

Translated excerpt

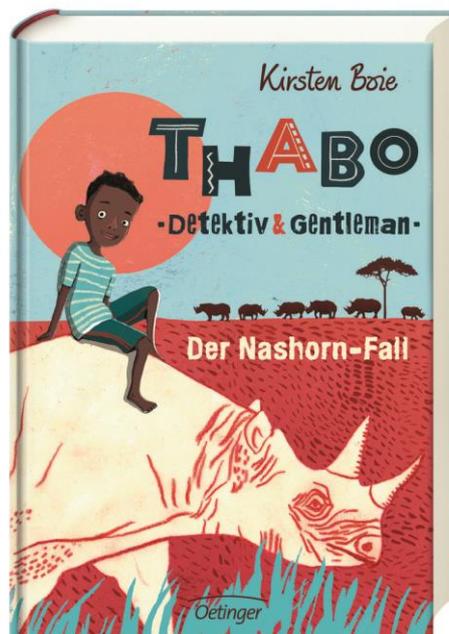
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Thabo: Detektiv und Gentleman.
Der Nashorn-Fall. Band 1
Illustrationen von Maja Bohn

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Thabo, Gentleman. The Rhino Horn Murder.
Illustrated by Maja Bohn

Translated by David Henry Wilson



A cry for help! No doubt about it, that was a cry for help from Miss Agatha!

I had put my mobile on vibration alarm, and so I almost missed her SMS; whenever I wash Uncle Vusi's jeep, I take my mobile out of my trouser pocket as a precaution, to make sure it does not get wet. It was only because a tourist summoned me with a whistle (rather rude of him, and I still do not know why) from the car park that I suddenly saw the phone dancing on the ground.

"Help! Help! Help!"

If the cry was that urgent, something was obviously wrong. The safari jeep would have to wait, and so would the rude tourist. After all, Miss Agatha had actually given me the mobile for such emergencies, and she also paid for my card.

Ladies and gentlemen, what should one do when one receives such a desperate call for help?

I put my mobile (still dry, I am happy to say) back in my pocket, and raced away. As far as I was concerned, the tourist could carry on whistling. I had far more important things to do.

But I have not introduced myself yet, have I? Miss Agatha says that a true gentleman always introduces himself first.

My name is Themba. Themba Sonnyboy Shongwe.

Unfortunately, I cannot reveal to you how old I am. Miss Agatha says that a true gentleman never asks people their age, because that is rude. And so if you think about it, to *say* your age must be even ruder than to *ask* about it. That is why I cannot tell you my age.

Of course I am not yet a true gentleman, but I would like to become one. (When you are still a boy, you cannot be one anyway.) Because a true gentleman generally has a very large house (often with a park) and a very large car and a very beautiful wife and a lot of money, so it is worth being a gentleman.

In all other respects, however, it may well be that a gentleman's life is rather boring, according to what I have observed up to now. That is why for some time I have been wondering if I would not prefer to be a private detective. Miss Agatha has a television set, and we sometimes watch such films. I have realized that private detecting could be an exciting career for me. But I have also realized that private detectives generally do not have very large houses or very large cars or lots of money. (All they do sometimes get is a very beautiful wife – but only at the end of the film.)

That is why I am not quite sure if private detecting would really be the correct job for me. And so until I make up my mind, I am trying to be both whenever the opportunity arises. The opportunity to behave like a gentleman naturally offers itself more frequently than the opportunity to behave like a private detective. As a gentleman, all you have to do is be polite, especially to the ladies. But as a private detective you have to do a bit more. You have to solve crimes. And to do that, first of all there has to be a crime for you to solve. It is most unfortunate, ladies and gentlemen, that where we live crimes do not happen very often. To be honest, I must confess to you that here in Hlatikulu there has never actually been such a thing as a crime. (Or at least during my life.)

Maybe criminals just do not come here, because they think there is nothing that is worth committing a crime for? (It is not true, though. Miss Agatha has a television they could steal, and a DVD player and a CD player and a computer. And in Lion Lodge there are even more expensive things. Somebody ought to tell the criminals, to give Sifiso Lovejoy and me a chance to test our private detecting skills.)

Sifiso Loveloy Madlopha is my best friend. (I have now politely introduced him.) When we were younger, which was when I moved in to live with Uncle Vusi, we both wanted to be professional footballers, but we were young and stupid then. Now we do not think we would have a real chance to become internationals. Sifiso says you have to train every day with a leather ball, and where would we get a leather ball? (Of course we could steal one, and then we would both have a leather ball so we could be professional footballers, *and* we would have a crime to do our private detecting training with. But then we would have to arrest ourselves.) In any case, you have to spend a lot of time every day kicking, and Sifiso has not got that much time because he has to look after his brother and two sisters.

That is why I suggested to him long ago that instead of professional football, private detecting might be a good job for us. I always tell Sifiso about the films I watch with Miss Agatha, because Sifiso has not got time to watch films with us on account of his brother and sisters. Also I am not sure that Miss Agatha would like it. *One* boy whose trousers are not always perfectly clean sitting on her genuine English silk chintz sofa might perhaps be enough for her.

I must also introduce Miss Agatha. It is easy to be polite about Miss Agatha and not to tell you her age, because I do not know her age myself. (I did once ask her, and that is how I know that it is not polite for a true gentleman to ask such things.) But I can tell you that she is the oldest person I know, although she is quite well preserved. Miss Agatha was already living in Hlatikulu when the English Queen was still chief of our country and a large number of English people lived here. In those days someone in Mbabane could easily have thought they were in London according to Miss Agatha, and they had cocktail parties every night. When our own King became chief of the country, most of the English people left. But Miss Agatha stayed.

She lives in a very upper class cottage just behind Lion Lodge, and it looks just like the houses in England. Of course I have never been to England, but I know about it from films which Miss Agatha and I watch together. Outside, all round the cottage, everything looks like it does in Hlatikulu, but in Miss Agatha's living room you could imagine you were in, say, Cornwall or Devon or Milchester. (Those are places in England where a lot of really terrible crimes take place, which have to be solved by an old lady and her friend. Because in England the police cannot solve most of the crimes – I learned that from the films, and I was a bit surprised. They leave crime solving to old ladies and their friends. So maybe it would be good if Sifiso and I went to England, because we would have plenty of private detecting work to do there.)

But we must return to the cry for help.

Miss Agatha was standing in the doorway when I arrived. "Themba!" she cried. "Thank God you got my message! I never know with these damned miniphones whether I've pressed the right buttons."

(First, Miss Agatha is definitely a lady – which is the female equivalent of a man being a gentleman. Secondly, unfortunately, in spite of that Miss Agatha sometimes uses words that a gentleman is not allowed to use, like 'damned'. But I think a lady *is* allowed to use them.)

I have to say I was relieved that Miss Agatha was still alive. When you get an SMS that says “Help! Help! Help!”, you imagine all kinds of terrible things. For instance, she could have been bitten by a black mamba (which will kill you) or attacked by common criminals (which I would have preferred, because at last we would have had a case to solve).

You do not imagine that it would just be a matter of telling her how to get onto the Internet.

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That is what it was, though.

“Emma’s arrived!” cried Miss Agatha, and pulled me into the house by my sleeve. “I’d completely forgotten that Wendy had told me, and now there’ll be all sorts of trouble!”

Wendy, ladies and gentlemen, is Miss Agatha’s niece, Ms Wendy Chapman, who owns Lion Lodge; and Emma is her daughter.

In the old days, Emma and I always used to play together. Uncle Vusi’s quarters are much closer to Lion Lodge than to the other huts in the village, because the rangers have their own compound in the park, just behind the car park. But Emma goes to a boarding school in England now and only comes home in the holidays, so we do not know each other as well as we used to.

Miss Agatha finds it very embarrassing that she keeps forgetting how to write emails. I watched Emma explain to her how easy it was. Emma wanted Miss Agatha to learn so that they could email each other when she was in England. But afterwards Miss Agatha immediately forgot how to do it. That is why she always sends me an SMS when she wants to write an email, because of course I remember.

(I think gentlemen always have computers. Maybe a private detective does too. If I cannot afford to get one in time to take up my profession, I shall ask Miss Agatha if I can use hers. It only stands around doing nothing except when I help her to send emails to Emma.)

“You know what Emma’s like!” Miss Agatha said, dropping onto her English silk chintz sofa. “She’s so suspicious! When she comes she’ll ask me straight away if I’ve *really* mastered the laptop and remembered everything she told me, and then she’ll make me show her. You know how bossy Emma is.”

Both things were true. Emma can be very suspicious and very bossy. I do not understand why Miss Agatha puts up with it. Emma should show Miss Agatha respect, not the other way round. Everybody respects their elders. But Emma is Emma, ladies and gentlemen, and there is no other way to describe her.

“I can show you again, Miss Agatha!” I offered. “Then you will be able to do it when Emma comes.” Of course I was pleased. Everybody is pleased when they can use someone else’s laptop.

Miss Agatha sighed. “Ngiyabonga, Themba!” she said. “What would I do without you?” Then she very solemnly pressed the on/off key. I could tell at once that she was proud of herself, because at least she had remembered the first thing you had to do.

“There!” she said smugly. “Now it’s on. What do we do next?”

But the laptop was not on at all, and anyone who paid just a little attention could have seen that. The screen was still dark, and there was not a single red or green light shining, which they always do when it is on.

“Where is the cable, Miss Agatha?” I asked. “The battery has gone flat, so we need the cable.”

Miss Agatha looked a bit confused. ““I know I had it recently,” she mumbled. “It damned well kept getting caught up in my feet. So where can the damned thing have gone now?”

(I have already mentioned that Miss Agatha uses words a true lady should not really use, but maybe a *very old* true lady is allowed to. In any case, you still have to respect her.)

She looked behind all the cushions on the sofa and chairs. I do not know where she puts her cable when she wants to get it out of her way, so I only watched and did not help her to look.

It was all in vain.

“Do not worry, Miss Agatha,” I said. “If the battery is flat and the cable is missing, the laptop cannot be switched on. Not even Emma can switch it on. And so you will not have to show her anything.”

Miss Agatha frowned. “Are you sure, Themba? Not even Emma? Couldn’t there be some sort of trick?”

“Not even Emma can do it, Miss Agatha,” I said. “So you can rest easy. It cannot work without electricity.”

I know a lot about electricity. Uncle Vusi’s hut has electricity, and all the rangers on the Lion Park compound have it. (And they also have walkie-talkies. They could be very useful for a private detective.)

Miss Agatha closed the laptop with a sigh, and looked straight at me. “Cup of tea, Themba?” she asked.

Miss Agatha and I always like to have a cup of tea together – strong, hot and sweet. The old lady in the films that we watch together (her name is Miss Marple) has the same. That is how I know that a good cup of tea (strong, hot and sweet) helps in any situation. (Not everyone believes that, of course. Uncle Vusi and his colleagues believe more in buganu, which is marula beer. Or tjwala in a carton, which is our mealie beer, or also expensive beer in a can.)

“I would love a cup of tea, Miss Agatha,” I replied.

But we never had it, because at that moment the front door flew open with a loud bang.

“Auntie?” yelled a familiar voice, and I could feel the joy rising in me, knowing that Emma was back again. “Auntie! It’s me! Emma!”

I do not know why, ladies and gentlemen, but somehow I felt straight away that there were exciting times ahead.

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When she saw me sitting on the sofa, Emma was so surprised that she stood frozen in the doorway as if she had just seen a lion. Or even worse, a hippopotamus. (Which of course was rather unlikely in Miss Agatha's living room.)

"Oh. Themba!" she said. "You're here too!"

And suddenly I also felt embarrassed. Before Emma flew to England to attend a good school (I do not know why Ms Wendy Chapman thinks the schools in our kingdom are not good), I had never felt embarrassed when we met.

"Yes, hello, Emma," I said, and stood up from the sofa. A true gentleman stands up when he greets a lady.

"Well?" said Emma.

There is not a lot you can say in reply to "Well?"

Fortunately, Miss Agatha now rushed towards Emma (if you can call an old lady's rush a rush) and threw her arms around her.

"Emma!" she cried. "I'm so happy to see you!"

Indeed she was, now that her laptop had not got any electricity.

"Ugh!" said Emma, fighting her way out of the embrace. Then she dropped down onto the sofa. "What a relief to be home again!"

I was not quite sure whether I should stay or not. Maybe Miss Agatha would prefer to have her cup of tea alone with her great niece.

But my mobile took the decision out of my hands. It rang, and the display showed the number of the rangers' station.

"Uncle Vusi?" I asked.

"Where the hell are you, Themba?" growled Uncle Vusi at the other end. (Of course it is good that Miss Agatha pays for my mobile, and my friends are envious. But sometimes it is a nuisance.) "What about my car?"

"I am coming!" I said. "There was an emergency, Uncle Vusi! I shall finish washing it right now! It was an emergency!"

I had completely forgotten about the safari jeep.

“I am afraid I have to go, Miss Agatha,” I said. “I must wash Uncle Vusi’s car. The tourists always complain when it is too dirty. They get stains on their clothes when they climb in.”

I always felt like laughing. It looks really funny when the tourists struggle up the little ladder to the benches on the viewing platform, especially when they are fat old ladies in trousers. But a true gentleman does not laugh at fat old ladies in trousers.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Themba,” said Miss Agatha. “Hamba kahle!”

“Sala kahle, Miss Agatha!” I replied. “So maybe I shall see you sometime, Emma.”

“Of course,” said Emma without looking at me.

There is something between us, but I do not know what it is.