

## The Bottom Line

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She let out a piercing sarcastic chuckle. The dim-lit bedroom absorbed the earsplitting cackles under inevitable compulsion. The yellow bulb at the ceiling cast yellow streaks that adorned the pretty pair in sallow complexions. The two sat fronting each other, with Fresha in a melancholic mood. The visitor's face carried beams of uncommon mirth. From her luxuriant cheeks down to lips and back, Madame Florina was splendid. Clad in a dazzling see-through dress, Fresha could see the perfect curves of her waist. As she reclined on her chair, Fresha beheld the most gorgeous damsel on this part of Nairobi. Madame's body exuded a bewitching scent that confronted the gloom in the room.

Perhaps, her coming would help abate Fresha's foul mood that had lasted for weeks.

"It is shocking how a graduate should turn into a sad thing," Madame announced.

"Sorry ..." Fresha said.

"Great academic qualifications ... but so miserable!"

"It's the sorrow of missing him ... and the pandemic." Fresha sat up and rose from her seat.

"It's shocking, Fresha, isn't it?"

"But nothing goes my way ... I love him, but he's poor ... The pandemic has made it worse."

"You're an idiot, Fresha!"

This was a resounding harangue from Madame. Fresha winced, but controlled herself.

"Weigh your words."

"It's a fact. I speak the truth and shame the devil!" Madame chortled and squirmed in her seat.

"Truth is also relative," declared Fresha.

"What's that?" Madame asked with airs of ignorance.

"I mean, sometimes you should appreciate individual differences. Truth to you may be lies to me. Handsome to you ..."

"Phew! I'm tired of pep talk! Books have ruined you and I'm sorry to say that you'll never be happy!"

"All right, what are major attributes of a fiancé in your opinion?" asked Fresha

"A rich man."

"Is money everything?"

"Good heavens, it is the *only* thing!"

“I doubt,” Fresha’s said in a calm voice.

“Don’t pretend, wench,” Madame made an affront.

“I am no wench like you ... Humankind needs ideals?”

“Do you dress ideals? Do you travel by wisdom or car?”

“My dear cousin, knowledge, integrity, wisdom are all recipes for success ... including love and marriage.”

“Bullshit!” thundered Madame.

“Uncultured woman!” screamed Fresha.

“Deuce, integrity ... wisdom ... no longer matter! You will die poor?”

“What ...?”

The room teemed with shouts and gasps. While outside, a heavy mist crawled. The yellow bulb flickered on and off under the impending darkness. Madame Florina, without notice, sprang to her feet and picked-up her splendid handbag. With a “dignified” forthrightness, she snarled, “I clink my liaisons and I rustle my religion. I clink my business, I rustle my path in life.”

She strutted outside to her classy yellow Prado, drew the door ajar, entered and slammed it shut. She thrust the key into the ignition and turned it on. The car chortled its way out of the compound. Instead of wasting her precious time with “a miserable thing like Fresha,” she would rather secure another lucrative deal with her business partner. With Mulosi Mogeni on her side, her account would burst with more millions than idle chatting in the company of “intellectuals on the verge of starvation.” Madame stepped on the accelerator as she went into her characteristic musing. She pitied the Freshas of this world. Educated they were, but Madame’s father owned fifty times more in property than they ever could. ‘*Survival was the way, especially being streetwise,*’ she thought. Education is a pile of abstracts that yielded nothing more, but indigence.

With the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, Fresha and her colleagues, after years of teaching in private schools, were rendered jobless. Some had no means of livelihood. Eugene, Fresha’s boyfriend, joined *Kazi Mtaani*, a government initiative to assist “the poorest of the poor to eke a living.” Wataka, Eugene’s elder brother, a role model, a graduate student at Millenia University, joined “the destitute” to clear bushes in town for a meager daily wage of three hundred shillings now that all universities had been shut down. ‘*Heck! Of what use is knowledge if all one possesses is poverty? Of what use is integrity if everything one has in inventory are papers?*’

“Intelligentsia, integrity and wisdom are nothing more, but mere prattles,” Madame muttered. Folks wasted time pursuing naught at the expense of what really mattered in life. After all, her father had neither acquired “big degrees” nor bragged about “powerful morals.” Through aggressiveness and survival tactics, he vanquished poverty and set his family on a path to “success.” For him, one can say ignorance was strength. The less one knew, the happier one became.

Unlike Fresha, Florina knew to be sane demanded toiling hard for something, clinging onto something benevolent and tangible. She did not need to submerge the self into the abstracts—integrity, scholarship, virtue or propriety. Had she stuck onto these things, she might have missed pertinent points. Her father’s path had taught her volumes and trained her well. The young Florina had grown-up to appreciate pragmatism, but detested rhetoric. Psychoanalysis, democracy,

individuality, integrity and many prattles did not bring food onto her table. Going after such ideals was a futile pursuit; therefore, she embraced utilitarianism as her life's philosophy. Her body craved bacon, milk, Danish pudding, English pastry, hamburger and other delicacies characteristic for a sophisticated girl.

It is no wonder her family was the most respected in and around Makombe Estate. Their lush mansion was a living evidence of their material success. It proclaimed affluence and splendor. The intelligentsia's attention to details gave them ability to describe virtually anything; yet, they could not describe her father's complicated mansion.

One evening, as Florina returned home, negotiating a corner towards the gate to her father's mansion, six rotund masked men jumped in front of her car. She slammed on her breaks as her car came to a screeching halt. She nearly flew out of its front window shield.

The men roughly accosted her. "Hands up!" one growled.

It was a confounding moment and experience. She threw her hands up in the air.

"Out of the car!" a voice growled.

She hopped out of the car with her hands aloft. The burglars tied her hands to the back, dragged her into the hedge at the lush gate, jumped into her car, and sped off.

After some neighbors untied her, Madame dashed into their living room only to stumble upon a lifeless body of her father, Mwangi Kamau. The sight of his blood everywhere filled her with fright. It was on the walls, the sofa and the flower vases. For a brief moment, audible silence reigned supreme against the encroaching chill and despair. To her dying day, Madame Florina could never forget the tiniest details of that day. A moment that marked the darkest page in her autobiography.

As she examined her father's body, she saw five bullet wounds gaping on his belly. There was also a small note adjacent to his shoulder that read:

Gluttonous and cruel accomplice  
 Corrupt and unscrupulous in corruption  
 How could you enjoy proceeds of ARVs alone?  
 Yours is ours to fulfill our dreams  
 Your comrades in *murkidom*

Before this fateful day, Madame Florina knew her father, who was a clinical officer at Makina Government Hospital, had resigned his position to venture into business. Soon, thereafter, he opened a small Makombe Pharmacy opposite the hospital, which enabled him to obtain cheaply government drugs from clever pharmacists. He then sold them at exorbitant prices for profit. Before long, his colleague introduced him to a senior government officer who had access to a government medical warehouse. The man could make away with tons of medical supplies, fake records and hand the stocks to Mwangi. Mwangi, in return, opened new markets in neighboring countries—Uganda and Tanzania—where he travelled to sell the purloined merchandise and shared the booty with his associate. As luck would have it, her father's wealth flourished. He expanded from owning one to twenty pharmacies scattered all over the country. With advice from Rahab, Florina's mother, Mwangi diversified his investments to real estate, farming and transport industry. He later linked-up with other partners and with their twenty minibuses, they started plying the Nakuru-Nairobi highway. All the while, Fresha's father, Mwangi's elder brother, John

Kamau could not afford a car even with his two degrees.

The period succeeding her father's demise sowed surprises in the Mwangi home. What a harrowing experience for young Florina! First, her father's leadership and smartness had left a void her mother Rahab and sister, Valentine, could not fill. Second, were the apprehensions regarding the enemies' next move, which soon became the routine. Third, was the president's pledge to fight corruption in every sector of his government. Valentine's arrest, a year before receiving millions from her boyfriend at the National Youth Service, had cost his father a fortune on a court pending case. These recent events almost prompted Madame Florina to doubt her utilitarian philosophy. Was Fresha's perspective the bottom line of life? Would her life be better off had she sought knowledge and wisdom like Fresha? No. The quest for wisdom was a search for eternal poverty. In her mind's eye, one's love of money was the bottom line of life. Like her father, Florina would seek for it in whichever way humanly possible.

To the best of her recollection, half of her father's enterprises were joint ventures. Given his tragic end, the Mwangi's had to brace themselves for peril. Flexibility of the law, notwithstanding, Madame Florina could not hazard legal redress in this marshland for survival. The rule of the jungle pervaded everything. Any move she could dare make meant danger for her and her siblings.

On her father's burial day, somebody dropped off leaflets that read: "Keep off the buses. Keep off the pharmacies in Eastlands. Remain in your greedy house. Obey or die!" This signaled apparent poverty and misery that now knocked at Mwangi's homestead. Florina and her siblings had no choice, but to keep away from their very fountain of happiness. She could not deny that now Fresha and his poor father were far ahead of them.

For young Florina, this was a death from life. She had lost a father, a mentor and her model in life, a man who had fanned her passion for fine living. Soon though and coincidentally, fate flung a fine pilot Madame's way; and she, the belle of Makombe Estate, fell in love. Although in her past, under her father's tutelage, he had adulterated her attitude towards love. She never saw any possibilities for it. When the cruel pangs of scarcity reached their lawn, she had no choice, but rise up to combat them, clinging onto her father's advice: *Daughter, learn to survive!*

The young man, Suleiman Mahbad Mahfouz, loved her after all. His fondles for her were the props of her life. With the sensitive delicacy of youth, Florina worshipped the ground upon which he walked. Mahfouz was a young Egyptian pilot who drew Florina away from her sexual purity and gave her a preamble to sensuality. He showered her with cascades of passion. With kisses and flatters, he replanted and tended the tree of her self-worth and love. The young Florina had never before known a man so caring. Their liaison was hot and quick. For he had mastered the art of "loving" a girl. He spoke the right words, chose right rendezvous, and touched her in the right places. Soon, Florina realized that discipline had denied her the pleasures that heralded true happiness. Every date they had, gave her premises for levity. Mahfouz chattered her out of loneliness and pulled her into a marriage bed with promises of eternal bliss. As she signed her civil marriage certificate, Florina beheld a brilliant future. Irrevocably in love, she could not see the thorns in her path that embittered most marriages. With brilliant hopes, she had given her life to Mahfouz to enjoy the grapes of this eternal orchard, but had abandoned restraints to the likes of Fresha, who were destined to marry no one.

Two months crawled past. Before long, her hopes capsized, crushing into tittles. Mahfouz turned against the very maxims of courtesy that characterized the man she had loved. Even tears

could not alter him. He became callous. He trounced on her pleas and entreaties, turning Florina into an idle spectator in her very own life. She saw the tree, which had sheltered her loneliness, wilt, fall, and wither. Men had rights after all ... The right to go out and have as many lovers as possible. They had an innate ability to make love without any emotional attachment. For women, only sluts afforded such vices. Mahfouz, her once dear darling man, transformed overnight into a beast. Exploiting the liberties of his sex, he came into the house with gorgeous girls to have his sweet moments with them. Her attempts to criticize him were met with hostile glares that killed the spirit she had taken years to nurture.

“Hell! You’re just one of them!” he had exploded more than once. Madame Florina became helpless and unable to confront him. A man as strange as Mahfouz could do anything. The dreadful anxieties and disquiets eroded the least commendations she had cultivated about men. Thus, Madame Florina swore never to get married again; instead, she resolved to become a paranoid single woman.

Perhaps, Mahbad Mahfouz had just been friendly, but not a friend. Had Madame been a humble woman, Fresha could have given her a piece of advice. Fresha knew it well ... That compatibility was beyond airs. That marriage based solely on physical attraction certainly led to tears. She knew this truth from the onset about Madame’s marriage to Mahfouz. That it was based on his tall handsome Egyptian looks, his richness and his romantic-mere tags. That this type of marriage was flawed all along and destined for failure.

For Fresha, a friend was someone you developed a past, a present and together you build a future. It had to be someone who knew you, cared about you, and would be there for you. Unfortunately, Mahfouz fell short of this first test. Another thing Florina ought to have known was the internal energy magnetism. The two lovers had to be attracted to each other’s internal energy. She had loved his career. What talents or professions did Mahfouz admire in her? There was a vacuum on this point. Not only that, but also their career goals and creative energy levels were inconsistent, making her marriage a farce and unsustainable.

To escape her shackles of marriage, Madame had picked a full briefcase of money from Mahfouz’s safe and fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Her father’s tutelage was not for nothing after all. Her *street wisdom* had begun. Like a chick, she had emerged from an incubator to perfect her purpose in the world. Six months later, she transformed herself into a *real* architect of survival and Mahfouz had given up on his chase of her. Henceforth, a new Florina was born. Influenced by Belgian acquaintances in the DRC, she assumed the title of Madame. It signified her new ability to distinguish the real from the fake. The real being the material value of every endeavor, but the thrill to fight back at men overwhelmed any other urge. Madame Florina resolved to perfect her father’s business acumen, shred society’s sexual blueprint and design her sensuality.

She trounced on men in vengeance and, at the same time, traced her father’s networks to sell stolen medical supplies to survive. She could not idle in despair waiting for society or Fresha’s “God’s blessing” to shape her fate. She was the master of her own happiness and *Lord* of her soul. Obviously, the right to express her emotional, sexual and career preferences lay in her hands. Madame became so aggressive in networking and sensual matters. Four months after her break-up with Mahfouz, she established fifty brothels, half in Kenya and half abroad. Twenty pharmacies followed suit, overflowing with medical drugs from half of her father’s networks. She afforded all possibilities and allured all manner of men, including some of her father’s enemies. She was sexy,

confident, sophisticated, and charming. They bowed to her wishes and, at cheap prices, poured government supplies into her pharmacies. Free government condoms flowed into her brothels to give her and her clients much-needed protection against sexually transmitted diseases. Hundreds of men who had been intimate with her consistently wished to have her for a wife. The quality of her intimacy with them was exceptional, but the spiteful attitude she held towards marriage sent them packing.

It was medieval. It was novelty. Madame Florina claimed to be the epitome of economically and sexually liberated generation of women, a strange breed fashioned with novelties of financial and sexual equality. No more heartbreak! She was not prepared for any relationship that inclined towards marriage. She knew men were only out and out for a good time. So, would she butt with a cash tag? If she was a slut, they were studs. Like most men, she would not wait for an opportunity to present itself. She would go out for what she wanted. She proposed and seduced, used and dumped. Men could afford it after all. The fear of being slandered vaporized and male visitors never missed in her compound.

Splendid cars frequented her parking lot. In fact, a lush BMW had remained permanently parked. Fresha had only shaken her head in amazement. Like father like daughter. Madame Florina could not be poor. More than a dozen times, Fresha had spotted her in queer zones at the wee hours of the night. In quick glances, she had once read *Mahfouz Club and Restaurant*. She had not delved deeper into the matter. She knew better to mind her business. At Madame's age and class, her cousin Fresha could not do anything to remedy the situation. She left her cousin to her own devices and fate.

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the president gave a directive to close all entertainment joints. '*What idiocy!*' Madame thought. She could not carry on with her favorite business as usual. '*Like father, like daughter,*' she smiled as she drove to Mogeni's home, her business partner. With him, they had exported the first consignment to a neighboring country. He had deposited twenty million shillings into her account. As "fools" whined about the devastating impact of the pandemic, the "wise" took advantage of it simply to make a fortune.

"Gota!" said Mogeni, upon her arrival.

"Gota," Florina said.

"Welcome. Wow ... Gorgeous!" Mogeni said, ogling her from head to toe as he led her into the house.

"My weakness? Thanks ... *Mpango?*" she said, sitting in his spacious lounge.

The pink flowers on his glass table and purple carpet appealed to her sensibilities. Meanwhile, the mongrel in its cage near the gate did not stop barking. It threatened to break its chains as though Madame had come to kill its master.

"You won't give me a kiss today?" he said. "I hope you know I love you."

"Oh, Mogeni! We have always done business."

"I agree, but we should think about taking our relationship to the next level," he said.

She detested this. Her liaisons did not entertain feelings, but she did not want to upset him.

"We will talk, Mogy," she said with a wink. "How is the deal?"

“A hundred liters of reagents were sent to your labs at the City Centre. You can start testing.”

“Mogy, a hundred are barely enough!”

“The reagents are very expensive. If we steal in huge quantities, the minister will realize,” he said. “Fake it,” he added.

“What do you mean?”

“Use water and fake the reports.”

“I see.”

“With the pandemic, many rich people can’t travel abroad without COVID-19 certificates.”

“We can charge 5K per test.”

“Hey! How about 10K?”

“I will use my influence to direct stranded truck drivers there.”

“Thanks, hun.”

“Happy to hear that, *honey* ... That is how you should always call me,” he said, grinning ear-to-ear.

“The sanitizers?”

“The grant from China?”

“Yes, hun.”

“I have hundreds of thousands of liters at our warehouse.”

“That is why I like you.”

“Say, ‘I love you!’”

She winked at him.

“Hope your guy is ready to purchase.”

“I called him yesterday. He liked our terms.”

“Ha!” he chuckled. “These Kenyan beggars will not see a drop of free sanitizer!”

“Let them die like rats,” Madame scowled.

“As we bank millions per week,” he kissed her on the cheek.

“I will accompany Ouma in the truck to Dar.”

“We have turned the pandemic from lemon to lemonade, *gota!*”

Her palm met his in the air. She allowed him to kiss her again and lead her to the bed in which he had thrice taken her.

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Madame Florina’s journey to Dar es Salaam was a “success.” There was nothing as lucrative as selling obtained sanitizers at a hundred shillings per liter. The Chinese government had offered

millions of liters to bolster the government's efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, but Mogeni and other clever officers at the ministry of health had diverted it to a private warehouse. The first batch of exports included facemasks from which they had made a fortune. Madame Florina had made a similar fortune from sanitizers and now her focus was on ten new laboratories.

*'I hate this president,'* Florina thought as she went around inspecting the nurses. *'I voted for him, but he has caused 'us' many losses.'* Why would he close down bars and clubs? She would rather die of the virus than live a pauper's life like Eugene and Fresha! Why would the president restrict access to reagents? Mogeni's attempts to access them remained futile. Long winding queues formed near the laboratory, of men and women of substance. They wore facemasks in keeping with the new COVID-19 mandate. Madame rarely wore a facemask as it prevented people from seeing her lipstick. *'Each of these masks, queuing is worth 10K. That is something,'* she thought.

With Mogeni, they had instructed the medical laboratory professionals to alternate patient results. The mantra was *AR, BW, CR, DW*. These acronyms simply meant patient A (with reagent), patient B (without), patient C (with reagent), and D (without) to have as many tests as possible. With Mogeni and other partners in the background, official rubberstamps from the ministry of health were availed to ratify all medical reports. As the queues elongated, a tumult broke at the reception where reports were being issued. Florina with her bodyguard marched to the scene without the protective gear, a facemask.

"This report is counterfeit!" a man thundered.

"Why do you think so?" Florina asked.

"I have no sense of taste. How can I be negative?" the man complained.

Hearing this, people on the queues retreated and fled in different directions. Madame Florina rummaged her handbag for the facemask and fumbled for words to explain.

"I have no sense of taste. I have difficulty in breathing!" the man insisted. "I can't be negative."

"That is what you think, but the report tells the authentic state of your health," Florina said.

Meanwhile, the shrill of an approaching ambulance rent the air. Someone had called the COVID-19 Rapid Response Team to the scene. Before Florina could address her staff, ten men in personal protective gear shoved her, the bodyguard, and the man into a government ambulance, while the police marched their way into her laboratories.

Madame Florina found herself in an "untidy public hospital," which she had oftentimes held in contempt because poor people were there. She had once asked Fresha why she went to such places to meet the destitute, risking infection of every kind of disease. The men pushed her, her bodyguard, and the man into separate rooms. Despite her determined resistance, her samples were taken for testing.

"I can't be positive! I am well ... Why do you insist on locking me in here? Am I an animal?" she screamed, but her screams fell onto deaf ears.

"The man in whose presence you stood and conversed without a face mask has no sense of taste. You have to be tested," the medical laboratory professional said firmly.

For the first time, Madame Florina found herself in a duel with the virus. She no longer



saw it as a money-making venture. On the wall, she could see a poster with measures of curbing the virus: *Wash your hands with soap, sanitize, wear a facemask, keep social distance*. Heck! It reminded her of her entertainment businesses. She cursed the measures and fell asleep.

At midnight, Madame was roused by a severe fever and difficulty in breathing. She sat bolt upright on the edge of her bed and screamed for help. A doctor rushed in to her side and, with the help of a nurse, they carried her to the ventilator room. By the time the report came, Madame had exhibited palpable symptoms of the killer virus.

“You are COVID-19 positive,” the doctor told her.

“I got it in your ambulance ... No, in this room!” Madame insisted.

“Please calm down. By law, you are required to give us names of those people with whom you have interacted.”

“Umm ... None,” she lied. “Just workers at the laboratory.”

She could not bring in Mogeni. She was certain it was “the rude” man who had infected her. On second thought, she recollected the man’s name, Antony. She had left her facemask in her handbag to go and manage a scuffle. When she turned on her phone, an advertisement featuring an American Presidential candidate, Joe Biden, popped up, “Just by wearing this mask, Americans would have saved many lives!” he said. ‘*Does Biden mean “we” risked many Kenyan lives by selling facemasks meant for them?*’ she thought silently, as she listened to the sound of her ventilator. Suddenly, a power blackout struck. Her ventilator stopped. She felt as though something was suffocating her. Madame struggled and rose. She threw away the insertions in her nose as if they were the cause of her breathing difficulties. The doctor appeared in her room as Madame collapsed on the cold floor. She stretched her hands as if to reach out for oxygen, but all was in vain. It was not something that could be grabbed. Darkness became more pervasive in the room as the doctor bent to resuscitate her.

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Though Fresha’s engagement to Eugene was not the best, her parents approved his integrity. The lovebirds avoided excesses and exhibited exceptional humility and contentment. John Kamau, whose financial standing had changed exponentially, took Eugene away from *Kazi Mtaani* and advanced him a hundred thousand shillings loan to start a retail shop. Eugene promised to repay the loan in time. In their shop, Eugene and Fresha nurtured their relationship as they sold supplies to customers. One evening, Fresha felt the need to peruse the day’s newspaper. She rushed out of the gate and bought one from a nearby vendor. On the front page, a picture of Florina was splashed with the caption: “Corona Virus Deals Blow to a COVID-19 Millionaire.” The article read:

A middle-aged woman, Madame Florina, has died of COVID-19 after she was picked and quarantined while talking to a suspected COVID-19 patient at her medical laboratory. The woman was picked-up when a COVID-19 Rapid Response Team and Police received a report of counterfeit COVID-19 tests at her laboratories. She was suspected of running a fleet of laboratories that forged coronavirus tests at ten thousand Kenya shillings. Antony Wekesa, who had been given a false report, raised the matter at the laboratory, claiming his symptoms contradicted the laboratory’s negative report. The clients had fled the scene and reported to the authorities. At least ten people who had interacted with Antony at the laboratory tested positive, including Madame Florina. While Antony and six of his patients are in Intensive Care Unit, Florina succumbed to the virus during a power outage that

disabled her ventilator. Police investigations have unearthed a syndicate behind Florina that runs multi-million-dollar contraband in medical drugs. In the past five months, Florina, with her business partners, sold more than half a million facemasks and a million liters of sanitizers from China to neighboring countries. Worse still, she owns hundreds of brothels in Kenya running many shifts of prostitutes. Madame Florina has had an enormously lucrative business selling a variety of pleasures and banking thousands of shillings per week.

When she finished reading the article, Fresha shook her head in dismay. ‘*The foundation of a house is undoubtedly crucial,*’ she thought. Corruption had bounty harvest that did not last. On receiving the sad news, Fresha’s father approved her marriage to Eugene, a poor young man from another community. Although their belief systems were distinct, they would rather toil with challenges of cultural hybridity than end-up with a daughter like Florina. John Kamau was ashamed of being mentioned as Florina’s kinsfolk. She had died many years before her death. As for Fresha, she knew money is not the only thing in life, and it will never be!

### **Glossary**

*Gota*: A slung term for “high five,” or a casual greeting among acquaintances.

*Kazi Mtaani*: A menial work program launched by President Kenyatta during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide employment to the youth.

*Mpango*: A Swahili term often used between acquaintances to inquire about the next plan of action.

*Murkidom*: A coined term from the words “murky” and “kingdom” to mean a kingdom of murky business.