the usual evening hatch of insects, mostly mosquitoes and flies, but a few other, more exotic varieties. The crickets would soon start their evening chirruping. Then the bullfrogs, down at the creek, where the boys swam and caught fish.

The boys had been down there most of the afternoon, playing their version of Rugby in the dusty field beyond the garden. There were no written rules - how could there be, for 'one a side'? - yet somehow they each understood what was allowed and what wasn't. So did Tinker, the Jack Russell, who chased the old leather ball as hard as anyone. Eventually, when the heat and dust got too much for them, they would all hurl themselves into the creek, to clean up and cool off. Tinker seemed to enjoy this best of all.

James Bartlett leant forward for his glass. The old rocking chair creaked, as it had done in his father's day. One day he'd fix it, but somehow it was as much a part of life as the chair itself. For as long as James could remember, that chair had been on the veranda, alongside the old wicker table, and it had always made that noise.

“One day, I’ll fix this chair,” he said to old man Mbele, the farm manager.

Mbele smiled a toothy smile.

“I doubt it,” he grinned. “Your father never did.”

He finished his root beer.

“Another?” asked James.

Mbele nodded his thanks, and as he did so, Beatrice Bartlett came out of the house with the jug.

“We were just thinking we’d have another,” said James.

“I heard the chair,” replied his wife. “How are you today, Mr. Mbele?” she asked, filling his glass.

“Fine, fine, thank you Missy,” he replied.

“Any more news.” Beatrice Bartlett looked concernedly at both men.

“No. Nothing new today.” replied James.

“The gang of strangers has been round the village again,” said Mbele, “but no trouble.”

“I’m sure there will be, soon enough,” said James. “I’m just glad we got that security fence up when we did.”

“They say in the village that another farm, to the north, was taken last week,” said Mbele. “But I don’t know whose it was or what happened to them. When my people find out, I’ll tell you.”

“I’ve heard nothing on the radio, but then it often takes days for news to get out,” said Bartlett.

“I get so worried,” said his wife.

“We’re as prepared as we can be,” said James, reassuringly.

“If that gang of war veterans doesn’t move away soon,” said Mbele, “it might be best to leave while you can rather than be thrown out like others.”

“I’m certainly not going to simply walk out,” said Bartlett. “This is my life - Zimbabwe is my country. This farm was built up to what it is now by generations

of my family, if my family hadn't developed the farm, then the village of Chasimu where you all live wouldn't exist. No school for the children, no store, nothing. My Grandfather built that dam with his own hands, and not a lot of help. Without it, the irrigation system would have been impossible, and the land would have stayed as scrub. I'm not going to betray all that effort just because there's a gang of thugs hanging around."

Mbele nodded sagely. "I can understand that," he said.

"You know that I've been in talks with the land reform agency for weeks now, trying to negotiate a way through this. There's over 4,000 acres of good land here, more than enough for your people to share and to make a living from."

"But we would need help," said Mbele. "We know we couldn't work the land without expert help from you. A big farm makes big money - many small ones cannot do that. One dam, many rivers, much water to be shared out, not enough machinery for everyone to have a tractor. And where would we get the money to buy seeds and fertiliser? You pay for that now - we couldn't."

"Between us, we could run it as a co-operative, with the land shared out, but the Government doesn't seem to understand that, or doesn't want to understand probably."

"But we all joined their party as they said we must," protested the old man.

"But you are not all 'war veterans'," said James Bartlett. "The mob in your village is probably of war veterans, and they have probably been sent by the government to take over the whole farm for themselves."

"That's what my people think, too," replied Mbele. "But they are not talking to us much, so we can only guess."

"Well, Mr Mbele," responded Bartlett, "we're very much relying on you and your people to let us know what's happening, and what the gang is getting up to. I'm quite sure they're here to take over - it's just a question of when."

"My people are doing their best to make them go away," said Mbele, who was the village elder. "They know what a good man you are and how much you have looked after them all these years. They know things will be bad for them if you go."

"It's possible they may each be given some land," said James, hopefully. "There's more than enough good land for all of them," he repeated.

"Some of them have already been promised land by members of the gang. That's probably what the Government would do, too," replied Mbele. "Confiscate the

land, and lease it back in small bits to local people, so long as they're 'war veterans' or members of Zanu PF."

"I might even be able to stay myself on that basis," said James. "The house and a few acres - just enough to get by on. Then I could help you and your people make a go of things. Keep the irrigation system going, and things like that. I shall need to work. The house and farm are worth a lot of money, but if it's all confiscated, we shall have nothing."

"No savings?" asked the old man.

"Some," replied James. "A little in England from the early days - enough to pay for Will's school, at least, but the rest is here, and we are forbidden from taking money out of the country, so if we leave or are thrown out, we lose everything."

"It's difficult enough now," said Beatrice Bartlett, "paying for Will's boarding school. I worry that he would probably have to leave, and he so wants to go on to University."

"That already begins to look out of the question, even if we stay," said James.

"I don't think I would ever have the heart to tell him," said his wife.

"I already have," said James. "He understands."

"And if the gang decide to move in, and take their pick of the land," said Mbele, "then you won't be staying. They may even be acting on orders from someone else - a Minister or a Judge or someone, who will take over all of it. There will be no village of Chasimu, no school for Bwonqa and the others, no store - nothing left. One of the President's relations or a friend will move into the house, and the land will be left."

They fell silent.

Old man Mbele said, "They say the people of Zambia are looking for good white farmers. Have you thought of moving there?"

"Thought of it, but no more than that," replied James. "It would mean starting all over again, with no money, no tractors or equipment, no house. That would be too hard at my age. No; we'll stay here and take our chance, or go south if we have to go anywhere."

They sat in silence again, with only the sounds of the bush at dusk to interrupt their thoughts.

“I have spoken several times to Lieutenant Conteh, and he says he is doing his best,” said Mbele.

“I’m never sure about him,” replied Bartlett, “although I’ve spoken to him myself. In fact, he came to the farm only last week. But I’m not at all sure about him. I can’t make out whose side he’s on - or any of the rest of the Police, come to that.”

“He tells us we should not be afraid,” said the old man.

“But the Police can’t stop the thugs if they should decide to take over the farm,” said Bartlett. “There’s too many of them, and Conteh and his men are always so slow to react if you should contact them.”

“He tells us he is talking to the gang, but they still won’t leave us in peace.” said Mbele.

“In the end, the Police work for the Government, and that’s all there is to it,” said the farm owner. “And the war veterans are doing the Government’s dirty work for it, let’s face it, which is why I’m never sure about Lt. Conteh.”

“He’s taking a wife soon, and there’s to be a marriage in the Mosque at Chichele,” said the old man.

“We’ve been invited,” said Beatrice Bartlett. “Perhaps he’ll manage to keep things quiet until after that. He won’t want any trouble at his wedding.”

“That’s true,” said James Bartlett. “I’d quite forgotten that, with all else there is on my mind. When is it exactly?” he asked his wife.

“Three weeks, I think,” she replied. “I’ll get the invitation - it’s just inside.”

She quickly returned.

“As I thought,” she reported. “Three weeks next Saturday.”

The two men looked at one another.

“Conteh will want no trouble,” repeated the old man.

“I wonder,” mused Bartlett. “If Conteh is talking to the gang, he may just be able to hold them off until after his wedding. We could have just three weeks left, in that case.”

“I’ll talk to him again,” promised the old man.

“So will I, by God. If we are going to be kicked off our own land, it would be handy to know when. We could at least plan things a bit better.”

Mrs. Bartlett shivered, even in the heat.

“We’d better get the boys in,” she said. “It’s getting dark.”

She went to the end of the veranda, and rang the old brass bell.

The boys heard, and Tinker barked. He knew the bell meant a final swim and then supper. He beat the boys into the creek, and then beat them up the hill, across the scrub, and through the new metal gate into the garden.

Old man Mbele stood to leave. “Thank you for the beer, Missy.”

“Will,” commanded Mrs. Bartlett, “you get straight inside and clean up before supper. Those old rags you wear are a disgrace - I shall throw them out when you’ve gone back to school.”

“Good enough for playing in the bush,” replied the boy. “See you tomorrow, Bonkers,” shouted Will, after the departing Bwonqa. “My last day before I go back to school in England.”

Bwonqa waved as he and his father headed off into the bush, back to the village. The Bartletts left the veranda in the failing light, and went indoors.

They were largely silent over supper, each lost in their own thoughts. Beatrice Bartlett was worried about the future, of course, as they all were, and she simply could not imagine what would happen to them all. What if they were suddenly forced to leave while Will was in England at school? How would they get in touch? Where would he go for his holidays - he couldn’t stay at school. If they couldn’t continue to live in Zimbabwe, then they would probably head for South Africa, where they had friends. Will could always go there, she supposed. But what about money? What would they live on? So many problems - so many ‘what ifs’.

James Bartlett felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders. Not just for his family, but for all his friends and their families who worked on the farm. He had done his best for them over the years, as his ancestors had, helping to pay for the village they nearly all lived in, setting up the small C.of E. school for the children, building the dam and planning and digging out the extensive irrigation system which had changed acres of scrub into valuable, fertile soil.

The villagers believed that if they had land, then they had money, but they mostly failed to understand that the land needed to be carefully farmed, tended and watered. When times had been hard in drought years, as they would be again, they had been tempted in the past to eat the seed corn. But now the farm was more

complicated. It no longer just produced maize, but also cotton, and, on the best land, grapes from the vineyard.

He guessed that, when and if he left, they would all try to scrape a living by growing maize and nothing else, knowing that the marketing board would buy it from them. On their own, they did not have the knowledge or the contacts to market the cotton, or to harvest the grapes at their peak for selling to the vintners in the south. He could imagine that all the hard work he and his forbears had put into developing the farm and looking after the local community over the last hundred years or so would soon be put to waste, and the land would revert to thorn trees and scrub.

William, too, was lost in his own thoughts and fears for the future. He was in his last year at boarding school, and had been looking forward to going to university or agricultural college before, eventually, taking over the farm from his parents. That had been his only ambition. His great friend from childhood, Bwonqa Mbele, who he had always called 'Bonkers', would also eventually take over from the old man, his father, as farm manager and head man of the village, and they would continue to develop the place together.

In his heart of hearts, he knew now that this was an impossible dream.

The insane political ambition of those in power would bring about the long-term destruction of the farm, by redistributing the land to people who could not run it or make a living from it. To them, possession of land was all that mattered. Land meant power and land meant money. Already, other farms that had been taken from their white owners were falling into disrepair, and this year's tobacco harvest was the worst the country had known.

"It might be a good idea, Will," said his mother, "if you started collecting together your things this evening, rather than leave everything to the last minute as you usually do."

"I already have, Mother," he replied. "I plan to take rather more than usual, too. If you have to leave while I'm still at school, it will give you more space for your things."

"William, please don't talk like that." His mother was plainly upset.

"You know it makes sense, Mother," replied Will Bartlett. "Distressing though it might be, I know that I may not see this place again, and I am planning accordingly, as I know you are."

His mother dabbed her eyes, and Tinker jumped on to her lap, not, this time scrounging for a scrap of supper, but because he, too, sensed that things were not right.

“That’s very sensible of you, boy,” said James, his father, quietly. “If we do have to leave, we shan’t have much time to pack, or even to let you know we’re on the move, probably. But we’ll take what we can, and you know we shall go to the Parkinson’s down south, where you can eventually join us.”

“You mustn’t worry about me,” said Will. “I have already discussed all this with Bonkers, who’s a very sensible chap, and we have agreed how he will get word to me if the worst comes to the worst.”

“I’m still hoping and praying that I shall be able to stay on, even if the land is confiscated,” said Will’s father. “It’s happened on a few other farms, to the north. If we can hang on to the house and a few acres, I shall be able to keep going. I will be given nothing for the land, of course, except a little totally inadequate ‘compensation’, and I can’t get our savings out of the country, so I shall need to work, whatever happens.”

“It could very useful keeping in touch with Bonkers,” said Will. “So long as his father is kept on as manager, or head man of the village, they may yet be able to exercise some influence on our behalf.”

“They will need to be careful, though, not to compromise their own future by being seen to be too close to the ‘enemy’ white farmer.”

“Bonkers and the old man know that, and will watch their step,” replied Will.

The family fell silent again. Tinker moved across to Will, his best friend and playmate, and looked up sadly, ears back.

“Come on, then,” invited Will, and the little dog jumped up onto his lap.

Both knew there wouldn’t be many more evenings like this.

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It was lunchtime the next day before Bwonqa and old man Mbele arrived at the house, with Will’s father. Will had finished his packing, and was due, in a couple of hours, to drive in the old Landrover to the airstrip on the farm, a few miles from the house, for his short flight to Harare airport and the evening departure to London’s Gatwick. There were sandwiches and fresh fruit ready for them, but Will had no real appetite. Neither did the other boy, who looked sad.

“Why don’t you boys go down to the creek?” suggested Mrs. Bartlett. “Take some sandwiches and your fishing rods, and see if you have any luck. But mind you don’t get dirty!”

Their rods were always on the balcony, ready made up. They wandered off, for once without any real enthusiasm. But it was always cool by the creek, and they had their favourite spot, on the rocks under the overhanging trees. There were birds there, and always fish in the crystal clear water.

“It may be some time before I see you again,” said Will to Bonkers.

“I know, friend,” replied Bonkers, casting his line into the water. It landed with a splash, which it never usually did - he was too good a fisherman for that. They watched as all the frightened fish shot off down stream. “Like you, I have my lessons again tomorrow, but holidays will be strange and lonely without you here.”

“It might be all right,” said Will. “We might be lucky, and be able to stay.”

“No.” said Bwonqa, shaking his head. “It will never be all right again. But I shall come here to fish, and think of you in your far away country.”

They sat in silence, with only the whispering of the stream and the sounds of the bush to break the peace.

Suddenly, Tinker sat bolt upright, his nose taking in a strange scent drifting on the breeze. The boys heard a twig snap under foot not too far away, and Tinker tore off towards the sound, barking like a thousand demented hounds.

“It’s the gang!” yelled Bwonqa.

Both boys leapt to their feet and chased after Tinker, shouting at him come to heel.

A shot rang out.

On the balcony, James and Beatrice Bartlett stood petrified, hardly daring to move. Old man Mbele stared into the bush towards the creek, ears straining as the startled parakeets settled again. Mrs. Bartlett rang the old brass bell furiously.

“It’s all right,” said Mbele, holding up his hand. “The boys are coming - I hear them.”

Will and Bwonqa walked slowly up to the balcony. There were tears streaming down the black boy’s dusty face, as he carried a small, lifeless bundle in his arms.

“They shot Tinker”, said Will.

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