How I became the proprietor of a house of ill-repute

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There is an amusing poem, somewhere in one of those collections of comic verse, which begins: 'I have never been a company director—as far as I know'. One would think that one would be well aware of the fact that one is a company director, just as one should be well aware of whether or not one is the proprietor of a house of ill-repute. I, however, can testify to the fact it is quite possible to be concerned in the running of a bordello but not to be aware of it. This is what happened.

Almost twenty-five years ago, at the age of thirty and still a bachelor, I decided to spend a sabbatical leave teaching law at the University of Swaziland. The arrangements were made through the British Council, which for years has supported links between British universities and universities all over the world, including Swaziland, a small kingdom tucked away between South Africa and Mozambique. I would spend six months there, during which time my services would be offered free in return for the use of a house on the university's rather attractive campus near a place called Kwaluseni.

My house was magnificent, and far too large for one person. It had a verandah from which one had a very fine view of the hills in the distance, and at the back it had a small set of buildings known locally as 'servants' quarters'. These were intended for the use of a maid or a cook. I had no need to employ a cook, as I took all my meals at a nearby restaurant called *Las Cabanas*, a splendid Graham Greene-ish sort of place into which chickens sometimes wandered and pecked about at one's feet.

Since I was not using the servants' quarters, I was approached by a secretary at an office in the nearby town of Manzini as to whether I would be prepared to let the rooms to her. She had heard on the grapevine that they were standing empty and accommodation was in short supply. I replied that as far as I was concerned she could stay there for nothing. I had no need of rent from premises which I was already being given rent-free. In fact, it seemed to me that it would be wrong to ask for rent in those circumstances. She was very grateful.

I saw very little of this lady, but would occasionally hear her radio playing over the weekend or would see a light shining from one of the windows. It was useful, I thought, to have somebody around the place for when I was away, as her presence would deter intruders.

Then I began to notice that at weekends and on some evenings there was a steady stream of gentleman callers, and after a while the scales fell from my eyes. A house of ill-repute was being run from the back of my yard. Now this posed a challenge. One would normally not want one's yard to be used for immoral purposes, and some people might have stepped in straightaway and put a stop to it. But that, I think, would have been a little bit difficult. After all, I was the visitor to Swaziland and I should not take it upon myself to tell the locals how to behave. And anyway it would have been difficult to prove: the lady in question might simply have said that she had many friends. So I minded my own business and did nothing. Nowadays, of course, it could be a different story, and I think one might have a duty, on public health grounds, not to countenance that sort of behaviour.

Then a strange thing happened. I was in Manzini one day and was approached by a middle-aged man and asked for a lift back to Kwaluseni. He claimed to know me, although I had no recollection of ever having met him. When I dropped him off at his destination, he asked me for some money, explaining that he was very hard-up and hungry. That sort of thing is perfectly normal in Africa and so I gave him some money and wished him well. He bid me farewell, telling me his name, which was Albert Dlamini. Dlamini is a very common name in Swaziland, but Albert less so. I did not expect to see him again.

But I did. One evening, when I was sitting in my study, I suddenly felt that I was being watched. It is one of those curious, disquieting experiences that make one feel very uncomfortable. Unseen eyes were upon me. I turned slowly to face the uncurtained window. There was Mr Albert Dlamini, looking in at me through the glass.

I went to the door and asked him what he wanted. He explained that a relative had died and he needed to get to the funeral. Could I lend him some money? Again this is a common request in that part of Africa, and very often, distressingly, it is quite true. Even then, before the ravages of AIDS, funerals seemed very common, and even very distantly related people had to go to them. And so again I

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gave him a small amount of money, but this time I told him that this would be the last occasion on which I could give him any help. He took the money and faded off into the darkness of the night. I returned to my study, feeling slightly worried.

A few days later I encountered my tenant from the back yard as she was setting off for her day job in Manzini. We chatted for a while and I told her about my experience with my night-time caller. 'And what is his name?' she asked. I told her.

'Albert Dlamini?' she asked, with interest. 'Can you describe him?'

I gave a description, and she nodded. Then she said, 'Ah, that is Mr Albert Dlamini, the murderer'.

It transpired that this Albert Dlamini had been convicted of murder some time ago and had now been released. He was, she explained, a well-known murderer.

'Next time that he comes here,' she said, 'you come and call me, quick.'

He came back some days later, a Saturday, around noon. I asked him to wait at the front door and I went round the back of the house to call my tenant. She duly emerged from

her quarters, clad only in a voluminous white towel. She was a large lady, of the sort one might today describe as being of traditional build.

She ran in her towel to the front door and began to scream at Mr Albert Dlamini, shaking her fist at him as she did so. I did not speak Siswati and had no idea what she said, but assumed, from the tone, that her comments were unambiguous. Mr Dlamini certainly had no difficulty in interpreting them, and made his way off without delay.

'He won't bother you again,' said my tenant.

Over that weekend I reflected on this entire business and realized that it said something about human obligation and exchange. I had helped her and she had later helped me. Had I been firm with her at the beginning, then Albert Dlamini might have added me to the list of his victims. So we never know what implications our acts will have in the future, not only for others, but for oneself. That is what I thought, with relief as I sat on my verandah and looked out over those hills and listened to the cattle bells drifting from across the valley. When I left to return to Scotland, the house of repute closed down.