

CLEAN SWEEP IGNATIUS

Few showed much interest when Ignatius Agarbi was appointed Nigeria's minister of finance. After all, the cynics pointed out, he was the seventeenth person to hold the office in seventeen years. In Ignatius's first major policy statement to Parliament he promised to end graft and corruption in public life and warned the electorate that no one holding an official position could feel safe unless he led a blameless life. He ended his maiden speech with the words, "I intend to clear out Nigeria's Augean stables."

Such was the impact of the minister's speech that it failed to get a mention in the Lagos Daily Times. Perhaps the editor considered that, since the paper had covered the speeches of the previous sixteen ministers in extenso, his readers might feel they had heard it all before.

Ignatius, however, was not disheartened by the lack of confidence shown in him, and set about his new task with vigor and determination. Within days of his appointment he had caused a minor official at the Ministry of Trade to be jailed for falsifying documents relating to the import of grain. The next to feel the bristles of Ignatius's new broom was a leading Lebanese financier, who was deported without trial for breach of the exchange control regulations. A month later came an event which even Ignatius considered a personal coup: the arrest of the inspector general of police for accepting bribes—a perk the citizens of Lagos had in the past considered went with the job. When four months later the police chief was sentenced to eighteen months in jail, the new finance minister finally made the front page of the Lagos Daily Times. An editorial on the center page dubbed him "Clean Sweep Ignatius," the new broom every guilty man feared. Ignatius's reputation as Mr. Clean continued to grow as arrest followed arrest, and unfounded rumors began circulating in the capital that even General Otobi, the head of state, was under investigation by his own finance minister.

Ignatius alone now checked, vetted, and authorized all foreign contracts worth over one hundred million dollars. And although every decision he made was meticulously scrutinized by his enemies, not a breath of scandal ever became associated with his name.

When Ignatius began his second year of office as minister of finance, even the cynics began to acknowledge his achievements. It was about this time that General Otobi felt confident enough to call him in for an unscheduled consultation.

The head of state welcomed the minister to Dodan Barracks and ushered him to a comfortable chair in his study overlooking the parade ground.

"Ignatius, I have just finished going over the latest budget report, and I am alarmed by your conclusion that the Exchequer is still losing millions of dollars each year in bribes paid to go-betweens by foreign companies. Have you any idea into whose pockets this money is falling? That's what I want to know."

Ignatius sat bolt upright, his eyes never leaving the head of state.

"I suspect a great percentage of the money is ending up in

private Swiss bank accounts, but I am at present unable to prove it.”

“Then I will give you whatever added authority you require to do so,” said General Otobi. “You can use any means you consider necessary to ferret out these villains. Start by investigating every member of my cabinet, past and present. And show no fear or favor in your endeavors, no matter what their rank or connections.”

“For such a task to have any chance of success I would need a special letter of authority signed by you, General.”

“Then it will be on your desk by six o’clock this evening,” said the head of state.

“And the rank of ambassador plenipotentiary whenever I travel abroad.”

“Granted.”

“Thank you,” said Ignatius, rising from his chair on the assumption that the audience was over.

“You may also need this,” said the general as they walked toward the door. The head of state handed Ignatius a small automatic pistol. “Because I suspect by now that you have almost as many enemies as I.”

Ignatius took the pistol from the soldier awkwardly, put it in his pocket, and mumbled his thanks.

Not another word passed between the two men. Ignatius left his leader and was driven back to his ministry.

Without the knowledge of the governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, and unhindered by any senior civil servants, Ignatius enthusiastically set about his new task. He researched alone at night, and by day discussed his findings with no one. Three months later he was ready to pounce.

The minister selected the month of August to make an unscheduled visit abroad, as it was the time when most Nigerians went on vacation, and his absence would therefore not be worthy of comment.

He asked his permanent secretary to book him, his wife, and their two children on a flight to Orlando, and to be certain that the tickets were charged to his personal account.

On their arrival in Florida, the family checked into the local Marriott Hotel. Ignatius then informed his wife, without warning or explanation, that he would be spending a few days in New York on business before rejoining them for the rest of the vacation. The following morning he left his family to the mysteries of Disney World while he took a flight to New York. It was a short taxi ride from La Guardia to Kennedy, where, after a change of clothes and the purchase of a return tourist ticket for cash, he boarded a Swissair flight for Geneva unobserved.

Once he had arrived, Ignatius checked into an inconspicuous hotel, retired to bed, and slept soundly for eight hours. Over breakfast the following morning he studied the list of banks he had so carefully drawn up after completing his research in Nigeria: Each name was written out boldly in his own hand. Ignatius decided to start with Gerber et Cie, whose building, he observed from the hotel bedroom, took up half the Avenue de Parichine. He checked

the telephone number with the concierge before placing a call. The chairman agreed to see him at twelve o'clock.

Carrying only a battered briefcase, Ignatius arrived at the bank a few minutes before the appointed hour—an unusual occurrence for a Nigerian, thought the young man dressed in a smart gray suit, white shirt, and gray silk tie who was waiting in the marble hall to greet him. He bowed to the minister, introducing himself as the chairman's personal assistant, and explained that he would accompany Ignatius to the chairman's office. The young executive led the minister to a waiting elevator, and neither man uttered another word until they had reached the eleventh floor. A gentle tap on the chairman's door elicited "Entrez," which the young man obeyed.

"The Nigerian minister of finance, sir."

The chairman rose from behind his desk and stepped forward to greet his guest. Ignatius could not help noticing that he too wore a gray suit, white shirt, and gray silk tie.

"Good morning, Minister," the chairman said. "Won't you have a seat?" He ushered Ignatius toward a low glass table surrounded by comfortable chairs on the far side of the room. "I have ordered coffee for both of us, if that is acceptable."

Ignatius nodded, placed the battered briefcase on the floor by the side of his chair, and stared out of the large plate-glass window. He made some small talk about the splendid view of the magnificent fountain while a girl served all three men with coffee.

Once the young woman had left the room, Ignatius got down to business.

"My head of state has asked me to visit your bank with a rather unusual request," he began. Not a flicker of surprise appeared on the face of the chairman or his young assistant. "He has honored me with the task of discovering which Nigerian citizens hold numbered accounts with your bank."

On learning this piece of information only the chairman's lips moved. "I am not at liberty to disclose—"

"Allow me to put my case," said the minister, raising a white palm. "First, let me assure you that I come with the absolute authority of my government." Without another word, Ignatius extracted an envelope from his inside pocket with a flourish. He handed it to the chairman, who removed the letter inside and read it slowly.

Once he had finished reading, the banker cleared his throat.

"This document, I fear, sir, carries no validity in my country." He replaced it in the envelope and handed it back to Ignatius. "I am, of course," continued the chairman, "not for one moment doubting that you have the full backing of your head of state, both as a minister and an ambassador, but that does not change the bank's rule of confidentiality in such matters. There are no circumstances in which we would release the names of any of our account holders without their authority. I'm sorry to be of so little help, but those are, and will always remain, the bank rules." The chairman rose to his feet, as he considered the meeting was now at an end; but he had not bargained for Clean Sweep Ignatius.

"My head of state," said Ignatius, softening his tone perceptibly, "has authorized me to approach your bank to act as the intermediary for all future transactions between my country and Switzerland."

"We are flattered by your confidence in us, Minister," replied the chairman, who remained standing. "However, I feel sure that you will understand that it cannot alter our attitude to our customers' confidentiality."

Ignatius remained unperturbed.

"Then I am sorry to inform you, Mr. Gerber, that our ambassador in Geneva will be instructed to send an official communiqué to the Swiss Foreign Office about the lack of cooperation your bank has shown concerning requests for information about our nationals." He waited for his words to sink in. "You could avoid such embarrassment, of course, by simply letting me know the names of my countrymen who hold accounts with Gerber et Cie and the amounts involved. I can assure you we would not reveal the source of our information."

"You are most welcome to lodge such a communiqué, sir, and I feel sure that our minister will explain to your ambassador in the most courteous of diplomatic language that the Foreign Ministry does not have the authority under Swiss law to demand such disclosures."

"If that is the case, I shall instruct my own Ministry of Trade to halt all future dealings in Nigeria with any Swiss nationals until these names are revealed."

"That is your privilege, Minister," replied the chairman, unmoved.

"And we may also have to reconsider every contract currently being negotiated by your countrymen in Nigeria. And in addition, I shall personally see to it that no penalty clauses are honored."

"Would you not consider such action a little precipitate?"

"Let me assure you, Mr. Gerber, that I would not lose one moment of sleep over such a decision," said Ignatius. "Even if my efforts to discover those names were to bring your country to its knees I would not be moved."

"So be it, Minister," replied the chairman. "However, it still does not alter the policy or the attitude of this bank to confidentiality."

"If that remains the case, sir, this very day I shall give instructions to our ambassador to close our embassy in Geneva, and I shall declare your ambassador in Lagos persona non grata." For the first time the chairman raised his eyebrows.

"Furthermore," continued Ignatius, "I will hold a press conference in London which will leave the world's media in no doubt of my head of state's displeasure with the conduct of this bank. After such publicity, I feel confident you will find that many of your customers would prefer to close their accounts, while others who have in the past considered you a safe haven may find it necessary to look elsewhere."

The minister waited, but still the chairman did not respond.

"Then you leave me no choice," said Ignatius, rising from his

seat.

The chairman stretched out his arm, assuming that at last the minister was leaving, only to watch with horror as Ignatius placed a hand in his jacket pocket and removed a small pistol. The two Swiss bankers froze as the Nigerian minister of finance stepped forward and pressed the muzzle against the chairman's temple.

"I need those names, Mr. Gerber, and by now you must realize I will stop at nothing. If you don't supply them immediately, I'm going to blow your brains out. Do you understand?"

The chairman gave a slight nod, beads of sweat appearing on his forehead. "And he will be next," said Ignatius, gesturing toward the young assistant, who stood speechless and paralyzed a few paces away.

"Get me the names of every Nigerian who holds an account in this bank," Ignatius said quietly, looking toward the young man, "or I'll blow your chairman's brains all over his soft pile carpet. Immediately, do you hear me?" he added sharply.

The young man looked toward the chairman, who was now trembling, but who said quite clearly, "Non, Pierre, jamais."

"D'accord," replied the assistant in a whisper.

"You can't say I didn't give you every chance." Ignatius pulled back the hammer. The sweat was now pouring down the chairman's face, and the young man had to turn his eyes away as he waited in terror for the pistol shot.

"Excellent," said Ignatius, as he removed the gun from the chairman's head and returned to his seat. Both the bankers were still trembling and quite unable to speak.

The minister picked up the battered briefcase by the side of his chair and placed it on the glass table in front of him. He pressed back the clasps and the lid flicked up.

The two bankers stared down at the neatly packed rows of hundred-dollar bills. Every inch of the briefcase had been taken up. The chairman quickly estimated that it probably amounted to around five million dollars.

"I wonder, sir," said Ignatius, "how I go about opening an account with your bank?"