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# The Kimberley Process

by

David Haggett

## Prologue

### Lake Victoria Bank, Kampala, Uganda

November 2007

Midnight was marked by the dull chime of the clock on the wall. Despite the late hour, the office felt hot and humid. The air was barely stirred by the uneven turning of the ancient overhead fan. The oppressive atmosphere was made worse by the sour smell of stale cigarette smoke.

At one end of the room, above the single curtainless window, a fluorescent tube threw a flickering light over a desk where a young African was fast asleep, slumped in front of a pile of computer printouts. A full ashtray smouldered at his elbow.

At the other end of the room, Peter Lemont drank from a can of warm cola under a double set of tubes that gave off a stark but steady light. He tried to concentrate on the task at hand but, with his beard itching again because of the heat, he asked himself for the hundredth time why he was in Uganda being eaten by mosquitoes and sitting in a shirt continuously damp with sweat. He knew the answer all too well. It was the money.

Lake Victoria Bank in Kampala was installing a new computer system. The old one, bought from an Irish company many years before, had become limited in its functionality and expensive to maintain. A six-month evaluation for its replacement had taken place but, as was common throughout Africa, the evaluation did not bear scrutiny.

No-one was particularly surprised when the contract was awarded to Griffin Banking Systems from Ghana, a relatively new IT firm with an aggressive sales program and a policy of “generosity” to its customers, new and old, that often helped nudge buying decisions their way.

Known as GBS to friends and foes alike, Griffin Banking Systems had become synonymous with the sort of transactions that had made the African banking software market so difficult in recent years.

The trouble with such contracts, mused Peter, was that once the money had changed hands - in both directions - the recipients were rarely interested in actually doing the work contracted. This project had started well enough but GBS had shortly thereafter won a prestigious deal for a Reserve Bank system in a small West African country. With the politics involved and the back-handers so well placed, it was a project that could not be allowed to fail. The result was key GBS personnel were quickly reassigned from Lake Victoria Bank to the Reserve Bank.

The owners of the Ugandan bank, the Patel family, were understandably furious. After some heavy negotiating, during which it was alleged that some equally heavy threats had been made, the chairman of GBS had engaged Peter and his partner, Robert Palmer, as freelance consultants. Their role was to assist the project manager of GBS, Mike Pretorius. He was a competent technician but with a reputation for taking chances and cutting corners, which is why he had been left behind at the bank when the more reliable GBS staff had been reassigned to West Africa.

After several months of tedious accounting, training and planning, tonight was the “go live” date: when the bank would drop its old computer system and start relying on the new software. During the past week, all the balances from the Irish system had been prepared, checked and reconciled. Just this afternoon the balances had been entered into the Ghanaian software.

The Patels had quizzed Peter regularly about the data and his activities, something that Peter found as annoying as it was pointless. There had been regular project meetings where they could have learned such things but he had often felt that they were expecting him to make some particular comment about his findings. When he had finally asked just what he

was meant to be searching for, Suresh Patel, the older brother, had become evasive and the questioning had ceased.

Peter was distracted from his daydream by an enormous cockroach scurrying out from behind the waste bin next to his desk. Instinctively he slammed his heel down hard on it. Repulsed by the crunch under his foot, he immediately regretted his action. It had been a long week and an even longer Saturday, so he was surprised at the speed of his reaction.

Yawning and stretching, Peter swept strands of dark wavy hair from his brown eyes with a flick of his left hand. He knew his hair was too long now, hanging to his shoulders, but he was certainly not allowing a Ugandan barber near it. His hepatitis shots might be up to date but this was not a country where one gambled on such things.

He had now finished verifying the balances that had been entered into the system and was certain that the current accounts were close to balancing. Voices echoed along the corridor and Peter groaned as two people entered the room carrying more computer printouts.

‘How’re you doing, Pete?’ asked the taller and thinner of the two, his partner Robert.

Robert refused to follow the bank’s dress code and, unlike the conservative Peter, wore a gaudy orange and green Hawaiian shirt and stonewashed jeans. His insistence on wearing what would have passed as Hippie style round glasses made him look like a computer nerd rather than the trendy man about town that he imagined he was. An untidy thatch of hair, dyed an unnatural straw blond, did nothing to improve first impressions.

‘More crap spewed from the great Ghanaian monster!’ he chuckled, as he dumped dozens of pages of computer printouts onto Peter’s already cluttered desk.

Robert’s companion, Pretorius, stood at the far end of the room shaking the African awake demanding to know why the rest of the project team had gone home when there was work still to be done. Pretorius was considerably shorter than either Peter or Robert, overweight and prematurely balding - unsolicited attributes that had conspired, in Pretorius’ opinion, to prevent him from fulfilling his true potential. To compensate for life’s inequitable distribution of physical assets, he was aggressive and sarcastic, which made him unpopular with the Africans and Peter. For some reason, his obnoxious character did not seem to affect Robert in any obvious way.

‘Give me a break, Rob. I’ve only just finished this pile,’ sighed Peter.

‘If you remember, you offered to check these others while Mike and I sorted out the suspense accounts and general ledger.’

‘Yeah, yeah. Alright. Organise some coffee would you? I reckon we’ve still another couple of hours of this.’

Robert grunted his acknowledgement of the request as he left the room, followed by Pretorius who had not spoken to Peter nor acknowledged his existence during the exchange. Peter and Pretorius had silently agreed early in the project that they shared a mutual dislike and Robert had found himself in the role of go-between.

Peter stared at the pile of fresh printouts and cursed under his breath. A brilliant flash lit up the sky outside, briefly turning night to day, quickly followed by the reverberating boom of thunder. The lights in the office flickered.

‘This is my last African project,’ Peter promised himself. He stopped to watch a gecko on the wall feast on unwary mosquitoes too fat and too slow to flee, having gorged on his blood.

Peter had had enough of Africa, with its biting insects, heat, corruption and half-baked projects. Some people loved the continent but he couldn’t see the attraction. The bank had provided none of the experienced staff that had been promised for the project, assigning instead half a dozen, seemingly semi-literate, juniors. Most of them were wary of Peter and Robert but all of them were terrified of Pretorius and his acid tongue. They were, at best,

useless. At worst, a liability. A quick glance confirmed that the young Ugandan at the far end of the room was asleep again. 'Situation normal,' Peter grumbled under his breath.

Computer security was virtually non-existent. Both Peter and Robert had passwords that allowed them to enter data directly into the system, which was normally forbidden to consultants on such projects. Except in Africa, where it was common. Peter was fairly confident that Pretorius had the "super-user" password that allowed him access to the data, the files and aspects of the system that only senior bank staff should have. Pretorius denied this, of course, but on reflection, Peter did not believe much of what Pretorius told him.

With the money earned from this project, Peter and Robert would, at last, have enough capital to set up the small software development company that they had been talking about since they first met several years ago at a bank in Lagos.

They planned to write the definitive, modern Foreign Exchange trading system and sell it for a fortune. No more would they sub-contract for the likes of Griffin Banking Systems. It was a common dream among banking consultants but Peter and Robert had already started the planning and analysis, convinced their dream would come true. Buoyed with that optimistic thought, Peter went back to ticking off the savings account balances, accompanied by the whirl of the fan, the clicking of the lights and the snoring of the young Ugandan.

Two hours later Pretorius and Robert re-entered the room to find Peter dozing, his coffee barely touched.

'Wake up, lazybones. We're going back to the hotel. The general ledger balances and the suspense accounts are done,' said Robert, slamming the door closed.

Peter stirred and yawned. 'That was fast. I thought you would be battling with the numbers for hours yet. How did the reconciliation of the suspense account balances go?' he asked.

A look passed between Robert and Pretorius but Peter, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, did not notice.

'Oh, fine,' muttered Robert, gazing down at his sandals.

'How far out?' asked Peter.

It was normal practice for these accounts to have balances in them which represented the accumulated differences between the two systems. Typically, the greater the divergence in age and technology between the systems, the greater would be the inconsistencies. The gulf between the ancient Irish system and the new GBS system could hardly be larger.

'Well, er, it's big, Peter,' mumbled Robert. 'About four million dollars.'

'Wow!' exclaimed Peter. 'That's huge for a bank like this. Have you had a chance to double-check?'

'No, not yet,' Pretorius responded sharply.

He then yawned, somewhat theatrically Peter thought. 'Come on, Lemont, it's late. The problems will still be here tomorrow and we'll have all day to sort them out, okay? I'll get the operators to back-up the system.'

He picked up the telephone and punched in the appropriate numbers. Peter needed no further encouragement to call it a night and made for the exit, followed by Robert. Thunder rumbled ominously in the background as they trudged toward the front door of the bank.

'Have these idiots installed something to keep the system running if the power goes off?' asked Pretorius gruffly, joining them.

Peter shook his head. Installing the power back-up was Pretorius's responsibility but, as usual, he had delegated it to one of the bank staff which did not bode well.

As they left the relative cool dryness of the bank lobby the oppressive, steamy night air hit them like a wet towel. The three consultants huddled under the protection of an

awning, while heavy rain drummed loudly on the canvas making conversation all but impossible. Already sheltering under the cover was Wilson, the bank guard, who snapped sharply to attention and saluted with military precision as they arrived.

‘Goodnight, Wilson,’ shouted Peter, trying to be heard above the downpour.

‘Goodnight, sir,’ replied the guard, with the ghost of a smile playing on his face.

Peter always made a point of speaking to the guard and often complained to Robert about the offhand manner in which his friend treated Wilson.

The rain was falling in torrents, running down the pavements and roads in rivers. Despite Wilson scampering alongside him with an open umbrella as they raced to the waiting taxi, Peter was soaked before he could clamber inside to join his sodden colleagues.

A drenched Wilson watched as the car pulled away, before returning to the awning, a small puddle collecting at his feet. Despite the unpleasant sensation of his boots filled with water, Wilson beamed, pleased with the little wad of Ugandan shillings that Peter had slipped into his hand.

The drive back to the hotel was an unpleasant mix of water trickling down their necks, the stink of sodden carpet in the back of the cramped vehicle and the crunch of car springs as they veered from one pot-hole to the next.

‘God, I hate this place,’ said Peter to no-one in particular. ‘The quicker I can be out of here and back home the better.’

He got his wish sooner than expected. The following morning a letter from the Patels terminating his contract was waiting for him at breakfast, along with an air ticket back to England. The letter guaranteed a small but sufficient bonus to compensate him for the early conclusion of his services. No explanation was given and Peter was too pleased to be leaving to ask for one. Robert also had a letter in his hand and, from the expression on his face, Peter knew he would not be travelling alone.

# Chapter 1

Monday 18th August 2008

## England

Peter strolled along the high street in Seaford, a small town on the East Sussex coast, enjoying the salty tang carried by the strong wind off the English Channel. Seagulls screeched overhead in the pale blue sky. A solitary cloud drifted slowly across the sun, momentarily blurring the shadows. The season was struggling to make its presence felt between relentless rainy days. It was turning into one of the wettest summers for many years but today there was just enough warmth for Peter to unbutton his leather jacket.

Both he and Robert had been back in England for nine months and Peter had no desire to leave again any time soon, certainly not back to the sauna that was East Africa. Their business had taken off better than in their wildest dreams. Peter had assumed the role of salesman and business analyst, while Robert was the software expert and programmer.

It was demanding work, with long hours and enough stress to keep them focussed but it also allowed the flexibility for Peter to indulge his passion for old books, which is why he was in Seaford.

Peter turned left into Church Lane, a narrow side road occupied by the more exclusive shops that did not want to vie for attention with the usual high street stores. He passed a boutique window advertising the curative powers of New Age Crystals and glanced briefly into a pet store where an iguana was clearly not relishing the English weather.

He finally stopped outside a small shop, its windows crammed with books of all sizes. On the door was written, in gold Gothic script, 'Roger Noble, Rare Books'. Peter turned the small brass handle and opened the door, conscious of the gentle ringing of the bell above his head. The musty smell of old volumes engulfed him while he waited for Roger Noble to appear.

'Ah, Peter. Good. You got my message,' said the proprietor, as he emerged from the storeroom at the rear of his cluttered shop. A gaunt, balding man, with gold pince-nez balanced on an aquiline nose and wearing a sensible tweed suit with a green bow tie, Roger Noble was, Peter thought, the quintessential antiquarian book dealer. Noble disappeared back into the storeroom, re-emerging moments later with a large book, held carefully with both hands.

'Here it is, as promised. "The Aurelian" by Moses Harris, the father of butterfly collecting.'

Roger placed the volume gently on the table in front of Peter, pushing aside a stack of dusty atlases. Peter stared at the large leather-bound tome which he knew dated from 1840, one of only two thousand printed. He also knew it was going to be expensive. The binding appeared good, although some of the hand-painted plates of English butterflies were obviously missing, judging by the way the pages lay.

'Go on. How much?' he asked.

'Peter, this is an uncommon find. Do you know how rarely such a book comes through a dealer and not offered at auction?' Roger beamed enthusiastically. 'It's from a private collector in Norfolk whom I have known for years. We got chatting, your name came up and ... here's the book.'

'Come on, stop playing games. How much?' Peter had often done business with Roger and was familiar with his patter for upping the price.

'I can see that you've noticed the missing plates. Here's a list of them.' Roger handed Peter a sheet of paper. The list, handwritten, covered nearly half the sheet. Peter sighed with disappointment. He handed the list back.

'How much?'

The bookseller quickly put the list out of sight. 'It's a marvellous collector's piece, Peter, and a bargain at two thousand pounds.'

'Good grief!' exclaimed Peter. 'Sorry, Roger, but that's quite a bit more than we discussed. You told me that the last one went at Bloomsbury for fifteen hundred quid.'

'Well, I was also surprised at the price but it is a seller's market. You've been looking for two years and this is the first one that's come my way.'

'I appreciate that, Roger. But I'll have to think about it. I'll give you a ring later.'

'Don't leave it too long, Peter, I can only hold it for a short while'.

Shaking with both the excitement of finding his Holy Grail and the frustration of it being significantly more than he had budgeted, Peter shook Roger's hand and left the shop, bumping into two large black men who were standing by the doorway.

'Sorry, guys, I didn't see you,' Peter mumbled as he slid past them, deep in thought.

He strolled to a café on the corner of Church Lane and High Street. In the cosy atmosphere of the family-run business, he ordered a cup of coffee and mulled over the advisability of investing so much hard-earned money in what was, after all, just a hobby. Still distracted, he stared out of the window and saw the same two large men he had just bumped into on the far side of the road staring back at him.

The sight of these two heavy-set men, both wearing expensive-looking camel-hair coats, seemed somehow odd to Peter. Initially, he couldn't think why but then it struck him: their heavy coats looked out of place, as everyone else was dressed for warm weather. Maybe these two were foreigners, he concluded.

They quickly turned and walked away when they saw him looking at them, so Peter's thoughts returned to the burning question - to buy or not to buy?

The coffee did little to help resolve his quandary, so he paid and left the café, making his way back to his car. He stopped to look in the window of the Sussex Stationers in the High Street when again he became aware of the two foreign men. Nigerians, he decided from their build and features, although he would be the first to admit that his knowledge on such matters was poor, despite having had the misfortune to have worked many times in Africa. They were twenty or so paces away and had also stopped to peer in a window. Peter was amused to see that they were staring long and hard into a launderette.

With his interest now raised, Peter sauntered down to WH Smiths, a little further along the street. Glancing casually at the reflections in the different shop windows as he went, it seemed to him that the two men were following him. If he stopped to look into a shop, they stopped too. Peter was intrigued but dismissed their actions as no more than coincidence. There was a more important subject to occupy his thoughts: what to do about the book?

Peter turned from the busy main road into a less used side street that offered a shortcut back to his car. As he entered the narrow road with its deep shadows, the air chilled considerably so he quickened his pace. His footsteps echoed off the cold, stone walls of the houses but soon he heard others added to his own. He turned his head and was surprised to see the two Nigerians behind him. If, indeed, they were Nigerian.

Perturbed but still not unduly worried, he increased his stride, trying to do so nonchalantly. The echoes told him that the strangers had done the same. Not wanting to appear foolish if their presence was simply coincidence, he made a pretence of looking at his watch as he broke into a run, hoping that they would assume he was late for an appointment.

Now he could hear that the Nigerians were also running and it sounded like they were gaining on him. Still not sure whether he was being irrational, Peter put in a final sprint and pulled the car keys from his jacket pocket.

As he approached his car he pressed the remote and heard the door locks click open. He grabbed the driver's door handle, yanked it open and threw himself inside the car.

Fumbling slightly, he thrust the key into the ignition and turned it. The Honda started first time and the car lurched forward, earning Peter a well-deserved honk from the one vehicle that had just turned into the road.

Cursing loudly from nerves, he looked in his rear-view mirror, disturbed to see the two men standing in the middle of the road staring at his car as he drove away.

With his breathing returning to normal as he left Seaford, Peter decided that he should go home to change his clothes before going to the office. And perhaps even have a small drink to steady his nerves?

The further away from Seaford and the Nigerians he travelled the more he began to believe that he had acted foolishly. After all, he wondered, why would anyone want to follow him?

Three hours later, after a drink and a snack, Peter felt more relaxed, so he made his way to the offices of Phasmid IT, the software company set up by Robert and himself. The offices were, in reality, a small flat on the second floor of a rather shabby house along West Hill Street, not far from Brighton Railway Station. It was not a particularly salubrious area and Peter had concerns about the other occupants of the house. On more than one occasion he thought he had smelled marijuana but it had been a while since his university days, so he could not be sure.

The living room of the flat had been converted into a reception area. The décor, a subject on which Peter knew nothing, had been based on a picture he'd seen and liked in a magazine. The two bedrooms were now offices for Peter and Robert respectively. What had been a small kitchen buzzed with the noise of servers, modems and other technical equipment that Robert had specified as necessary but which Peter had stopped pretending to understand.

He mounted the stairs two at a time, anxious to start on a small problem that had been reported by one of the users of an arbitrage program. It was a client in the City that had shown faith in their ideas and products and, more importantly, had been quick to pay their invoices. Experience had taught him that not all banks could be relied on to act in such a manner.

At the landing, Peter stopped. The outer door of the office was ajar. This was unusual because it was their habit to ensure it was always closed, even when they were both working inside. There had been a lot of petty theft in the area of late and some of the equipment in what was the kitchen would be a definite lure for burglars and drug users alike.

'Robert!' Peter called out as he pushed the door fully open.

He stopped in the doorway, shocked at the scene before him.

Inside, the reception area was a shambles. The glass coffee table in the centre of the room had been smashed. Magazines lay scattered across the couch. A standard lamp had fallen and lay on its side. Cupboard drawers had been pulled out, their contents strewn around the room.

Seized with panic, Peter rushed to Robert's office and flung open the door. Robert lay in a crumpled heap against the front of the desk, his legs bent under him. As Peter knelt by his side and shouted his name, Robert stirred and groaned. Peter examined his friend's damaged face. One eye was swollen shut, his lower lip was split and bleeding. Blood trickled from his now bulbous nose.

'What the hell happened, Robert? Are you alright?' The second question was stupid and Peter knew it.

Robert groaned again but didn't move. Peter gently shook him to see if he might come round and cursed himself for never having taken a first aid course. What should one do in these circumstances? Peter tried to position his partner more comfortably but this only had



the effect of making Robert cry out in pain, causing Peter to feel even more useless. His friend slipped fully into unconsciousness.

Peter swore as he stood and went to the telephone to call for the emergency services.